

Getting more from the Saxophone (Feb 2022)

A suitable support system (Slings, Harnesses, and ERGOsax)

Given that Saxophones are so heavy it is surprising that players often fail to pay attention to how they support the instrument. Also many players use the same support system for different size Saxophones and this may not be appropriate.

There are four support systems available:

A neck sling (from £6 - 30): this is the simple sling that fits over the player's head to rest on the back of the player's neck, and is hooked onto the ring on the back of the Saxophone. There are various versions of neck slings but the principle is that the bulk of the weight of the instrument is supported by the player's neck instead of their right hand thumb.

A shoulder sling (£10 - 40): this is a simple sling that also fits over the player's head but rests on the player's left shoulder and is hooked onto the ring on the back of the Saxophone. There are various versions of shoulder slings but the principle is that the bulk of the weight of the instrument is supported by the player's left shoulder instead of their right hand thumb.

A shoulder harness (from £20 - 160): some players do not like supporting the weight of the Saxophone with their neck or on the left shoulder alone, so they prefer to use a harness that fits over both shoulders and is hooked onto the ring on the back of the Saxophone. There are various versions of shoulder harnesses, but the principle is that the bulk of the weight of the instrument is supported by both shoulders instead of their right hand thumb. The most elaborate harness is the Vandoren FNH100 Universal Saxophone harness where the shoulder straps are connected by a bar mechanism to a waistband which distributes the weight of the Saxophone evenly on the shoulders regardless of the position of the player or Saxophone; this harness seems particularly suitable for Baritone players.

A rigid support: (from £140) the company 'ERGObrass' manufactures an innovative 'support system' for Soprano Saxophone called the 'ERGOsax' support. This is an adjustable bar that clips onto the ring at the back of the Saxophone. If the player is seated the bar can be set to rest on the chair so the bulk of the weight is supported by the chair not the player; if the player is standing the bar can be set to rest in a special pouch fitted to the players belt (or alternatively can be set to rest on the floor via an extension rod).

Please note - the most secure way to attach a sling or harness to the ring at the back of the Saxophone is by means of a 'self closing hook' that clips onto the ring. 'Open' hooks require more careful use.

A suitable mouthpiece

A surprising number of Saxophones are paired with unsuitable mouthpieces. The mouthpiece is the critical component of the instrument and is largely responsible for the tone, tuning, intonation, response, and dynamic range. If the instrument is in good condition then usually you should be able to play the instrument evenly and easily throughout its compass, and to play in tune (+/- 20 cents) although the Bell notes and notes above C in the 2nd register may require more manipulation of the embouchure. I strongly recommend that you check that the mouthpiece is suitable for the instrument and if it is not then buy a new one (of either student or professional quality).

Only try mouthpieces after the instrument has been fully serviced (within the last year) otherwise you will not be accurately assessing the qualities of a particular mouthpiece - instead you will be assessing how different mouthpieces respond to problems with the instrument. Bear in mind that you may have to try different strength reeds if the tip opening or lay of the mouthpiece is different to your current mouthpiece. Refer to my information sheet: Info - the Saxophone 08 - How to select and test mouthpieces.

A good ligature

On a student mouthpiece the ligature is usually made of metal and has two screws. The ligature should fit onto the mouthpiece without twisting or bending, and the two screws should be parallel. With the reed off the mouthpiece the 'bands' (sides) of the ligature should nearly meet when the screws are tightened; with the reed on, the space between the bands should be less than 1.6 mm (1/16").

If the ligature does not fit properly or if the metal has become distorted, then the reed will not sit on the mouthpiece correctly - the instrument will not play as easily and as well as it should. You should consider buying a new ligature. There are many good makes and models of ligature - if the mouthpiece manufacturer makes a matching ligature or recommends a particular make then buy that one, otherwise try Rovner or BG. The design of the ligature will affect the sound - particularly the tone, and so I would recommend trying the different Rovner and BG designs (note that to fairly assess a ligature your Saxophone must be in good condition).

A new crook

Recently manufacturers have been making premium crooks that can be bought separately. Crooks are second only to the mouthpiece in terms of the influence on tone, tuning and response. Players might simply want to replace their crook because it has got dented or excessively corroded in the bore, or they might want to experiment to see if they can improve the sound of their instrument by trying other crooks. As with mouthpieces it is important to make sure the instrument is working properly before testing crooks, in particular the player's current crook should not be loose in the socket at the top of the instrument (the crook tenon and body socket into which it fits have to be periodically reshaped and tighten by a repair technician).

Tuning and warming up

The mouthpiece will have an optimum tuning position on the crook cork - in this position the instrument should play in tune - the exact location will depend on the player but once it is established always locate the mouthpiece in the same place. If you are having problems keeping in tune with another instrument then either your instrument, or the instrument you are trying to tune to, is out of tune; changing the position of the mouthpiece will not solve this problem.

A Saxophone takes a while to reach 'playing temperature' and therefore will initially play flat unless it is warmed up - the best method is to warm up the instrument with a hair-dryer (or to hold the whole instrument over a radiator for a few minutes). If these options are not available then warming the crook in your hands before playing and then playing the lower notes for a few minutes will help. *Do not blow* into a cold instrument to warm it up - this creates excess condensation in the crook which distorts the tuning and the excess condensation can collect in the upper tone-holes.

During performances it is generally best for the player to keep hold of their Saxophone (rather than place it on a stand) so it stays warm and in tune.

Servicing the instrument

Make sure your Saxophone is regularly serviced so that you can get the most from it. I recommend graduate and professional Saxophones have a **custom service** or **custom overhaul** (depending on the amount of work required) to make the instrument play as well as possible.

The instrument is stripped down and cleaned *throughout*. The mechanism of the instrument is made to operate as quietly as possible and to feel as balanced as possible; this is done by removing play and binding from the mechanism, balancing the spring action, and using felt instead of cork on most of the articulated keys and some specific key heels. All pads are made to seat as well as possible - this may involve re-aligning keys and levelling tone holes.

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