

The Sax is NOT a Clarinet! (and vice versa!)

Rhett Bender

There are many reasons a clarinetist may want to begin playing saxophone or vice versa. As an educator, you may have a jazz band. Very likely you will encounter music that requires a clarinet double or even more likely you'll have a clarinetist that wants to learn saxophone so he or she can play in the jazz band. Perhaps a saxophonist, wanting to play in the orchestra, will wish to learn clarinet. If you can understand the similarities and the fundamental differences between the saxophone and clarinet, you will have a better sounding saxophone section and clarinetists that sound like clarinetists.

The first mistake is to assume a clarinet player can play saxophone as if it were in the same family of instruments. It is common to encourage beginning students wanting to play saxophone to first learn clarinet in order to later switch them to saxophone. This association promotes the view that saxophone and clarinet are the same instruments with different fingerings. It is comparable to learning Spanish by buying a Spanish/English dictionary and expecting every English word to have an exact Spanish equivalent.

One does not learn the language of another instrument until it is studied with an expert.

Let us understand why the clarinet and saxophone are so closely linked. They have in common a single reed, mouthpiece, and ligature combination that sets the column of air vibrating; but that is where the similarities end.

Yes, they both use a system of Boehm fingerings but so do most other woodwind instruments.

In other important aspects such as air support, the flute and clarinet are more similar and the saxophone and bassoon are more closely related.

Because the single reed and mouthpiece apparatus are so similar, it is too easy for us to approach the saxophone like our clarinet and vice versa. Many students can facilitate both instruments but do not approach them differently. You don't want the sound of a saxophonist playing clarinet in

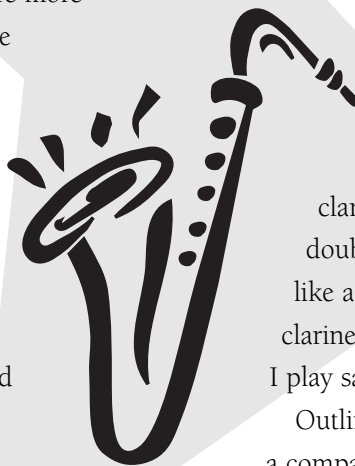
your band. We all know what it sounds like when a clarinetist plays saxophone for the first time or a saxophonist fails to cross the break on a clarinet. With no other point of reference they play it like their native instrument.

Frequently, I come across poor sounding clarinetists who sound bad simply because they are playing their clarinets like saxophones (even if they've never played saxophone before). The

tip-off is when they struggle to go over the break because they are using warm air.

As a saxophonist, I never want to sound like a saxophonist playing clarinet. As a woodwind doubler, my goal is to sound like a clarinetist when I play clarinet and a saxophonist when I play saxophone.

Outlined on the next page is a comparison of the nine most distinctive differences between a saxophone and clarinet. Noting the differences and approaching each as a unique instrument is the key to a good sound.



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	SAXOPHONE	CLARINET
Air stream	Wide airstream Warm air High volume	Fine, concentrated, high pressure Cold air Like an aerosol spray
Mouthpiece pitch	Not the highest possible pitch (soprano saxophone concert C, alto saxophone concert A)	Highest comfortable pitch (Bb soprano clarinet concert C)
Embouchure	Round, equal pressure around mouthpiece. Lips like a rubber band.	Pointed chin, shaving position. Pressure on reed is caused by “prying” teeth apart with clarinet.
Throat/Tongue	Lower to accommodate wider airstream Tip used to stop reed	Higher to create fast airstream, position “Heeeeeee” Tip used to stop reed
Mouthpiece angle	Enters mouth straight	Instrument is 45 degrees with body
Hand position	Weight of saxophone held by neck strap. Fingers keep a natural curved position	R.H. thumb holds entire weight of clarinet. Finger tips must be flat enough to cover holes.
Finger technique	No holes to cover with finger tips. Finger tips rest on pearls. Technique is heavier and firmer.	Must cover holes, fingers must get away from holes to not interfere with sound. Technique is lighter.
Left hand thumb	Always resting on thumb rest with minimal movement.	Three different positions: push register key, cover hole, and off entirely.
Vibrato	Accepted as part of the saxophone sound. Produced by jaw movement.	Used more than in the past, but always added to a note—never part of the sound. May be produced with the jaw but angle with reed is different than the saxophone.

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