



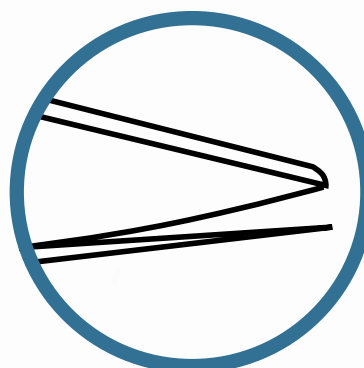
MOUTHPIECE *matters*

Chuck Currie on why saxophonists need both a classical and a jazz mouthpiece, plus his personal recommendations on the best brands and models

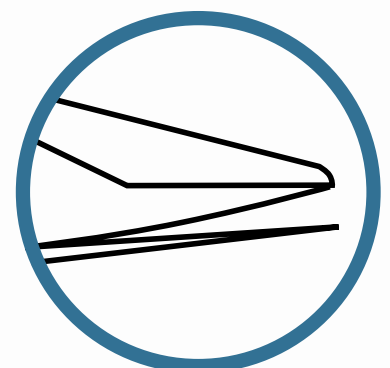
Your imagination of your own sound is the biggest factor in your musical identity, but almost as important is the mouthpiece design and type of reed. This set-up governs your tone spectrum more than your instrument, as long as you have a decent saxophone in good repair. In order to play with the appropriate sound for the musical style you are inhabiting, a quality mouthpiece of the right design with an appropriate reed strength is critical. If you want to be a well-rounded player comfortable in all musical languages you need two mouthpieces.

Classical versus jazz mouthpieces

These are vastly different designs. The single biggest difference between the two is the 'baffle' on the inside of the mouthpiece.



Classical



Jazz

The convex shape of the baffle on the 'roof' of the jazz mouthpiece makes the biggest difference. It speeds up the air the moment it enters the mouthpiece and gives more edge, projection and buzz to the sound so the saxophonist can compete against amplified instruments in commercial music and brass in a big band. The straight or concave baffle makes the classical sound rounder and sweeter, purer and more burnished.

There is no way you can compete with the louder instruments in jazz with a classical mouthpiece, or blend with woodwinds and strings beautifully in classical music with a jazz mouthpiece. In addition, generally speaking, classical mouthpieces will have narrower tip openings and shorter facing curves. The more open tip and frequently longer lay of jazz mouthpieces allows the jazz musician more options for bending notes and 'sub-tone' playing.

If you want to be accepted by both musical communities (including players and audiences) you must have an authentic sound that is true to the music and the history of its greatest players. You will not have any success playing Sammy Nestico charts with a classical mouthpiece or Bizet solos with a jazz mouthpiece.

Choosing a mouthpiece

This is highly personal since everyone's oral cavity, teeth and lips are different. Still, there are 'sweet spots' in all mouthpiece design that will tend to lead us to a facing curve, tip opening, baffle height and reed strength that will allow our imagination to achieve the desired sound with ease. You need the help of an open-minded and knowledgeable teacher to guide you, along with the chance to experiment and test for a few weeks with a given set-up before making a decision.

The best advice on mouthpieces and reeds I got as a young student was from James Morton, principal clarinetist of the National Arts Centre Orchestra. He visited our school for a concert with a wind quintet made up of all the principal woodwinds. A student inevitably asked him, 'What strength reed do you play?' His answer? 'A moderate strength reed on a moderate mouthpiece.' After measuring over 500 mouthpieces for all sizes of saxophones and clarinets, and carrying an inventory of 450 reeds of different brands and strengths in the studio for students to try, that has proven true for my 12 different saxophones and clarinets.

Luckily, some manufacturers have worked for decades to design mouthpieces that are highly consistent and good value. I own 200 mouthpieces, chosen from over 500. I have been researching them for decades and have ended up with some personal recommendations that I update every year as new mouthpieces are released. These have worked well for my students.

Classical alto

I recommend **Vandoren Optimum**, **D'Addario Reserve** or **Selmer Concept**. The Vandoren Optimum AL3 can be too polite for wind ensemble. The AL5 has a similar but 'bigger' and darker sound. It is terrific for those who have a somewhat bright tone naturally or a bright instrument like the new model Yanagisawa saxophones. The AL4 has more presence than the AL5 or AL3 and can be used by beginners in their first year for both classical and jazz. The AL4 can be too aggressive for chamber or orchestral work. The newer D'Addario Reserve mouthpieces are great, particularly the D150 with the lowest baffle and longest facing. The Selmer Concept is fantastic for everything classical, but almost double the money!

Jazz alto

Vandoren V16 A6M (medium chamber), **D'Addario Select 6M** or **JodyJazz HR* 6M**. All three of these mouthpieces are modelled after vintage Meyers, and they

are all great. In my opinion, medium chambers are a little darker and sweeter than small chambers. These tip openings and facings allow for easy response but with plenty of power, making them appropriate for players new to jazz mouthpieces. D'Addario Select and JodyJazz mouthpieces are fantastic but not as consistent as Vandoren in hitting their design specs in terms of tip openings, and can have slightly asymmetric side rails, so you have to try a few and might want your teacher to measure the tip openings and check the rail symmetry. I've evened up all the asymmetrical side rails in my mouthpiece collection and only Vandoren mouthpieces have never needed this.

Classical tenor

This is the single hardest mouthpiece to source. Classical tenor sax is seldom heard and few classical professionals specialise in tenor, so there is not a big market. The **Vandoren Optimum** or **T20** seem to have the best balance of warmth and projection to me. Like the alto version, the Optimum TL3 offers a beautiful sound but is very 'polite'. I can't see using it for anything but chamber music with strings or woodwinds, and probably not sax quartet! The TL4, the new TL5 and the V5 T20 are better for players looking for more presence. Like the alto AL4, the TL4 can be used for classical and also beginner jazz. The TL5 has a much better balance for classical. It is very similar to the T20 but 'bigger' and takes more air. The Selmer Concept tenor is a disappointment compared to their ➡



From left to right: D'Addario Reserve alto, JodyJazz HR* tenor, Vandoren SL3 soprano and Vandoren V16 S6 soprano

stellar (but expensive!) soprano and alto mouthpieces – nice and warm, but not enough higher partials to really project.

Jazz tenor

Vandoren V16 T6L, Vandoren Java T45, JodyJazz HR* 6* or D'Addario Select 6M. Generally, the Vandoren V16 series is great for a 'classic' jazz sound, and the new large chamber versions available only for tenor are magnificent, especially if you like a dark vintage 40s or 50s sound. You also cannot go wrong with the Java T45 for a player new to jazz mouthpieces. All my students who have started on these have had great success and could move to the large chamber V16s if they had the air support for that. The JodyJazz HR* tenor is a modern version of the Vintage Otto Link mouthpiece and is fantastic on soprano, alto or tenor, but is not as consistent in quality control as Vandoren – nothing is! The D'Addario Select tenor mouthpieces are also excellent, but in my opinion they need at least one more facing that is more closed than the rest of the line-up. The numbering is also confusing. They are actually about one more step open than the model numbers would indicate – their 6M is more like a 7 Otto Link or JodyJazz (and so on). I think we need a D'Addario Select 5M which would be similar to a 6 in all the other brands. The reason Otto Link and Meyer mouthpieces don't make the cut in this list is because they are made by JJ Babbitt, who have the worst quality control in the industry. There is not a symmetrical rail or consistent chamber, facing or baffle to be found on any of their mouthpieces. That is not to say that some of them are not fantastic. You just have to try a lot of them and then fix the flaws in the best of them. I'm a proud owner of some of these, but I cannot recommend them to neophytes who might not be able to judge or fix them. Before CNC (computer numerical control) manufacturing, many mouthpieces were like this, but I feel that those days should be over.

Classical baritone

The easy response and warm tone of the **Vandoren Optimum BL3** has made it a popular classical baritone mouthpiece and a great choice for students and professionals. That being said, it is a little on the 'polite' side, like all the Optimum 3s. For baritone I actually prefer this, as it has the same great sound as the BL4 and BL5, but it is easier to pop out quiet

low notes and make large interval leaps. I move a lot of air and the BL3 allows me to use it all without dominating the quartet or orchestra, and I am not forced to 'throttle back'. The Vandoren B35 is also versatile and still easy for students to play. The BL4 has much more authority and can even stretch to jazz but can be a little aggressive for chamber or orchestral work and can take more air and support than beginners can provide. The BL5 is more resistant and smoother, and takes even more air. The much longer facing curve can make it difficult to get quiet and immediate response on leaps to staccato low Cs and below. Selmer does not make an appearance here because they only have the square-chambered S80 and S90 models for baritone. (The mouthpiece designer Ralph Morgan, who retired as Selmer's chief woodwind designer in 1980, famously asked, 'Why don't they design a square neck while they are at it?') Rousseau mouthpieces are beautifully designed but suffer from inconsistencies due to JJ Babbitt's quality control.

Jazz baritone

The JodyJazz HR* baritone mouthpiece sounds nothing like the rest of this brand's excellent line-up – a bit dull and muted. What a shame! Luckily the **Vandoren V16** mouthpiece is the baritone jazz mouthpiece of your dreams! It has been chosen by two of the greatest modern bari players to replace their vintage Otto Link mouthpieces – Dennis DiBlasio and Gary Smulyan. The Vandoren V16 B5 is my choice. It's the smallest tip opening but still powerful, centred, dark and warm with just enough edge to cut through the trombone section. Ideal for big band or combo work. Way cool looking – like a magic bullet, and plays like that! It has a very slim profile that fits a tenor ligature rather than a bari ligature.

Classical soprano

I've left soprano for last because it is the least utilised of the saxophones. That being said, mouthpiece choice is critical to its sweetness, warmth and purity. Well-trained classical saxophonists study all four of the family members, but the alto saxophone has by far the most solo and orchestral repertoire written for it. Soprano saxophone is most used in the saxophone quartet. Even in the hands of someone who specialises in it, intonation can be an issue. For that reason, my recommendations are two mouthpieces with a beautiful, sweet, centered tone, medium closed tip openings and medium short facing curves. Both are made with CNC technology, so they are very consistent in their quality control. They are the **Vandoren Optimum SL3** and the **Selmer Concept**.

Jazz soprano

The soprano is just as little played in jazz, and frequently by doublers – so there are even more likely to be inherent tone and intonation issues. Hence, two dependable, centered, rich and warm recommendations are the **Vandoren V16 S6 medium chamber** and the **JodyJazz HR* 5***. These are relatively closed-tip/medium facing curve (for jazz mouthpieces, that is!). They are the most closed facings in these models – and still you will have no problem being heard whatsoever! ■



From left to right:
Selmer Concept alto,
JodyJazz HR* tenor and
Vandoren V16 B7 baritone