

Saxophone Mouthpieces

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Choosing

There is a widespread feeling among jazz players that metal mouthpieces aid in creating a "jazz tone". Classical players generally hold to the belief that hard rubber mouthpieces produce a superior tone quality. The materials from which mouthpieces are made may or not have an influence upon the resultant tone quality. One of the requisites for research needed in this area is the manufacture of a single mouthpiece design duplicated exactly using several different kinds of materials. The fact is that there are on the market today some excellent mouthpieces for jazz made of hard rubber, as well as some equally fine ones of metal designed for classical playing. One of the advantages of metal over rubber is its durability, being less prone to chip and scratch. Once the facing has been properly put onto a metal mouthpiece it will not easily be changed. On the other hand a drawback of these mouthpieces lies in the fact that metal is easily affected by lower temperatures, becoming very cold and remaining so for a relatively long time. Although a player's warm breath against any cold mouthpiece will result in bothersome and potentially disruptive condensation, the issue is compounded when a metal mouthpiece is in use. Essentially, it may be a good idea to try both metal and rubber mouthpieces to get the sound you want, realizing that there are advantages and disadvantages to both. Weigh them carefully. Also, realize that the facing and reeds have more to do with sound than the material.

Maintaining

The primary requisite in mouthpiece care is cleanliness. Considering that this essential piece of equipment is designed with measurements in thousandths of an inch (e.g. the tip opening differential from one facing to the next is usually .003"), its proper care is of utmost importance. The reed should be removed after playing and wiped with the thumb and index finger to remove water as well as any foreign particles. Pulling a soft absorbent cloth such as a cotton handkerchief through the mouthpiece after each playing is the best way to take out moisture and maintain a sparkling clean interior. It is best to pull the cloth so that contact with the tip and baffle area is kept to a minimum in order to have the least possible amount of wear. The rails and table must then be inspected to ensure that they are free of any foreign matter and that they are not chipped or scratched. If this simple routine is used on a daily basis there will be no need to use a mouthpiece brush for cleaning purposes.

Testing

Five steps should be taken in testing mouthpiece:

1. Use several reeds of slightly different strengths. Your favorite reed is probably comfortable on your current mouthpiece, but may not be suited to a different mouthpiece.
2. Be certain that the reed is placed correctly on the mouthpiece, that its tip is even with the mouthpiece tip, and that it is centered from side to side.
3. Does the reed seal? Keeping the end covered, draw the air out of it and then take the mouthpiece from your mouth. A popping sound means that the reed is fitting properly on the mouthpiece. A warped reed will not pop because air is escaping between it and the mouthpiece.
4. Tune on alto, tenor, or baritone saxophone (on soprano) to its respective concert pitch. This note may be tuned slightly flat, but never sharp. Improper mouthpiece position can cause bad intonation, poor response and inferior tone quality.
5. Do some playing in all registers, from lyrical to rapid staccato using various dynamic levels. Repeat the examples several times, then play them using your own reed and mouthpiece. Now try the new mouthpiece and reed again. Many players like to record this test which allows them to "stand back and listen". Some prefer to have one or more musician friends listen as each mouthpiece is played. If you use these "judges", be sure that they cannot see which mouthpiece is being played. Listen with your ears, not with your eyes. Be patient. Mouthpiece testing takes time.

Finally, how does the new mouthpiece feel to you? To make the right decision you must like the way it sounds and the way it feels. Good luck!

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