

Chuck Currie

Ligature Choices for

I've tested ligatures extensively, including recording them in performance halls. I'm looking for a vibrant, dark, warm, well projected tone with clear articulation on all clarinets and saxophones. I tend to favour the lower partials, but there must be enough presence of upper partials to give a contained ringing sound and project well.

The testing has led me to believe that metal projects better than fabric, leather or string and ligatures that have two vertical rails on the reed surface with nothing touching the edges of the reed, and minimal mouthpiece contact are the best, at least for me. Fabric ligatures and some metal ligatures have too much material in contact with the mouthpiece, dampening the tone, in my opinion and the opinion of those who have listened 'blind' to the recordings I have made.

Beware! Any ligature that has minimal contact with the mouthpiece has issues with slipping on the mouthpiece, especially in an orchestral situation where one is shifting the mouthpiece between A, Bb and C clarinets. A thin mouthpiece patch on the back of the mouthpiece almost totally obviates the problem, but not with all ligatures.

TWO RAIL LIGATURES

Daniel Bonade Inverted



The legendary clarinetist and teacher was the first to design the 'two rail ligature', but unfortunately over a few months of

playing, the metal weakens and the circumference of the ligature starts to touch the edges of the reed with a noticeable dampening of the sound. Robert Marcellus, Bonade's most influential student, pioneered cutting out the centre part of the ligature so that there are four shorter rails. This gives the reed more freedom and expression, but at the expense of seating it firmly, since the metal is a little soft, so one loses a little bit of the focused ring in the sound. Articulation is improved a little. These are fine ligatures but need to be replaced once or twice per year, as soon

as the metal tires and starts to contact the edges of the reed.

BG Super Revelation



constricting the mouthpiece.

Amongst the best of the fabric ligatures. Smooth and warm with good projection, very focused, but a little dampened by the fabric

Rovner Versa



all. The thicker the plate - the darker the sound. In addition, there are two "flaps" of fabric that can be pulled out from just under the edges of the plate and placed over the plate, so there are really six different setups. I don't recommend pulling the fabric over the plate, as it just dampens the reed, very warm, but restricted upper partials and less projection.

Rovner Versa X

This latest fabric ligature from Rovner is excellent; the freest and warmest of all those I have tried. I still find the sound very slightly dampened compared to metal ligatures, but I could play any of these fabric ligatures with this one preferred. The Versa Ligature with the thin plate configuration is the most similar to this. This ligature also has the fabric flaps that can be pulled out over the metal plate, again not recommended.

BG Traditional



One would think this ligature would work very well indeed. It's modelled directly from the Bonade ligature and the metal never touches the edge of the reed. I don't know why, but I've found it a little dull and stuffy on every instrument. That includes the gold plated version.

Vandoren Optimum



Great job by Vandoren. The plates are very easy to change and they are held loosely enough so that they will adapt to slightly uneven reeds. The 'four point' plate will actually dig little holes into the stock of the reed and does not seat it that well on the mouthpiece table. Nice and warm, but lacking 'ring' and clean articulation.

The sideways rails do not work at all in my opinion. They dampen the reed a lot. This is the same rail design as the Vandoren M/O ligatures. Vandoren's promotional material says: 'Two small contact points secure the reed without dampening or restricting its natural vibrations'. I couldn't disagree more. If you switch plates back and forth on the Optimum ligature you can form your own opinion. The plate to use, in my opinion, is the one with two vertical rails. However, there is an awful lot of metal on this ligature and it seems to dampen the sound to me.

Rico H



This is a direct imitation of the vintage Harrison ligatures. It does have two rails, but they are joined in the middle, forming that letter H. A fine ligature, very warm, not quite as much ring, projection or clear articulation as two rails without the horizontal strip of metal. If a player's sound is a little bright, this ligature will ameliorate that. It has the benefit of a very secure fit on the mouthpiece, although that does dampen the sound

Clarinet and Saxophone

just a little. I use it on my Eb and D clarinet mouthpieces, as the ligatures that have less metal contact with those small mouthpieces tend to slip upwards as they are tightened.

Brancher



This is a lovely ligature, made by a jeweller. Beautiful workmanship, with no chance of any metal contacting the edges of the reed.

One of the less "secure" fits on the mouthpiece though, and quite rigid, so it can be a little tough to fit on some larger mouthpieces such as bass clarinet and baritone saxophone. Wonderful centre and ring to the sound and excellent articulation.

Francois Louis



This ligature is available with stainless steel, rubber covered stainless steel and pure brass plates. Very secure on the

mouthpiece but with minimal metal

contact. Really a revolutionary ligature, and saxophonists have embraced it. I find the stainless plate a little bright, and the heavy brass plate (while very dark and warm) restricts upper partials and limits projection, so I would recommend the rubber covered stainless plate. Terrific articulation. The brass plate for clarinet is not curved enough and the full plate contacts the reed with very obvious dampening of vibrations. However, the Wanne Enlightened Ligature silver plate can be cut and bent to fit clarinets and installed on this ligature, transforming it into one of the finest clarinet ligatures available. I've installed modified Wanne Silver plates on many of these ligatures and think it enhances their sound for all single reed instruments. More on this modification of the Wanne Silver plate in the next section.

Theo Wanne Enlightened Ligature



This excellent ligature has very minimal metal contact with the mouthpiece and is available with six different plate

materials, all with distinct tones. I prefer the silver plate for its combination of warmth and projection. The plate is held by one screw in the centre so it will adapt to reed irregularities, as does the Francois Louis. The plate is 13mm across and works better on all sizes of reeds when it is placed in a vice and bent to 11mm so it is more concave and contacts the reed a little closer to the centre. For clarinet, it needs to be trimmed and bent to 8mm. Otherwise it contacts the edges of the reed, and dampens it quite dramatically.

WANNE LIGATURE PLATES

Wanne Ligature Plates Modified



The ligature on the left is a Wanne clarinet ligature with the plate trimmed and then bent to 8mm wide.

The ligature on the right is a Wanne soprano ligature with a silver plate bent to 11mm wide. The plate at the front of the picture is an unmodified plate, still 13mm wide.

Peter Spriggs Floating Rail Ligature



This ligature has two rails that have pivot points in the centre, so that they are independent of each other. The rails are slightly concave but

flattened on the ends where they meet the reed for just 4mm. Wonderful warmth, clarity, ring and projection. Excellent articulation. Made only for soprano clarinet and bass clarinet. While the next ligature is my absolute favourite, the Spriggs is more secure when changing mouthpieces between differently pitched clarinets in orchestra, so it is my first choice for that situation.

Continued →

WANNE PLATES



Standard with all mouthpieces



Alive Gold [versatile]: Vibrant and alive, yet very pleasant and colourful tone! (Comes assembled on the ligature.)

Heavy Brass [dark]: Muted, quiet, flat and darker tone. Most of the overtones are removed, providing core sound focus.

Stainless Steel [bright]: Vibrant and alive industrial sound. The heavy metal tone!

Titanium [bright]: Big, bold, open, free and fully alive sound with tons of character. Titanium has extremely resonant qualities which produce a lot of overtones.

Solid Silver [dark]: Smooth, warm, round, and very pretty tone. It creates an elegant more weighted sound with lots of core, life and beauty.

Vintified [dark]: Warm and dark tone with wonderful colour, overtones, and core to the sound.

Rovner Platinum



My current favourite ligature, the Rovner Platinum, has a fair amount of metal in contact with the mouthpiece, but the platinum is so thin

and lightweight that it allows the mouthpiece to vibrate more than any other ligature. The 'rails' that touch the reed are bent strips of hard rubber. They seat the reed very well indeed and the flexibility allows for the best *legato* I have ever heard and enhances response from the low end of all instruments.

It is very important to get the tension of the bent rubber strips right with this ligature. I find it best to use the least tension possible. Tighten the ligature just barely enough to get stability in the altissimo of your instrument and you will find a warm vibrant ringing sound all the way to the bottom of the horn, with terrific ease of articulation. Unfortunately, the ligature is so slippery that it is hard to adjust tuning on saxophones without moving it. I still find it is worth it! However, the ligature will never work for an orchestral clarinetist, as it is impossible to move the mouthpiece from A to Bb to C clarinets without the ligature slipping. I still use the Spriggs



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ligature for orchestra work due to this. You could make the choice to move barrel and mouthpiece together from A to Bb clarinets and still use this ligature, but I used a different model of barrel on A clarinets, so that does not work for me.

Superb artists use all of these ligatures, and I've kept all of them in my collection. I could play any of them happily. However,

I do have my current favourites and I've given reasons why I don't currently play some of these...but they are just my opinions.

The author gratefully thanks Sandro Massullo of Massullo Music for his expert help in sourcing and testing ligatures. Mr. Massullo is amongst the most respected instrument repairmen in North America and his Burnaby, British Columbia shop specialising in wind instrument repair and voicing, along with sales of new and restored vintage instruments and mouthpieces.

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 and Conn-Selmer Artist. ■