

A guide to graduate, professional and vintage Saxophones (Nov 2024)

Graduate Saxophones

'Graduate' is a term used to describe instruments that are a step up from premium student instruments. They are aimed at students studying beyond grade 8; teachers; and the serious amateur performer.

Graduate Saxophones are superior to student instruments in a number of ways:

- they are more robust having been made of thicker and/or stronger metal – particularly the keys
- they have a more consistent tone throughout their compass and better intonation
- they have an indirect linking arm from the *barrel* of the right-hand F# key (the key cup between the F and G# key cups) to the G# key (instead of from the F# key *cup* directly to the G#) and where the F# linking arm corresponds with the G# key cup and Bb arm there are adjusting screws. The indirect link makes the interaction between the F#, G#, and Bb leys more reliable and the adjusting screws enables mechanism to be more easily tweaked if necessary
- they have an indirect linking arm from the *barrel* of the Low B key to the Low C# key (instead of directly from the Low B key *cup* to the Low C#). The indirect link makes the interaction between the B and Low C# more reliable
- they usually have more adjusting screws on the backs of the left-hand and right-hand mechanism keys - this enables the mechanism to be more easily tweaked if necessary.
- they usually have more felts to quieten the mechanism
- they usually have links on the table keys from B & C# keys to the G# key allowing easier movement of the little finger from G# to Low B or C#
- they sometimes have links from Low Bb to C# on the table allowing for easier movement of the little finger between these keys

The most widely available graduate Alto and Tenor Saxophones are: Conn-Selmer Premiere (380V) series; Jupiter 1100 series; Keilworth EX/ST90 series; P Mauriat 180/5 series and 'Le Bravo' series; Trevor James 'SR' series (SR-Evo and SR-SR) or Horn 88; and the Yamaha 400 series – but there are several other good makes worth trying. The Yanagisawa W01 series and the Yamaha 62 series are on the cusp between graduate instruments and entry level professional instruments.

Play-testing a Graduate Saxophone before purchase

When trying graduate instruments the player should start with the graduate model made by the manufacturer of the student model that they already own; and then they should compare that instrument with graduate models by other manufacturers.

The exact location of key touch-pieces on a Saxophone varies from model to model and therefore different models will feel better under the fingers to different players. When testing a Saxophone the player should check the following:

- The (thumb) Octave key- it should be in a comfortable location and should not 'travel' too far when operated.
- The location of the crook when playing sitting down and standing up – the player may have to swivel the crook around slightly but the octave mechanism should still operate properly.
- The location (and effectiveness) of the first finger high F spatula (if the mechanism for this key has a 'rocker' key linking the spatula to the palm key then preferably the spatula key has an adjustable roller). The high F should sound easily.
- The location of the Bb 'bis' pearl – it should be level with, and close to, the B key pearl so that the player's first finger can comfortably hold down the B key and the Bb key at the same time.
- The location and springing of the 'table' keys (G#, Low C#, Low B, and Low Bb) – the player's left-hand little finger should be able to comfortably operate all of these keys.
- The height of the Palm keys – they should be easily operated but they should obstruct the left hand.

Professional Performers' Saxophones

These instruments are made to the highest standards; they are fitted with a mechanism that has been manufactured to a finer tolerance than on graduate instruments so the keys are a better fit to the screws and rods. This means that there is less 'play' on the keys i.e. they do not wobble. With less play in the mechanism the instrument feels more 'positive' and the pads seat more reliably; also there is less noise from the mechanism and the mechanism lasts longer before it starts to wear. Most importantly the crook and bore of the instrument have been designed to produce the best possible response, intonation and tone.

Professional instruments have all the features of a graduate instrument but they should also have two other features:

- The Low C# key is an 'articulated' key, this means there is a lever that indirectly operates the key. Where the lever corresponds with the key (hidden just behind the back of the C# key) the mechanism should incorporate an adjustable roller – this is an indication that the table keys have been designed to correctly operate with the right-hand mechanism.
- The linking arm from the barrel of the right-hand F# key (between the F and G# key cups) has a small bar carrying the adjusting screws where the F# key corresponds with the Bb arm and G# key cup. The location of this small bar on the linking arm should be adjustable – this allows for the venting of the right hand action and left hand action to be set independently if necessary, but more importantly it is an indication that the right and left hand actions have been designed to operate together correctly.

Another two desirable features are an adjustable roller on the G# key cup where the G# touch-piece engages with it, and an adjustable roller on the F/C rocker key linking the first palm key (high F) to the left-hand C spatula touch-piece; these are not essential but are an indicator that the manufacturer has considered that adjustment might be necessary to ensure these touch-pieces are operating efficiently.

Professional instruments will get a lot of use and they need to be reliable; there are two other aspects to the key mechanism that are worth checking in this regard.

- The high F lever should operate such that when depressed (to open the palm key and close the B key) it contacts the B key close to the centre of the key - not at the edge – this is because the finger pressure used to operate the high F lever is greater than used to operate the B normally, and if the lever pushes the key cup down from the edge the pad will eventually crush down at the edge and leak.
- For similar reasons the A pearl should close the Bb key (which lies directly below the A pearl) contacting close to the centre of the Bb key rather than at the edge.

Often manufacturers make several professional models. The models vary primarily in the metals used to make the instrument and the finish given to the instrument.

Various types of Brass or Nickel silver are commonly used in the construction of the tube of a Saxophone but types of bronze or solid silver are sometimes used as well. The tube is manufactured in 4 sections – crook, body, bow (or U-tube), and bell; and different metals can be used for each section. A particular metal may be selected for a section of the tube for different reasons: perhaps because of the ease with which it can be worked; or its strength; or its resistance to corrosion; or its tonal quality. Players will choose a particular professional instrument chiefly for the tone it produces, but resistance to corrosion and the weight of the instrument can also influence their choice. In recent years some manufacturers (primarily Yanigisawa) have started producing a range of Saxophone crooks made of different metals available to purchase separately - allowing players to change crooks to achieve a different tone to some extent.

The finish on an instrument (usually lacquer, nickel plate or silver plate) not only determines the appearance of the instrument but also how well the base metal is protected from water (condensating from the player's breath) and sweat (from the player's fingers). The bore of the instrument is vulnerable to water and over time there can be a build up of verdigris and calcium salts as water reacts with the base metal particularly in the crook.

Vintage Saxophones

There have been many models of Saxophone originally intended as student, graduate, or professional instruments that are no longer manufactured. The student models are usually of poor quality; however the graduate and professional models, which were manufactured to higher standards, can be very desirable instruments.

These older models of Saxophone are sometimes referred to as 'Vintage' Saxophones. Although the metals used on Vintage instruments can sometimes be of a higher quality than on their modern counterparts, the mechanism itself is definitely of a lower quality than on modern instruments, and is missing features that would be considered standard even on today's student instruments. Often the tuning of a Vintage instrument is not as accurate as a modern instrument, and so requires the player to work harder to bring the instrument into tune, however it is the tone that these instruments produce that players are interested in.

Vintage instruments have to be checked for the effects of age. Almost certainly the lacquer and/or plating will be heavily worn but as long as the bore of the instrument is relatively smooth and clean this should only affect the appearance of the instrument.

The chief areas that require scrutiny are:

- The **solder-work**: this has a limited lifetime depending on the solder used and how well it was done in the first place – if there is evidence of several re-soldering jobs then steer clear of the instrument – obviously things keep falling off of it.
- **Denting** to the body or crook: some minor denting is acceptable but be wary of excessive denting near the top of the body or on the crook – this can affect the tuning and tone of the instrument.
- The **mechanism**: this will inevitably have some wear but check for excessive key wobble or movement – this will have to be removed (if possible) if the mechanism is to operate properly. Also, vintage instruments tend not to have articulated keys (such as the side Bb and C keys and the table keys) which means the seating of the pads is less reliable and the springing of the keys may not be as well balanced as on a modern instrument.
- The **padding**: most, if not all, of the pads on a vintage instrument should have been replaced several times during its lifetime. If the pads are old and the leather is hard, crusted, or broken then they will need replacing.
- The **curvature of the body**: when a Saxophone is made the body is a straight cone into which holes are drilled and onto which pillars are soldered. These two actions place a stress in the metal and over time this stress causes the body to curve. Although this has perhaps

no effect on the sound of the instrument it does affect how the mechanism operates and limits how well it can be set up.

- The **alignment of the bell**: for similar reasons as above, the bell will drift in its relationship to the body of the instrument, this will affect how well the mechanism of the table keys can be set up.

Play-testing a similar quality Saxophone before purchase

Before testing a new Saxophone of similar quality to their existing instrument, it is best for the player to ensure their existing instrument is playing well. Commonly players compare a new Saxophone (which should be in good condition) to their own Saxophone (which is not); instead of comparing Saxophones they are actually comparing the *condition* of the two Saxophones. If the player's Saxophone is in good condition (i.e. it was fully serviced less than a year ago) then they can truly assess the differences between the Saxophones. Ensuring an instrument is playing well is even more important when testing mouthpieces – a player might select a mouthpiece because it alleviates a problem that would otherwise be solved by having the instrument serviced, and what is more, once the instrument is serviced the player might find the mouth-piece disagreeable.

A player trying out graduate or professional Saxophone will already own a mouthpiece but first the player should test the new Saxophone with the manufacturer's recommended mouthpiece (e.g. a Yamaha mouthpiece for a Yamaha instrument) but bear in mind that the particular mouthpiece normally supplied with the new instrument might not have the same tip opening/length of lay as the player's existing mouthpiece. Mouthpieces usually come in a range of tip openings/lengths of lay and the player should request a mouthpiece with a tip opening/length of lay as close as possible to their own mouthpiece – this way the mouthpiece will be correct for the instrument and will feel more or less the same to the player. If the recommended mouthpiece is not available with a tip opening/length of lay similar to the player's existing mouthpiece then the player will have to use the supplied mouthpiece and try softer or harder reeds to compensate for the difference.

If the player's mouthpiece is a professional mouthpiece, then the player should use this to test the instrument as well. However there can be a problem locating the player's own mouthpiece in the right position on the crook if the cork on the crook is too thin or too thick. If the cork is too thin then wrap some plumber's PTFE tape around the cork – if the cork is too thick then it will have to be sanded down – if the vendor allows.

If the player is having difficulty with the instrument, even if they feel at ease with the mouthpiece and the layout of the touch-pieces, it could be down to how well the instrument is working (bear in mind that sometimes even new instruments have not been set up properly).

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