

Excellent Single Reed Mouthpieces for Students

In mouthpieces, as in all wind instruments and accessories, “student models” are not more appropriate for students or easier to play, just inexpensive. In most cases the more pejorative term of “cheap” would be appropriate. In some cases, the items qualify as an “M.S.O” or “Mouthpiece Shaped Object!” The only demonstrable purpose of an M.S.O. is to ensure the student grows to hate playing. Luckily there are professional quality intermediate instruments and mouthpieces of great value to be had, that will make it much easier for a beginner to achieve a beautiful sound, good articulation and easy response.

There seem to be almost as many models of single-reed mouthpieces as there are players in today’s clarinet and saxophone world. While that is an exaggeration, it would be appropriate if it were true, as everyone’s oral make-up, embouchure and air support varies. I own 175 mouthpieces for all sizes of clarinet and saxophone, which is only a fraction of those I have used. I could happily play any of them, and simply choose the ones that make it easiest to achieve the tone colour I hear in my imagination, along with providing great response and ease of articulation.

I keep all these mouthpieces for students to test for several weeks at home and in rehearsals. I also carry every premium brand of reed and ligature in the studio. Once students have a firm idea of the sound they are trying to produce, they will pick the setup that makes it easiest to express themselves.



The mouthpieces I’ve selected for review are widely available and of great value. The mouthpieces range from \$35 for student plastic mouthpieces to \$125 for great value hard rubber professional mouthpieces that give a mature sound very early on and are easy for a beginner to control. Some “stock” professional mouthpieces and many “custom” mouthpieces can cost up to \$600. They are excellent but obviously inappropriate choices for a student budget. Almost all mouthpieces supplied with student instruments are “Mouthpiece Shaped Objects.” The only exceptions I am aware of are Selmer and Yamaha, which I will review in part 2 of this article, along with D’Addario.

Mouthpiece Diagram with Terms

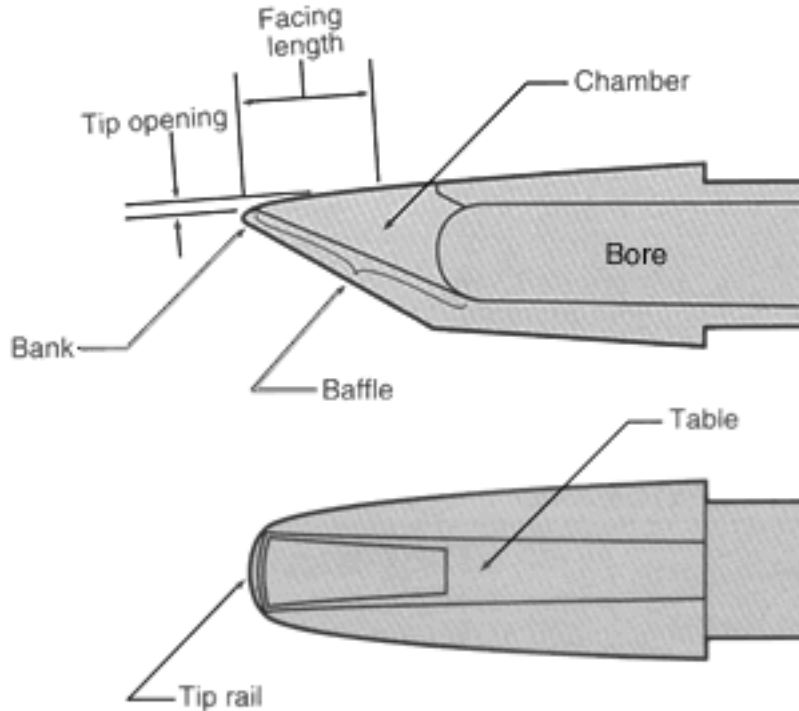


Table: This is the part of the mouthpiece on which the reed is placed. It should be perfectly flat or possibly have a slight concave section in its very center to help “seat” the stock of the reed firmly without too much pressure from the ligature. It is composed of two parts, the flat part of the facing (up to a closing point) and the curved part of the facing.

Tip Rail and Side Rails: Tip rails must be very even and symmetrical for good articulation. Asymmetrical side rails cause chirps and squeaks and limit the response of the reed. The side rails must be utterly symmetrical, of the same width and the facing curve must be dead even on each side.

Chamber: the part in which the sound is formed and which receives the pressure of air directly from the mouth, the bore channeling the air to send it into the instrument.

Baffle: when the mouthpiece is placed in the mouth, it is the upper part of the chamber (the part which has the most effect on the sound). A more convex baffle is used in jazz mouthpieces to give more air speed into the bore and give a brighter, somewhat buzzy sound for big band work, in order to achieve balance with the nine brass players in the ensemble.

Bore: A wider bore lowers the pitch of the instrument.

Facing Curve: The shape of the facing curve (the relationship between the tip opening and length of the facing) influences the sensation of resistance to the musician. A longer facing curve allows the musician to vary the texture and tone of the sound and shape notes with bends more easily. Usually a softer reed is used for a longer facing curve.

Tip Opening: A more open tip also requires a softer reed. A narrower tip opening and/or shorter facing curve requires a harder reed.

Vandoren

No one company makes all the best mouthpieces, but no company makes a larger variety of mouthpieces with superb quality control and terrific value than Vandoren. The specifications and literature on their website are superb as well. Here is a sampling of my personal choice of their best products. These have also been the choice of most of my students, and a wider assortment of students in clinics.

Black Diamond BD5 Soprano Clarinet Mouthpiece



This is my new favourite of all their clarinet mouthpieces. It has amongst the prettiest tone colours of any mouthpiece anywhere, especially in the altissimo. It is free blowing, round, sweet and has a lovely contained ring with amongst the most liquid legatos and clearest articulation available. It makes me want to play French chamber music all day long (although of course I always want to do that anyway!) It is not the most powerful mouthpiece available, but has great focus that projects very well indeed.

It works incredibly well with the new Vandoren V21 reeds, and one would almost think that they were designed together, except that the mouthpiece was actually designed by Bernard Vandoren in the 1970's! It was too difficult to manufacture at that time, though. It is only with the advent of CNC technology and computer controlled cutting equipment that the chamber was able to be reproduced commercially.

5RV Lyre Soprano Clarinet Mouthpiece



From one of the most recent Vandoren mouthpieces, to one of the greatest of their old standards! The first 5RV Lyre was made by Robert Vandoren for Jacques Lancelot who wanted a mouthpiece that was a bit more open at the end and a facing that was slightly longer. A longer facing makes it possible to play softer reeds, to obtain a richer tonal quality (darker in certain cases), more volume and, above all, greater ease and comfort. Responsive and easy to control in all registers.

Like the 5RV, the Vandoren 5RV Lyre Bb clarinet mouthpiece is an excellent choice for the advancing student or for professionals. With a slightly more open tip, the Vandoren 5RV Lyre takes a slightly lighter reed, giving the player more flexibility and a more open sound. It also has a longer facing than the 5RV. Extremely responsive with a wonderful ring to the sound from the top to the bottom of the instrument.

M Series Mouthpieces



Developed by Donald Montanaro, associate principal clarinet of the Philadelphia Orchestra and a teacher at the Curtis Institute. Based on Chedeville designs from the 50's, this series features a large bore and deep baffle for a darker rounder sound.

These have become very popular, and the most open models, the M30 or the M30 Lyre are chosen by many symphonic musicians. I hasten to add that this more open model is still just a moderate tip opening with a medium long facing curve.

Vandoren Optimum Saxophone Mouthpieces



These are extremely free blowing and responsive mouthpieces with great ring, clarity and projection for the classical player. Available in three tip openings, 3, 4 and 5. I tend to favor the moderate 4 opening, although the 3 opening on the Soprano

saxophone SL3 mouthpiece makes intonation a little more dependable. The “4” opening is wide enough to be used for jazz playing until the student is experienced enough to graduate to a true jazz model.

Computer controlled cutting on this line makes the mouthpieces extremely consistent and they have been a favorite choice of most students. The beak is designed to be quite narrow on these mouthpieces and makes it extremely easy to “double” on more than one size of instrument.

Vandoren V16 Ebonite Jazz Saxophone Mouthpieces



A “vintage” robust sound with a combination of dark warmth and cutting edge that is perfect for both small combos and big bands. A very wide variety of tip openings and facing lengths. As always, I favor the moderate openings...5 or 6, depending on the instrument. The Alto version is available in the Small (S) chamber or Medium (M). The smaller chamber “cuts” more and the medium chamber is warmer. These mouthpieces have plenty of power, so I have not found the small chamber necessary. It’s all personal, though! The Alto A5M and A6M and the Baritone mouthpieces in this line have found an amazing level of acceptance amongst world-class players and my students.

Selmer

Selmer Paris was founded in 1885 by Henri Selmer and originally only manufactured reeds and mouthpieces. Henri Selmer began making clarinets in 1898. His younger brother Alexandre became a clarinetist with the Boston Symphony the same year, then played with the Cincinnati Symphony, and finally the New York Philharmonic. He played Selmer clarinets from 1903 on, which strongly supported the sales of the clarinets in North America. It was not until 1922 that Selmer released its first saxophone.

Selmer has long had a great reputation for its mouthpieces, made of particularly good quality hard rubber. They are the only major manufacturer that releases their professional and artist model clarinets and saxophones complete with equally fine mouthpieces. This practice may not actually make sense! Most artists already have a favorite mouthpiece and are not going to play the one that comes with the instrument.

Selmer C85 Clarinet Mouthpieces



These mouthpieces were developed in the late 1980's along with the Selmer Recital clarinet. The C85 range features a powerful and rounded tone. They offer very precise and easy blowing staccato. The sound is rich in low overtones; combining power with subtlety and roundness. They can play extreme dynamic ranges while remaining focused and project extremely well.

All the C85 models have a medium length 19-mm facing with three tip openings available: 1.05 (medium closed), 1.15 mm (medium), and 1.20 mm (medium open.) They are named after these tip openings. The C85 120 mouthpiece is supplied with all their professional clarinets. I feel that one cannot go wrong with moderate equipment for students, so recommend the C85 115.

Selmer S80 Saxophone Mouthpieces



A top-quality professional level mouthpiece, the Selmer S80 Series is popular the world over. Machined from hard rod rubber to assure stability, accuracy and consistent facings, these mouthpieces feature a square cross section in the chamber instead of the conventional arch. The facing length is moderate and they are available in many tip openings. They have a very warm, grainy, broad and full tone. They have a moderate baffle which gives them enhanced projection, and the larger tip openings have frequently been used by jazz artists.

Tip openings are C, C*, C**, D, E, F and G. The S80C* is supplied with all their professional saxophones. It is very appropriate for Alto and Baritone saxophones, but C** is recommended for Tenor. Many players believe that tenor saxophones require a

wider tip opening than the other sizes, and when I played S80 mouthpieces, I found the C* worked well on everything else, but the C** gave the tenor easier response. This was all for classical playing.

For jazz playing, most people choose the D, E or F tip opening which corresponds approximately to the classic Meyer or Otto Link 5* to 7 openings...right in the middle of the jazz ballpark.

D'Addario Reserve Clarinet Mouthpieces



This phenomenal mouthpiece line was a development project led by clarinetists Mark Nuccio of the New York Philharmonic, Richie Hawley of Rice University, and Lee Livengood of the Utah Symphony, who also manufactures custom mouthpieces. These distinguished artists worked to develop a hard rubber material and acoustic design reminiscent of the legendary mid-20th century Chedeville mouthpieces and they succeeded! It has superb intonation and articulation and a rich, centered, velvety, ringing sound with a shimmering core. They are machined from the excellent hard rubber by CNC equipment, so they are extremely consistent.

I recommend the middle of the range, the X10 model with a moderate tip opening and a medium long facing. If one want something slightly easier to control with a harder reed, the X5 model is also appropriate. Students have found these easy to control and very responsive. I wish D'Addario would make saxophone mouthpieces like this!

Yamaha Standard Mouthpieces



Yamaha makes the only good inexpensive plastic mouthpiece that I know of, and a Yamaha 4C model is included with all of its instruments from student to artist models. I used to start all my beginners on these mouthpieces and I still keep several of each for every size of instrument in my studio. Some students show up with student instruments that come with "Mouthpiece Shaped Objects" and I simply loan them a Yamaha mouthpiece until they choose a professional model after a few months' work. However, when we are purchasing an intermediate instrument for a beginner, we always purchase a professional mouthpiece to go with it. We also never purchase a student instrument. They are harder to play, are not worth routine maintenance and do not hold their resale value. I recommend that parents rent an intermediate instrument instead of purchasing a student instrument, then make the purchase of that same instrument if the student is enjoying music and developing well. Schools should certainly not purchase them...they are a bad investment.

As good as the Yamaha mouthpieces are, they are molded of plastic instead of machined from hard rubber and they just do not project like a professional mouthpiece. On the other hand, they are consistent, easy to blow and have a warm tone. They have one manufacturing problem. Yamaha attempts to mold the table of the mouthpiece slightly concave to help "seat" the reed, but the concavity stretches up to the bottoms of the side rails so the reed does not make full contact with the rails for the last millimeter of the chamber. This is not a huge issue, but I still adjust the side rails for every student using a Yamaha mouthpiece so that this slight gap is eliminated.

The other issue with Yamaha is that they supply the wrong tip opening with their instruments, in my opinion. The 4C is quite closed. I recommend 5 C for Soprano Clarinet, Alto Sax, and Tenor Sax, and 6C for Bass Clarinet. Unfortunately, they only make the 5C for Baritone Sax, or I would also recommend the 6C for Bari. Students can control these mouthpieces easily and they will get enhanced response and a full tone compared to the 4C models. This will facilitate the change to a professional mouthpiece, and frankly I have had better results just starting beginners on professional mouthpieces.

That being said, these mouthpieces are phenomenal value and I no longer do school clinics without having them available at a hot price from a local dealer, along with Juno reeds.... demonstrably the only good student reed. This way I am not forced to spend most of the clinic trying to adjust individual students' Mouthpiece Shaped Objects combined with Reed Shaped Objects. I simply hand them a Yamaha mouthpiece with #2 ½ or #3 Juno reeds, and enjoy their look of delighted amazement as their musical life gets easier. Most elementary band teachers I have worked with now routinely outfit their beginning single reed sections with Yamaha mouthpieces and Juno reeds. I recommend strongly that high school players are outfitted with professional reeds and mouthpieces though, and it is never too early to do this!

The most common equipment mistake made for beginning single reed players is reeds that are too soft on mouthpieces that are too closed. Number 2 ½ reeds on moderate to moderately open mouthpieces will develop them the fastest. The embouchure and air support need resistance in order to develop and the reed needs to vibrate through a wider opening to give a full tone and facilitate clear articulation and enhanced response.



Chuck Currie performs on clarinet and saxophone with the Pacific Symphonic Wind Ensemble, Vancouver Saxophone Ensemble, the Vancouver Island Symphony and many chamber groups. His performance at the opening concert of the Vancouver 2007 Clarinetfest was reviewed as “absolutely amazing.”

He teaches at his own Sax Noir Studio, and has conducted clinics throughout British Columbia. Students have auditioned successfully for national and international scholarships and ensembles. He is a Canadian Champion of Music Education, a spokesperson for the Coalition for Music Education. He is a Backun, Conn-Selmer, Blashaus and Légère Artist.