

Ligature Choices for Clarinet and Saxophone

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 favor 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 or string projects better than fabric or leather and generally that ligatures that have two vertical rails on the reed surface, 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” Ligature Reviews

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 contact the edges of the reed with a noticeable dampening of the sound. Robert Marcellus, Bonade’s most influential student, pioneered cutting out the center 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



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

Rovner Versa



This was originally the “Eddie Daniels” model. It has two different plates, thick and thin, and can also be played without the plate at 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 modeled 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 it's 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 just a little. This is a good choice for 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 jeweler. 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 center 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 6 different plate materials, all with distinct tones. I prefer the Silver plate for it’s combination of warmth and projection. The plate is held by one screw in the center so it will adapt to reed irregularities, as does the Francois Louis. The plate is 13 mm across and works better on all sizes of reeds when it is placed in a vise and bent to 11 mm so it is more concave and contacts the reed a little closer to the center. For clarinet, it needs to be trimmed and bent to 8 mm. Otherwise it contacts the edges of the reed, and dampens it quite dramatically.

Wanne Ligature Plates



Standard with
all Mouthpieces

Alive Gold [versatile]: Vibrant and alive, yet very pleasant and colorful 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.

4-Piece
Pressure
Plate Set

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 color, overtones, and core to the sound.



Wanne Modified Ligature Plate

The ligature on the left is a Wanne clarinet ligature with the plate trimmed and then bent to 8 mm wide. The ligature on the right is a Wanne soprano ligature with a silver plate bent to 11 mm wide. The plate at the front of the picture is an unmodified plate, still 13 mm wide.



Peter Spriggs Floating Rail Ligature



This ligature has two rails that have pivot points in the center, 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 4 mm. Wonderful warmth, clarity, ring and projection. Excellent articulation. Made only for soprano clarinet and bass clarinet.

Rovner Platinum



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

Silverstein Ligature



The Silverstein Ligature is my current favorite. I purchased 16 of them for various mouthpieces, so this is not something that was decided lightly. It is the first non-two rail ligature that has given me amazing results. Because the cord on this ligature is so high-tech, firm and dense, it has minimal surface contact with the reed. The two "fine tuner" bars on either side of the reed can be moved from the sides to any point around the circumference. My preference is to move the fine tuners up to within a couple of millimeters of the reed for enhanced focused projection. This is not just my opinion: in fact legendary British clarinetist Leslie Craven worked with acoustic scientist Dr. Robert Watson, using a high-end digital oscilloscope to chart frequency response with the Silverstein ligature for all partials from 256 hertz to 12,536 hertz, capturing all possible harmonics of the fundamental tone. This scientific testing against four other highly respected ligatures backed up the subjective opinions of many single reed players that the Silverstein ligature provides an incredibly rich sound with great ease of articulation, and the spectrum analysis proved that adjustment of the sidebars alters the focus of the sound.

Each Silverstein Ligature has a serial number and comes with a lifetime warranty. They also treat their artists very well... they gave me two extra Bass Clarinet ligatures with silver and gold tension adjuster/fine tuner bars in addition to the standard titanium. They also made a custom ligature to fit my Baritone saxophone mouthpiece.

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

My ligature collection



Chuck Currie performs on clarinet and saxophone with the Pacific Symphonic Wind Ensemble, Vancouver Saxophone Ensemble, Pacific Blackwood, Sax Noir and the Vancouver Island Symphony. 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, Légere and Silverstein Artist.

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