

A beginner's guide to student Saxophones (Nov 2024)

Although Saxophones are made of metal they are classed as woodwind instruments because of the way the sound is produced (by uncovering holes on a length of tubing).

Saxophones come in various different sizes, which make up the Saxophone family. Beginners usually start on either of the two most common members of the family – the 'Alto' Saxophone or the 'Tenor' Saxophone; the 'Soprano' and 'Baritone' Saxophones are best left alone until the player has mastered the Alto or Tenor (or possibly the Clarinet) but see below with regards to the 'Jsax'.

Adults can start on either the Alto or Tenor - Alto Saxophones are usually cheaper but it is best to start on the size that produces the sound they prefer; children usually start on the Alto simply because it is smaller, lighter, and cheaper. A recent innovation is the 'Jsax' - a plastic soprano saxophone in C designed for young children – if it proves popular with teachers it might become the standard instrument for a child to start on.

The Saxophone is played by attaching a reed (a small piece of cane) to the mouthpiece and blowing. The player presses keys on the instrument to produce different notes.

The parts of a Saxophone

- The **mouthpiece** – onto which a **reed** is fastened using a **ligature**.
- The **crook (or neck)** – a short curved tube to join the mouthpiece to the body.
- The **body** – which has a socket at the top to receive the crook and a lot of **keys** (which are operated by the player so that the pads cover or uncover the various tone-holes to make different musical notes)

The metal keys on the Saxophone make up the mechanism of the instrument. The keys are supported between metal pillars on screws or rods. Most of the keys have a wire spring that keeps them held open or held shut. Most the keys also have a key cup in which there is glued a pad to cover the tone-hole. The keys also have cork or felt glued on to function as a stop so that each key opens the correct amount. The pads, corks, and felts on the instrument (and also the adhesives which keep these items in place) deteriorate over time. On older or poorer quality instruments the mechanism itself starts to wear and the keys can become loose or jammed.

The mouthpiece is the part of the instrument that has most influence on the tuning and tone of an instrument. The reed is held on the mouthpiece by means of a ligature which can also influence the sound produced.

Although not a part of the instrument there are four other vital accessories:

- The **case** - a poor fitting case will damage the instrument when it is being transported. Soft cases (with no rigid sides at all) are worse than useless because they give the impression the instrument is protected when actually it is not.
- The **mouthpiece cap** - this protects the mouthpiece if it gets dropped and also protects the reed when the mouthpiece is packed away with the reed still fastened to it.
- The **sling** – this must be comfortable, easy to adjust, and most importantly it must link securely to the body of the instrument; slings with a simple 'open' hook sometimes slip off the instrument and the player then drops the instrument with catastrophic results – a good sling has a 'closed' hook.
- The **end plug** – this fits into the top of the Sax body when it is in the case and prevents the Octave bridge key from getting bent (a pad-saver, which has an integral end plug, is even better).

Special Saxophones for children

Traditionally children have started on the Recorder, then moved to the Flute or Clarinet, and then moved onto the Alto Saxophone when they were able to support the weight of the instrument and reach all the keys, but there are five Saxophones designed particularly for children which might shorten this route.

The smallest and cheapest of these special Saxophones is the **J sax** – it is a plastic soprano saxophone in C with simplified key-work. This is very cheap and aimed at primary school children. This instrument is a disposable instrument not designed for repair but is said to be robust enough to be used by school children. If this instrument proves to be reliable, and also liked by teachers, it could be very popular and a sensible purchase for the beginner child. (Note that children should not start to learn the Saxophone on a standard Soprano sax – it is more difficult to play than an Alto sax and much more expensive to buy and maintain.)

Another non-metal Saxophone (poly-carbonate) is the '**Vibrato**' manufactured in Alto and Tenor sizes (but these are only available on-line in the UK). These instruments are not particularly aimed at children but because they are significantly lighter than metal Saxophones they might be very useful. Unlike the Jsax described above, these instruments are fitted with standard keywork and are designed to be repairable but most repair workshops will not carry the spares required.

Trevor J James produces the '**Alpha**': this is a metal Alto Saxophone but it does not have some of the higher and lower notes so it is lighter, plus it has modifications for smaller hands. The Alpha Sax is a relatively recent innovation and it is yet to be seen if teachers and schools will adopt it (currently Saxophone is usually only taught at Secondary schools). The Alpha Sax is not significantly cheaper than the standard instrument, although it would be cheaper to maintain due to the reduced key-work and so perhaps schools might be interested in the instrument. This instrument would also be suitable for an adult beginner.

The last two Saxophones to consider for children are the **Roy Benson child's** Alto Saxophone and the **Conn 655** Alto Saxophone. These are standard metal Alto saxophones but the key-work has been adapted for smaller hands, and on the Conn 655 the crook has also been altered.

Variations in design

Standard modern Saxophones do vary slightly with regard to the design of the keys and the mechanism and therefore each one can feel slightly different to the player. They can also vary in tuning to some degree – with poorer quality instruments being difficult to play in tune. They can vary significantly regarding the tone they produce although this is largely down to the mouthpiece. There are only two aspects of design that really vary from the point of view of a beginner (excepting the five designs listed above especially for children):

Finish: on Saxophones all metal work is usually either lacquered or plated to protect the metal from corrosion. Normally on student instruments the whole instrument is lacquered with a clear, gold, or black, lacquer. Sometimes the body and crook are lacquered but the keys are nickel plated for extra protection.

High F#: in the last 15 years or so all new Saxophones have featured this additional key, but many older secondhand instruments will not have this key. This key extends the normal range of the instrument up to high F#; for beginners up to grade 5 this key is not necessary but it is certainly useful above grade 5.

Categories of student instruments

Student instruments can be divided into four categories.

Budget student instruments: (currently Altos under £500 and Tenors under £580) these are models that are often sold on-line or by local retailers who do not specialize in music (and sometimes even by established music shops). These models are usually manufactured in mainland China and sometimes do not even have a serial number (which means there is no quality control!). These instruments are often much cheaper than the established brands and

sometimes cheaper even than second-hand standard student instruments, this is because they are of poor quality and will have a very limited lifetime - either because they will soon need repair (but many repairers will not work on these cheaper instruments) or they simply do not meet the needs of anyone but the complete beginner. Some budget instruments are of reasonable quality for the price, but there is no 'brand consistency' so it is impossible to recommend any particular make or model, therefore it is 'pot luck' as to whether a budget instrument will be of reasonable value or not.

Older student instruments: these are models that have not been manufactured for many years but were solidly made. They are suitable for up to and including grade 5 if in good condition.

Standard student instruments: these are models first manufactured within the last 15 years. They are reasonably well-made and useful up to grade 5 and possibly further if in good condition.

Premium student instruments: these are models first manufactured within the last 15 years. They are very well made and are for up to grade 8 and beyond if in good condition.

Manufacturers and models

Here is a brief description of the three most popular current student brands.

Jupiter: Jupiter is a brand name owned by KHS music instrument Co. These Saxophones are well made and are popular with teachers and students. There are two Jupiter student models - the 500(Q) series (standard student model) and the 700 series (premium student model). The 1100 series is a graduate model.

Trevor James: Trevor James Saxophones are also well made and are popular with teachers and students. There are currently three standard student models - the 'Horn classic II', the relaunched original model 'The horn', and the Trevor James/Kurioshi 'Vivace' and there are two premium student models - the 'SR Evo' and 'Horn 88'. The other two models are the 'SR' (graduate model) and the 'signature custom RAW' (professional model).

Yamaha: Yamaha Saxophones are also well made, and popular with teachers and students, and they are very reliable, however due to fluctuations in the value of the pound these student instruments can be overpriced at times. The current Yamaha standard student model is the 200 series (currently 280); the next model up is the 400 series (currently 480) which is a premium student instrument / graduate model.

Play-testing a Saxophone before purchase

For a complete beginner this is impossible because the player won't be able to produce a sound. If the player has been playing for 2 or 3 months and can produce a reliable sound then it is worth getting the player to try the instrument before purchasing because the player might find one instrument easier than another; this is largely down to the mouthpiece and the reed, but the positioning of the keys also makes a difference.

Each make and model of student Saxophone should be supplied with its matching mouthpiece (e.g. Yamaha instruments have a Yamaha mouthpiece). Student Saxophone mouthpieces can be quite different from each other and so can feel different to what the player is used to. The player should play the instrument for a few minutes to adjust to the feel of the mouthpiece. It is also important that a player tests an instrument with the correct reed strength. The player will have got used to a particular reed strength for the mouthpiece they have been learning on, however that reed strength might not be suitable for the mouthpiece of the instrument that they are considering buying; if the player finds the instrument hard to blow, or squeaky, they should try playing it with reeds that are a grade softer and a grade harder than what they are used to. Occasionally the situation arises where a student has been learning on an instrument using a professional mouthpiece; if the student owns the mouthpiece, then it is worth testing the new instrument with both the supplied mouthpiece and the professional mouthpiece (providing the professional mouthpiece can fit onto the crook of the new instrument).

The positioning of the key-work on a Saxophone does vary from model to model and this is worth considering: the player should check that they can reach the little finger keys comfortably, can

play the Bb 'bis' key (the pearl on the Bb key adjacent to the B key) comfortably, and can operate the octave mechanism comfortably. If the player is having difficulty with the instrument (even if they feel at ease with the mouthpiece, the reed, and the key-work) it could be down to how well the instrument is working (bear in mind that even new instruments might not be working well).

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