

Saxophone Mouthpieces

Part I, The Big Picture By Gunnar Mossblad

A Guide to Selecting And Trying Mouthpieces

In this issue I'll begin my discussion about mouthpieces focusing on the big picture of searching for and playing a mouthpiece. In my follow-up article next issue, on saxophone mouthpieces, I will zero in on the idiosyncrasies of analyzing mouthpiece structural components with emphasis on the subtle details of a mouthpiece and what to look for.

Everyone is in search of the illusive perfect mouthpiece. But, what is a perfect mouthpiece? Hopefully it is the mouthpiece you are playing right now. More likely, you have settled to some extent, for a good mouthpiece and are in search of something better. Either way a mouthpiece is probably the most important piece of equipment that any saxophonist owns. It is the first and primary connection between the apparatus (you) and the amplifier (the horn). A conservative estimate of the importance of the mouthpiece, reed, and ligature to the tone, pitch and even comfort of playing the saxophone is more than 80%. Reeds come and go far too quickly, and a ligature really only reacts to the quality of the reed and mouthpiece. Therefore the mouthpiece is the only real constant in the formula for a good, in tune, comfortable sound.

While the science of mouthpiece design is theoretically perfect, when you add in the human and artistic equation everything is up for grabs. Which is why there is no one right mouthpiece for everyone. Each person's unique physical characteristics will make the same mouthpiece feel and sound different. Additionally, even a precise computer controlled machine cannot make two mouthpieces exactly the same and therefore will not play the same. In addition to differences in the actual material a mouthpiece is made of, an imperfect human put the slightly different material in those precise machines differently every time.

WHERE TO FIND MOUTHPIECES

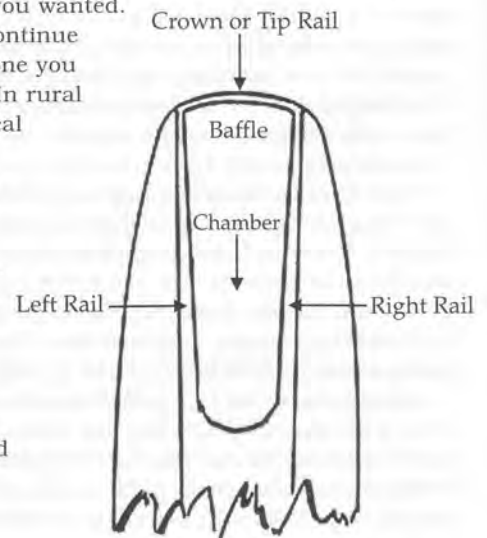
Traditionally musicians have gone to their local music store or woodwind repair shop to sit in a strange room (acoustically that is), and play a bunch of mouthpieces. If you are lucky you would go home with one or more that you thought were better than what you have. As early as

high school I was trying as many mouthpieces as I could get my hands on, looking for one that had the tone I was hearing and made playing easier. It was very frustrating because the process was hit and miss. Many times what I thought was a great mouthpiece in the store was just okay when I got it home. Other times I thought the mouthpiece was good until I actually got on a gig or the mouthpiece was really great for a short period of time, but I out grew it very quickly. If you were lucky, every 25 or 30 mouthpieces you tried might produce one good one, but rarely did you find a great piece. Besides when you are younger you do not always recognize a great mouthpiece, because your embouchure and apparatus are not yet fully developed. Anyone who has gone through this search process knows it is expensive and you end up with a drawer full of mouthpieces that did not turn out to be the perfect one.

MAIL ORDER

Mail order is even more of a gamble. With a guarantee of eventually purchasing one mouthpiece, you can usually order 2 or 3 mouthpieces at a time, and return them if they are not what you wanted.

This process can continue until you find the one you want to purchase. In rural areas where the local music store may handle only a very few varieties of mouthpieces and only a small inventory of the mouthpieces they carry, this may be the only way to get to try several mouthpieces. This method does let you play and compare mouthpieces, but



only for the current three. What happens if you send back a mouthpiece that you later realize was the best of the bunch? Unfortunately that is too bad. Once the mouthpiece is restocked it would be next to impossible to be assured of getting the same mouthpiece back that you had returned. If you find a mouthpiece that might be good you keep it and send the other two back to the company with a request for two more mouthpieces to try. The process continues until you are lucky enough to find one mouthpiece you wish to keep. This is obviously not ideal, but a workable solution to selecting a mouthpiece as long as the credit-limit on your credit card holds out. Remember the full retail price of each mouthpiece has been charged to your credit card. Your card is credited only after the company receives the mouthpieces back from you.

THE INTERNET

Still more of a gamble is what I refer to as the mouthpiece lottery or buying a mouthpiece on one of the auction sites. It is a big gamble not only because you cannot try the mouthpiece, but also because you are dependent on the photography skills and for that matter the honesty of the seller. At best you are making a guess of the quality of the mouthpiece based on a visual assessment and an email dialog that you can have with the seller.

I have heard of people finding fantastic deals. I have personally found many great mouthpieces on auction sites.

In fact, I found the tenor mouthpiece that David Liebman is presently playing, for next to nothing as compared to its value. I have also heard of very unfortunate stories about auction purchases. I recently heard about a young saxophonist who made his first purchase on the Internet, an older serial numbered Florida Otto Link tenor mouthpiece. A vintage piece that someone had worked on to the point that it was 3/8" shorter than it was supposed to be, and the young man thought he was purchasing an alto mouthpiece because it was advertised as that. Consequently the young man bought nothing of value or use. It was unfortunate, but does demonstrate the gamble of purchasing on the Internet.

MOUTHPIECE TECHNICIANS

If you are not lucky enough to find that one-in-a-million great mouthpiece right out of the box, you don't have to settle for just a good mouthpiece. Many saxophonists have a mouthpiece technician work on the mouthpiece to make it better, hopefully even great. Although my emphasis in this article is not about the art of mouthpiece re-facing, I think it is appropriate to keep in mind when selecting a mouthpiece that adjustments can be made to the mouthpiece to make it perfect. If it is almost great, then perhaps it is worth buying. For those who may not be familiar with mouthpiece re-facing, there is a long tradition of hand mouthpiece re-facing.

Bob Ackerman Announces The New "Lost Wax" Mouthpiece Models!

Finally a great playing mouthpiece that's affordable, and we believe as good as the vintage ones. Recent customers include Mike Brecker, David Liebman, and Jessie Davis



50's Small Chamber Soprano

late 50's Small Chamber, resin, traditional baffle design, like Trane's piece but the rubber version. \$200 + S&H.

50's Medium Chamber Alto

late 50's Med Chamber, resin, traditional baffle design, what Phil Woods & most others have tried to use. We call this The Bob Model because it is copied from my own mouthpiece. \$200. + S&H

60's Small Chamber Alto

60's Sm Chamber, resin, more baffle, this piece is very similar to the above model but will play louder. The Guiseppe Model made from one of his originals. \$200 + S&H

40's Medium Chamber Tenor

late 40's Med Chamber, brass, traditional baffle. Dexter played this model on his Conns till 1961 when the horn & mouthpiece were stolen in Paris. The Bob Model made from one of my original mouthpieces. \$325. + S&H

60's Medium Large Chamber Resin Tenor

early 60's Med Lrg Chamber, resin, traditional baffle. Stan Getz & many others have used this model. We call this The Guiseppe Model also from an original mouthpiece. \$200 + S&H

60's Medium Large Chamber Tenor

Lost Wax Copy

early 60's Med Lrg Chamber, brass, traditional baffle, almost everyone in jazz has used this model. This is also called The Bob Model as it is made from one of my own original mouthpiece. \$325. + S&H

60's Medium Large Bari

early 60's Med Lrg Chamber, brass. Gary Smulian plays an original in this model. \$375. + S&H

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I was first exposed to re-facing in junior high school, when my father bought me the *Band Instrument Repairing Manual* by Erick D. Brand so I could disassemble my silver plated Conn 10M tenor and clean it. While checking on how to keep all those parts organized so it would go back together, I noticed and read a section on mouthpiece re-facing.

While I was in college we took our mouthpieces to Dallas to be worked on by a mouthpiece technician named Claude Humber. Claude kept a record of all the mouthpieces he refaced with the numbers. In fact, his book of mouthpiece facing numbers was a who's who list of jazz artists of the 1930s, 1940s and 50s, included among others Lester Young, Benny Goodman, Coleman Hawkins, and Johnny Hodges. I got rather interested in that process, and apprenticed in the old fashion way by hanging out and watching.

As it turned out some 20 years later I get to play, test, and work on lots of mouthpieces since all those almost good mouthpieces, as well as the auction mistakes, come through my shop. In fact, since that time I have seen just about every kind of mouthpiece through my shop. I quite often repair broken and chipped mouthpieces. I even once had to repair a mouthpiece that a dog had used as a chew toy. Recently, even music stores are having me test and

adjust new mouthpieces before they put them up for sale. Why? Because storeowners know manufactured mouthpieces are inconsistent and they increase the number of sales if all the mouthpieces work well. The majority of my work, however, is adjusting and balancing the facing, baffle, tip, rails and chamber of the a mouthpiece to produce that ideal tone, feel, and pitch for an individual. I try to make that good mouthpiece into a great one.

Whether or not you choose to have a technician customize your mouthpiece to make it better or not you will still have to play the mouthpiece lottery to some extent. With a little knowledge about what to look for in a good mouthpiece and how to test to see if you have a good mouthpiece can significantly increase your odds of finding a great one.

LOCATING YOUR IDEAL MOUTHPIECE

If you are new to the mouthpiece hunt and are not looking for a particular kind of mouthpiece, a large music store might be the place for you. Large music stores usually have a wider selection and bigger inventory of mouthpieces. Most of the mouthpieces in large music stores are new, however a store that does a lot of business in used instruments might also have vintage pieces as well. Be sure to ask. Local "mom and pop" stores, may not have as big of selection, but I certainly would not write them off. I have found the smaller locally owned stores are more likely to have some vintage mouthpieces or at least old stock mouthpieces that might be worth checking out. Repair shops are also a good source for mouthpieces. Instrument repair technicians are sometimes associated with music stores, but quite often they have their own shop. To find the local woodwind repair "guru," ask the professional musicians in the area or even the repair tech at a local music store. Most professionals use specialist to repair their horns.

Lastly, hock shops and both Internet and estate auctions can be a good source for mouthpieces, but neither offers a good chance to try before you buy. In the hock shop, you can probably try the mouthpiece for a moment, but if you sound too good on it the price will go up, so it is almost not worth it, and of course the mouthpieces found on the Internet need to be bought on looks.

AFTER YOU FIND A SELECTION OF MOUTHPIECES

After you have found a place that has a variety of mouthpieces to try, make an appointment and inform the store of your intention to audition a variety of mouthpieces. If you know what you want to play let them know and ask how many and what sizes they will have in stock. The important thing is that you don't catch them by surprise at a time when they are so busy they cannot



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possibly accommodate you.

If for any reason the store is not interested in letting you try the mouthpieces I would not bother even dealing with them. Any reputable store will understand the importance of trying the mouthpieces in the store before purchasing. It is a lot like buying a car, you need to test drive them to find out what you like. Quite often a store will lend you a practice room so that you can actually spend some time with each piece. At worst you might have to stand in a corner of the main store to try them. Occasionally, a store that gets a lot of traffic in less than serious musicians wanting to play their hottest licks on every guitar in the place with amps cranked to 11, are also skittish about younger students going into the back room with a bunch of mouthpieces. Be understanding, have your private teacher call ahead and make the appointment for you. Bring your teacher, colleague (professional musician) or even parent along. As I describe below it is good to have another set of ears there anyway.

CHECKING OUT MOUTHPIECES

Once you've found a place to check mouthpieces out, make sure you are prepared to take full advantage of the opportunity. There is a list of things that can insure a positive experience when trying out the mouthpieces. First and foremost bring an open mind. While you will probably come to the store with a preconceived idea about the brands of mouthpiece you want to try and even the sizes, it is important to be flexible and curious to try everything you can find. You never know what might work for you.

Also bring another saxophonist, friend, or teacher. It is valuable to have a set of objective ears to listen to the mouthpieces and give you objective feedback. The best person for this is obviously a more experienced saxophonist, either a colleague or a teacher, but almost anyone can be helpful to say what sounds good.

Even another person cannot substitute for a recording device. Whether it is a small cassette player or a mini disc recorder, a recorder will not lie. It serves as an objective record of what the mouthpiece sounds like, and it is a way for the person trying out the mouthpieces to step back and listen from an objective (and removed) perspective. Granted an inexpensive cassette recorder player will not produce the best sound, but if the device is used regularly for recording practice sessions, you should know how you regularly sound. It is also important that you record your mouthpiece before you begin trying mouthpieces as a reference point for the other mouthpieces.

KEEPING YOUR SAX IN GOOD REPAIR

Make sure your horn is in good repair. This may seem like a no brainer, but you'd be surprised the number of saxophonists that stop by my shop to try mouthpieces and do not have a horn in good repair. They are used to compensating with their present mouthpiece, but a new mouthpiece reacts differently and usually amplifies the problems of the horn, making trying something new a very unrewarding experience.

Along with your horn in good repair make sure you have a compliment of broken in reeds in your favorite strength. Have the reeds marked from good to great and know which ones are slightly softer and harder within your preferred

strength. Although you will want to use the same reed for most of your testing, once you get down to a mouthpiece or mouthpieces that you think you like, you will want to try slightly softer or harder reeds to see what is the best for those particular mouthpieces. Which brings me to the need for new reeds of various strengths.

Remember to keep an open mind. Sometimes a mouthpiece is extremely different than what you are use to. Perhaps it is significantly larger or smaller than what you normally play. In order to get the most accurate portrayal of a mouthpiece it might be necessary to depart from your normal reed strength. For that reason it is smart to keep a few reeds of varied strength available to try what might be termed as extreme mouthpieces. For consistency sake you should also try and use the same ligature for all of the testing, but the outside dimensions of different mouthpiece manufacturers can vary greatly, so it is important to have several ligatures with you that you are familiar with.

BRING A TUNER

It is also important to bring a tuner. Different manufacturers make the shank of the mouthpiece different lengths, so the in tune position for every mouthpiece may be slightly or dramatically different. If the mouthpiece you are trying is not placed in a position that let's the horn play comfortably, and as in tune as possible, you will not get an accurate portrayal of the pitch tendencies of the mouthpieces. If the mouthpiece is sharper or flatter than normal the entire scale of the saxophone will be out. In fact if the mouthpiece is placed in a position that is very flat, you will also notice that the lower notes will not even respond, producing a gurgling or bubbling sound.

Along the same line, if the shank of the mouthpiece is bigger in diameter than the mouthpiece you normally play, the mouthpiece will not play in tune or respond. It is therefore important to temporarily make the cork a little larger to accommodate each mouthpiece tested. This can easily be accomplished by wrapping the smallest post-it notepad around the neck cork. You can of course use any piece of paper, but I find that the sticky end of the post-it helps to temporarily secure the paper to the neck cork. Another alternative would be painter's masking tape, however the post-its are my personal choice.

MOUTHPIECE PADS

It is also good to have several mouthpiece pads with you. The outside dimensions of the business end of different mouthpieces can also vary greatly from manufacturer to manufacturer. A mouthpiece pad with an adhesive back can be purchased in various thicknesses. This can be used to make the outside dimension of the mouthpiece feel more like your mouthpiece or it can be used to emulate the feel of a slightly larger mouthpiece. By placing even the thinnest mouthpiece pad on a mouthpiece it will change the way the mouthpiece plays. It is yet another factor that can be taken into account when deciding on a mouthpiece.

Finally bring paper and pencil to record your thoughts about the mouthpieces, and some music if the best testing exercises are not in your head already. In addition to the recording device, written thoughts about each mouthpiece played will help to keep the characteristics of each mouthpiece more clearly defined. §

Saxophone Mouthpieces

Part II, Structural Components By Gunnar Mossblad

A Guide to Selecting And Trying Mouthpieces

In my previous article about mouthpieces (July/August 2003 *Saxophone Journal*) I focused on the broader picture of searching for and playing a mouthpiece. In this article on mouthpieces I will zero in on the idiosyncrasies of analyzing the structural components, with emphasis on the subtle details of a mouthpiece and what to look for.

DOING A VISUAL INSPECTION

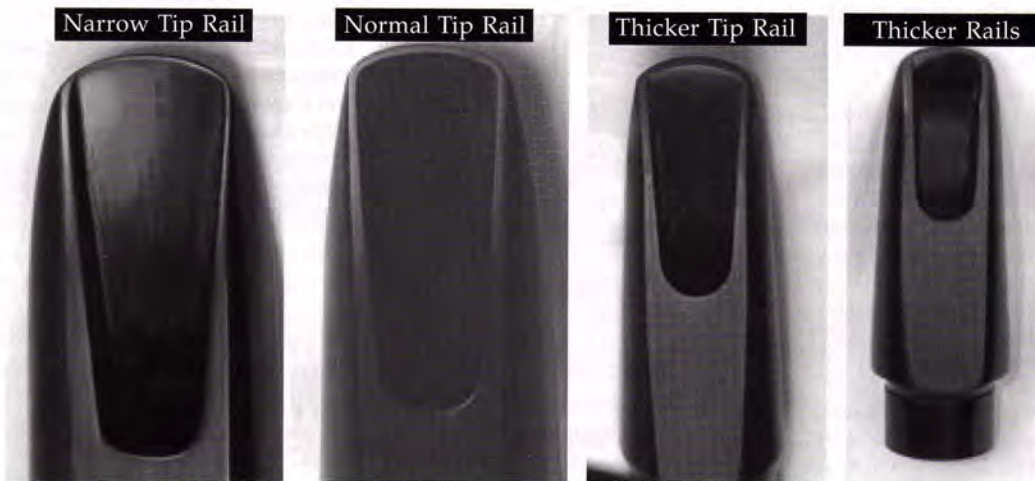
Making a visual inspection of a mouthpiece can reveal a lot about how it will play. It will not predict whether the mouthpiece is the perfect piece for you, but it can predict the general tone, color, and response. More importantly, doing a brief inspection will spot manufacturing flaws that will prevent the mouthpiece from playing well. Experience has taught me that a mouthpiece that looks rough or unfinished, will most likely have a raw quality to the sound and will not play as well as it could. It may be difficult to find a good reed for a mouthpiece that is twisted or asymmetrical. I will not rule out any mouthpiece if I have a chance to try it, however, I will definitely rule out a mouthpiece on the Internet if I see something that could be a potential problem. See my illustration for the parts of the mouthpiece.

Start a visual inspection right at the tip of the mouthpiece. One of the more important parts of the mouthpiece is the crown or tip rail. Without getting into too much technical information, this is crucial to the sealing of the reed, the resistance and the bright or dark quality of the sound. A thinner tip rail will produce a slightly brighter sound with less resistance, and a thicker tip rail will add some resistance and

make the tone slightly darker. If the crown is too thin, the mouthpiece may have a tendency to chirp. If the tip rail is too thick, the reed may be very slow to respond, and the mouthpiece may have unwanted backpressure. An average tip rail will be around 1/32nd of an inch wide, and should be the same thickness all the way across the tip of the mouthpiece. If it is not some adjustment will need to be made later on (see photos).

After inspecting the crown or tip rail, sight down the rails of the mouthpiece. The left and right rails should be symmetrical and should gently taper up from the table and bottom of the window of the mouthpiece up to the approximate width of the tip rail. Generally wider rails can have a damping effect on the reed and thus the sound of the mouthpiece, and rails that are too narrow may produce squeaks with a brighter quality to the sound.

While you are looking at the rails notice the bottom of the window of the mouthpiece. It should also be symmetrical. Notice the length of the window an unusually long or short window may cause pitch and response problems. Also notice the flair on the window. The window should flair to a point that butt end of the reed should almost fit into the mouthpiece right at the crown. Too narrow a



View Of Baffle And Chamber

View Of Baffle And Chamber

View Of Baffle And Chamber

View Of Baffle And Chamber

View Of Baffle And Chamber



window will make the sound narrow and stuffy.

Next, carefully rub the table of the mouthpiece on a piece that is laying on a hard flat surface. This will polish the table and you will be able to see if the table is flat and true or warped. If the table is a little shiny over the entire surface of the table, the table is flat. If there are places that are polished others that are not, the table is not flat. The dull places are low spots in the table. I should note that some manufactures do deliberately make the table slight concave, so do not be alarmed if the center of the table is dull but the bottom and top ends are polished. Look for the symmetry of the polished marks.

At this time you should take a reed and check how it would fit on the mouthpiece. Notice how the tip of the reed lines up with the tip of the mouthpiece, and how the width of the rails and table line up with the width of the reed. The tip should match the shape of the reed. If it does not this will make the reed vibrate differently across width of the reed causing a response problem or a change in the tone quality of different registers. The table should also be the same width as the reed. A slightly narrower table is not as crucial, but a table that is wider than the reeds will make placing the reed in the center of the mouthpiece more difficult.

After the surface of the facing and table are inspected, move your attention to the inside of the mouthpiece, including the baffle and chamber. Traditional thinking says that high baffle mouthpieces produce a brighter, edgier sound with slightly less low frequencies. In contrast is a lower baffle mouthpiece that produces a darker, rounder sound. While this is a generally true, there are many other ways to get power or edge out of a mouthpiece without a high baffle, (and visa-versa). So keep an open mind. Instead of being concerned whether is it a high or low

baffle, be concerned about the balance and shape of the baffle. Sight down the mouthpiece from the tip. By looking directly at the tip of the mouthpiece and then tilting the mouthpiece so the inside of the mouthpiece is revealed, you can inspect the symmetry and rate of the drop off of the baffle (see photos). The baffle just inside the tip rail is critical. If that part of the baffle, drops away straight or slightly concave from the tip rail, the mouthpiece should play pretty well. If the baffle has any kind of convex hump, the mouthpiece will probably play with some unwanted backpressure and at some point the upper notes (often in the altissimo) will become significantly weaker than the rest of the horn. Too much dip in the baffle and the sound will become uncentered (see photos).

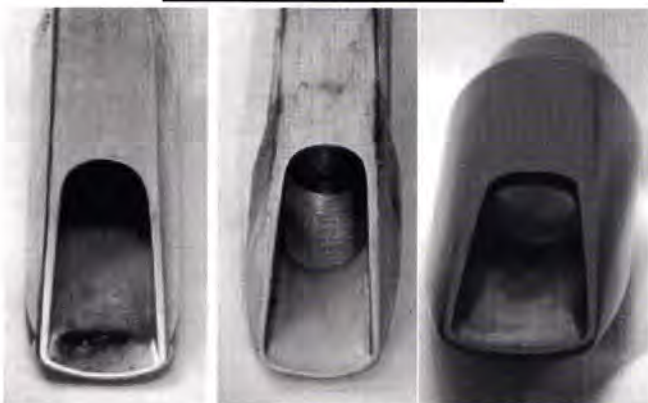
Similarly the baffle should lead straight and smoothly into the chamber of the mouthpiece. The chamber of a mouthpiece can come in all sorts of shapes, round, half round or "U" shaped, "V" shaped, and square to name just a few. Different players have different preferences. What is important for testing is, once again, the symmetry of the chamber.

This brief inspection may take all of 1-2 minutes at the most. As long as there is no glaring flaw in the mouthpiece, I would proceed to play the mouthpiece.

HOW TO TEST

NOTE: Do not play your present mouthpiece set up first. Keep an open mind. By playing your present setup at the beginning of the process, you are coloring or tainting your palette for the other mouthpieces. It is not fair to the other mouthpieces since you are familiar with the way your piece

Baffle Of Mouthpiece From Tip



Well-Balanced Mouthpieces

Good Low Baffle

Good All Around Proportions



plays, and all your best reeds are picked based on the way your mouthpiece plays. It would be better to play your mouthpiece and best reed at the end of the process, when you are down to 2 or 3 mouthpieces. Then you can really compare the differences.

Find a comfortable place to play the mouthpieces. If it is in the store, hopefully you can find an acoustic situation that you are familiar with. Soak a variety of new and broken in reeds of varying strength, but save your best reed for last. Select one of the medium sized mouthpieces, and secure a medium strength reed that is broken in. Finally, make sure the mouthpiece fits the neck and you are in tune. If the mouthpiece receiver or shank is too large and there is any wiggle on the neck, wrap your neck with a post-it or paper to make the neck cork big enough to make the mouthpiece fit snugly on the neck. The air pocket that is caused by a loose mouthpiece will throw the response and pitch of the horn off. Play the mouthpiece using set number and kinds of exercises that test all ranges and dynamic levels of the horn, record the piece on your recording device and take some notes on the quality of the tone pitch, response, feel, etc. Try to use the same ligature and reed for each mouthpiece, but if the mouthpiece will not work with the "control" reed and ligature, try something else, until you feel you have found the best possible combination for that mouthpiece. Then return to the con-

trol reed and ligature on the next mouthpiece. Follow this procedure with all the mouthpieces, slowly eliminate the mouthpieces that do not work for you or are not as good as others through listening to the recordings of the mouthpieces, talking with your friend reviewing your notes and accepting that the feel of the performance. Most likely it will become obvious very quickly what works for you and what does not. If you are lucky enough to get down to 2 or 3 that you believe are fine mouthpieces compare them to your mouthpiece and best reed following the same procedure.

WHAT TO TEST

There are not right exercises to use to test a mouthpiece. Each individual has his or her "licks" that are a benchmark for determining the quality of the response, pitch, dynamic contrast, tone etc. My advice is simply to do two things. First, try to simulate a performance, and second, test the mouthpiece in all-possible ranges, dynamics, and general musical situations. For example, I really like to start testing a mouthpiece with a medium tempo, full-range, using chromatic scales. Not only will you be able to see how each register responds, you should be able to hear the sonority of tone throughout the registers. From there I go to an exercise containing larger intervals. Playing tritones through all ranges is popular with me. After that, I

play some specific passages on the mouthpiece. If it is a classical mouthpiece I play select passages of some of the Sonatas and Concerti that I have performed. If it is a jazz mouthpiece, I play tunes and phrases that I am comfortable with. Lastly, I check certain intervals that seem to be responding differently, and just play to see how comfortable the mouthpiece is. Unless the mouthpiece is really bad, I need about 10-15 minutes to adapt and then objectively analyze what the mouthpiece is capable of.

BUT WHAT KIND AND SIZE MOUTHPIECE SHOULD I TRY

As I mentioned at the beginning of this article there are as many kinds and sizes of mouthpieces as there are kinds and sizes of people so there is no one right kind or size of mouthpiece. Right now, we (the saxophone world) are fortunate to have many mouthpiece makers experimenting and producing many fine products. The best advice that I can give any saxophonist is look, listen and experiment. Listen to your teacher's advice and listen to the great players. Observe or look at what they are playing, and then experiment from the inside out. Start with medium or average size mouthpieces and do not be afraid to go away from the norm to find what is best for you. §

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