

Saxophone Buying Guide

First of All

Don't just listen to me, there are many different and valid opinions so why not log in to the Cafe Saxophone discussions, you will also get a lot of useful saxophone information and advice there.

Someone starting out as a complete novice needs to think very carefully about this. Here are a few points to bear in mind:

What size instrument?, Sopranino, soprano, alto, tenor, baritone, bass or what?

New or secondhand.

Ultra cheap, intermediate (student) or professional.

What accessories to get.

Where to get the best deal.

What size saxophone?

The more extreme sizes are not generally a good idea to start learning on. The high instruments (soprano and sopranino) can be harder to get a pleasing tone and good intonation (intune-ness). The lower instruments (baritone and bass), apart from being more expensive, may be harder to blow and finger, especially for children or small adults. Most beginners choose alto or tenor, but for small children a tenor is usually too big. Some instruments have easier fingering for small hands than others (ergonomics), so if you really want to play tenor and find it difficult, try a few makes to see if there is an easier one for you.

If you can handle either size, the next thing to consider is which one you prefer. Listen to a lot of alto and tenor players to see which really floats your boat. Also think about which style of music you want to play, and possibly what openings there may be for performing experience on either in your area - it's a good idea to get playing with other people as soon as possible and if there is a community, college or church band nearby, find out whether they have more openings for alto or tenor. If you want to play rock & roll, you may find that tenor will be the best instrument. If you want to play classical then there is much more repertoire for alto saxophone. (Classical tenor is mostly useful in a saxophone quartet). If you want to play jazz, whether it's mainstream, modern, fusion, smooth or whatever, then either alto or tenor are useful.

New or Secondhand?

Very often the easiest option is to buy a new instrument as you can be confident that it should be in good working order and is covered by a manufacturer's guarantee. It is quite likely that, as with buying a new car, the most depreciation in value will happen in the first few months (or hours) of buying. If you are buying from a reputable dealer or teacher, then a secondhand instrument should also be fine, but may need some maintenance a bit sooner than a new one would. If you are buying a vintage instrument, you can often get a very good professional level instrument for a very good price, though some vintage saxophones command very silly prices (e.g. Selmer MK VI or SBA). Some vintage instruments are not suited to beginners as the ergonomics, consistency of sound across the range and intonation may not be as good as modern horns, though some are better. More information about these on the Vintage Saxophones page.

If you in doubt, many shops will let you hire an instrument for a while, then take the hire charges off if you decided to buy it.

Ultra Cheap, Intermediate (student) or Professional?

Over recent years the gap between cheap and expensive instruments has been narrowing, almost to the point where a £200 saxophone is very nearly as good in every respect as a £2000 instrument. To the majority of players the most important thing is obviously the sound of the instrument, but other factors to take into account are intonation, consistency of tone across the range, build quality (will it let you down during a performance?), feel (does it feel and sound good to play, irrespective of the sound projected?), ergonomics, cosmetics and resale value.

Professional Saxophones

People talk about the "Big Four" manufacturers of professional quality saxophones - Selmer, Yamaha, Yanagisawa and Keilwerth, the first two of which also have a cheaper range of student instruments. All of these are no doubt very good instruments, and beyond the initial hefty depreciation, will probably hold their value quite well. There is no reason why a beginner should not buy one of these if he/she can afford one, they are generally no harder to play than cheaper saxophones. The main thing to realise is that it may cost ten times the price of a saxophone that is almost as good, and that if you find the saxophone is not for you, you will have made quite a considerable loss due to depreciation. I cannot recommend any particular one of these, they are all built to last and have good intonation and sound. Which one is best is very subjective - each different make or model can have a distinctive character in the way it sounds or the response you feel from playing it, possibly a reason to wait until you are more confident about your playing before buying a top of the line horn. Having said that, I recently tried many saxophones at the Frankfurt Musikmesse exhibition and my favourites were a Rampone & Cazzani alto, P.Mauriat tenor and Inderbinnen tenor.

Intermediate Saxophones

These are makes such as Jupiter, Trevor James, Earlham etc. and are aimed at the student market. Until recently these were a good way for a beginner to start without the expense of a pro saxophone or the risk of a secondhand or vintage instrument. These would generally cost about half the price of a professional saxophone. That's not to say they only sound half as good - some of them sound as good. The saving in price is usually reflected by a not quite so rugged build quality and a more utilitarian finish. Many are made in Taiwan, which could be a saving for manufacturers compared with Germany, France or Japan, though a being made in Taiwan in itself does not mean the quality is any worse.

Ultra Cheap Saxophones

Currently quite a controversial topic. It used to be the case that ultra cheap instruments made in the far east were vastly inferior, often very out of tune and made from metal so soft that keys would bend and leaks set in almost as soon as you took the instrument out of the box. Over the last couple of years some very good instruments are now being imported from China. Many people disagree about the quality as it's very easy to lump them into one bracket, i.e. play a bad Chinese saxophone and then assume that all Chinese saxophones are bad. I have tried a few very good ones, which are at least half the price of the intermediate instruments, but actually appear to be better - intonation, tone, build quality and looks. I have tried many different brands of less expensive saxophones, in the end I bought a Bauhaus Walstein soprano and baritone as back up instruments for professional use, but now I actually use them as my main saxophones.

Getting The Best Deal

You are most likely to get the best prices from an internet mail order company, but of course, not necessarily the best service. A well stocked shop with knowledgeable and experienced staff can be a real bonus. If you do buy from an internet site, try to find one with a money back no quibble 14 (or at least 7) day return policy. Beware the many scammers on ebay. You will get plenty of good friendly advice on my forum about the good and bad suppliers.

What Accessories to Get.

Beware any shop that tries to sell you too many unnecessary accessories. Unless you buy a professional instrument, you will probably need to buy a mouthpiece, as generally the ones supplied with the saxophones are not very good. As well as this I would recommend you get some reeds, a good strong and comfortable neckstrap, a swab or pullthrough and a stand. Accessories that may be a waste of money include padclamps, padsaver, gigdust or any kind of pad treatment and fancy ligatures.