

Purchasing A Saxophone

Whether it's the time of year or the fact that everyone is taking lessons, I seem to have been inundated with questions about buying a horn. Since my expertise is saxophone, I'll be answering the question "What you should be aware of when buying a saxophone?"

One thing is clear, no matter what saxophone you buy you have to have a good mouthpiece. If the mouthpiece is bad the sound is bad – buy a good mouthpiece. A good mouthpiece is going to cost anywhere from \$100 to \$180, but you could pay up to \$800! I suggest looking at Selmer, Otto Link, Meyer or Ralph Morgan mouthpieces. They all seem pretty stable and have a good sound. You should play the mouthpiece for a couple of weeks so you're familiar with it before you play a new horn.

First, should you buy new or used? Both can be good choices depending on your circumstances.

If you are a beginner or someone that is buying their first horn, unless you have a teacher with a lot of experience, a new horn is usually a good idea. You know you're not buying anyone else's problems and most music stores have a great warranty. Often a saxophone needs a little tweaking by a good repairman after it's been played for a while and a good warranty means you won't have to pay for that. Also if there is some kind of structural problem a good music store will correct it if you are unhappy.

The quality of new horns these days is a pretty amazing value but it's still important to check the pitch of the horn you choose. If you can get a tuner, check a couple of notes and see how close you get. It doesn't have to be perfect because you tune while you play but make sure nothing is way off. The other thing I like to check out is the design. Does everything feel comfortable on the horn? Is it easy to get to all the keys within reason? Does it feel right to you? Does it play freely or does it take a lot of effort? And most importantly, how does it sound? If, when you play the horn you can't put it down and you want to play it all day, then that's a horn you want to own. I also like to see if I can predict repairs. I check the rods and the posts to try to tell if they'll stand up and I look to see if the pads are sitting on the tone holes. For a saxophone to really play well the metal can't be too hard, but if it's too soft it will need a lot of repairs so I talk to the repairman at the store and see what he or she thinks. They usually give you an honest answer because they don't want to be repairing the same thing over and over again on warranty.

Now, used horns also have a lot of things to think about. First, they're cheaper than new horns. If you run into someone that calls used horns Vintage horns (with a capital "V") he will tell you that, "that's when they knew how to make good horns." In some cases he may be right. However, if the horn is a Vintage horn it will cost more – no matter what. The first thing I listen for with a used horn is a great sound and with most pro players I think it's the same. I check to see if there is any evidence of any major repair work. Are there any wrinkles in the metal anywhere? Are the tone holes round? Do they have any marks or dents? A dent in the bell doesn't really matter but a dent in the neck or a tone-hole will affect the pitch and the sound and may cost a lot to repair. You want to make sure that the money you save buying a used horn you don't then spend on repairs. I also check the brace where the bell is attached to the horn to make sure it's solid and doesn't wiggle around.

Feel around the neck to feel if there are any ridges – that usually means the neck was, or is, bent. A bent neck is going to play out of tune and is expensive to fix. Try to get your teacher or someone whose playing you respect to play the horn and give you their opinion. I think some of the older horns are great but they do have some pitch problems so be prepared to adjust on some of the notes.

When you buy a horn you should think a little about what you need it for. Is it for your own enjoyment, a school band or a North American tour? Whether you buy a new horn or a nice, old, used one, try to buy a horn you can grow into without breaking the bank.

An Aside...

This August 1-6, the Kincardine Summer Music Festival, on Lake Huron, will offer jazz instruction and concerts. This year's Artist in Residence is Renee Rosnes, offering clinics during the week along with performances by Barry Elmes and Pat Collins. For more detailed information, visit www.ksmf.ca or call 1-866-453-9716.

Reedman, Alex Dean has been described as "one of Canada's foremost Jazz Saxophonists," has been a mainstay of the Canadian music scene for many years. He has played with Gil Evans, Kenny Wheeler, Dave Liebman, Ernie Watts, Mel Torme, Ray Charles, Pat Labarbera, Nick Brignola, and the Toronto Symphony. Alex is a member of Rob McConnell's 'Tenet'. He also holds the tenor saxophone chair with Rob McConnell's "Grammy award winning" BOSS Brass. His numerous recordings include Grammy and Juno award winners and he is the bandleader of the explosive Tenor Madness, Alex Dean Quintet, and "power trio", DEW East. Alex is the Canadian Artist Representative and clinician for Boosey & Hawkes, promoting Keilworth Saxophones and Rico Reeds. He is also the Artistic Director of the highly regarded Kincardine Summer Jazz Program on Lake Huron, ON. Alex is a member of the Jazz Faculty at the University of Toronto and Humber College. He is a widely respected clinician/adjudicator in Canada and the US.



by Alex Dean

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