

## **Saxophone Gear – What the Pros Use and Why**

---

**Master Sgt. Jake McCray, Saxophone, Concert Band  
The United States Air Force Band, Washington, D.C.**

---

As a professional musician, the type of sound one brings to their craft is incumbent upon not only countless hours practicing, but also the equipment chosen for use. As saxophonists, this can present a myriad of options/pitfalls. Depending upon the ensemble and genre, saxophonists are tasked with providing a multitude of sounds and colors across a wide- spectrum, ranging from mimicking the sounds of stringed instruments in an orchestral transcription, to belting out a jazz solo above the colossal sound of a blazing big band. We've compiled a list of equipment used in both the Concert Band and the Airmen of Note Jazz Band of the United States Air Force Band, as a reference of what works for us, professional saxophonists in the Premier band of the United States Air Force. Enjoy!

**Chief Master Sgt. William Marr  
Principal Saxophonist, Concert Band**

For Alto I play on a Selmer Series II alto with a Selmer C\*\* mouthpiece, #3 Vandoren blue box reeds and a Rovner Platinum ligature. On Soprano I use a Selmer Series III, a C\*\* mouthpiece with #3 Vandoren blue box reeds and a Rovner Platinum ligature. I still find the Vandoren reeds to be the most consistent, especially now with the individual packaging.

**Master Sgt. Jeremy Koch  
Alto Saxophonist, Concert Band**

I prefer the sound of the Selmer Series I over the Series II or III since I purchased my first alto back in high school. I find the Series I to have a darker, richer tone and better projection, for my style of playing. I use a Selmer S90 mouthpiece with a 180 tip opening, and Vandoren #3.5 blue box reeds, along with the Rovner-dark ligature. I've used this setup consistently now for about 20 years and I find it works great in ensemble and solo playing.

**Master Sgt. Jake McCray  
Tenor Saxophone, Concert Band**

I play on a Selmer Series III tenor, Vandoren TL4 mouthpiece, Vandoren blue box #3 reeds, and Rovner Platinum ligature. The Series III tenor gives me a great response in the low register and I really like the way the palm keys feel in my left hand. Since I have to play some jazz at times and then shift right back into classical, the Series III allows me to be more flexible with my tone, much more so than the Series II. The TL4 mouthpiece also provides for greater variety of tone colors yet still allows for control, even at the softest dynamics. I've found the Vandoren blue box reeds to be the most consistent and of highest quality, any other Vandoren cut is too edgy for the concert band. The Rovner Platinum ligature is a bit pricey, but I like the fact that it has 1 screw only, which allows me to switch reeds quickly, at times during a long rest within the music.

**Technical Sgt. Ricky Parrell**  
**Baritone Saxophonist, Concert Band**

I play on a Selmer Series III Baritone Saxophone, Selmer D mouthpiece, Vandoren blue box strength 3.5 reeds, and a Rovner Platinum ligature. The unique instrumentation of the USAF Band requires the bari sax to often blend and balance with instruments not usually paired with the saxophone. I feel that my "set-up" allows me to produce a dark and rich sound that will easily blend with the bassoons and celli, yet it has the flexibility needed to project when necessary. The Rovner Platinum ligature is a new addition to my personal setup for concert band/classical baritone playing. It should be noted that all four members of the concert band saxophone section currently use Rovner ligatures. This adds to the homogeneous nature of our saxophone "section sound". The Platinum offers an ease of playing and a feeling of evenness and in all registers. It affords me the ability to play very softly with a controlled, centered tone in the extreme low register of the instrument.

**Master Sgt. Tyler Kuebler**  
**Lead Alto/Musical Director, Airmen of Note**

For alto I use a Yamaha Custom Z, unlacquered, with a Jody Jazz HR\* 7M with LaVoz Medium or Medium Hard reeds. I find the Yamaha is the best alternative to the classic Selmer Mark VI legend. The horn is incredibly consistent, and has the closest ergonomic feel to the Mark VI on the market. I find the Jody Jazz hard rubber mouthpiece is a good combination of the comfort of a hard rubber and the projection of a metal setup. If I have time to prep reeds, I'll generally go with the medium hards as they last a bit longer on the gig and hold up better under the aggressive

conditions encountered playing lead alto in a big band. However, if I'm pressed for time, I'll play a medium reed right out of the box; the mediums respond immediately and have a nice buzz but they don't last longer than one gig.

For soprano I use a Selmer Super Action 80 Series II with a Bari 68 mouthpiece with Vandoren Java (green box) #3 reeds. Although I also have a new gold plated Series III, I prefer the response and tone quality of my older Series II. The Bari soprano mouthpiece seems to be the choice of many other pros on the scene as well; it responds beautifully and I don't have to worry about dialing back any extra "shrillness" of other soprano setups.

For clarinet I use a Leblanc Symphony (Bacun series) with either a Clark W. Fobes or Charles Bay mouthpiece. I recently found some Morre Italian reeds that pair really well with my setup; as lead alto, I need to be able to project over the section on our Glenn Miller set, and these reeds have the right combination of a thick heart and responsive tip that I need for big band playing.

For flute I use a Muramatsu Solid Silver open hole offset G with a B-foot. I've always been a big believer in the ergonomic advantages of an offset G as opposed to an inline G, especially when paired with a classic open-holed setup.

For piccolo I use the Yamaha YPC-81 Professional. My wife is a professional flutist, and she highly recommends this instrument, so that's what I went with!

On alto flute I prefer the Yamaha, gold brass alloy, with a curved head joint. The Airmen of Note has a strong tradition of

extensive woodwind doubling in the sax section, and the lead alto chair gets the brunt of the doubling duties. I needed a top-level pro horn for this double, and Yamaha delivers beautifully. The curved head joint makes a world of difference, and helps alleviate back and neck soreness from extended playing.

As for bass flute, (which is used infrequently) I rely on the goodwill of my AF Band colleagues in the concert band for those times. We maintain a great instrument here in the squadron that is fun to play and always generates lots of positive comments from audience members.

I'm currently writing new material for our Reeds and Rhythm sub-group of the Note, and I'm trying to utilize new technology as much as possible. For EWI, I have an AKAI EWI 4000S with customized sounds from Matt Traum of Patchman Music. I also have the capability of running the EWI through my MacBook via Logic Pro; this gives me much more control over customized sounds.

Although I don't play tenor very often with the band anymore, I sometimes get the opportunity to play with smaller groups within the band for chamber concerts or special arrangements. I'm currently playing on a Keilwerth with a customized Otto Link 6\* with Vandoren Java (green box) #3 reeds.

I'm also working on some new music for 2 bass clarinets and sax section, and I'm using a Selmer Bass Clarinet with a low C extension paired with a Charles Bay mouthpiece and a bari synthetic tenor sax reed. I find that the synthetic tenor sax reed gives me a fuller sound than traditional bass clarinet reeds, and the size

is virtually the same so it fits perfectly on the bass clarinet mouthpiece.

**Master Sgt. Andy Axelrad**  
**Alto, Airmen of Note**

For Alto I use my personal horn, a Selmer Mark VI alto from 1957. I'm constantly switching mouthpieces and reeds, but currently using a rubber Otto Link mouthpiece. I find this gives me the blend and projection I need in the big band setting, without having to work too hard or overblow – important factors to consider when one is spending hours practicing and rehearsing.

**Technical Sgt. Tedd Baker**  
**Tenor Saxophone, Airmen of Note**

On tenor I use a Selmer Mark VI, a Balanced Action, Radio Improved, or an old Conn Chu Berry. For tenor mouthpieces I switch between a Brancher metal LJ 31 or Brancher L 31 Hard Rubber or wood. For ligatures I use the Olegature, Francois Louis pure brass, or an old Lebayle wooden ligature. For reeds I prefer Rico Jazz Select, Roberto Winds, Rigotti Gold, or LaVoz medium hard.

For Alto I use a Martin Committee 2 with a Morgan Hard rubber 7 Mouthpiece, Francois Louis ultimate ligature and LaVoz medium reeds.

On soprano I play a Selmer Mark VI with a Brancher L17 mouthpiece and LaVoz Medium hard reeds.

For clarinet I use a Buffet R13, Vandoren B45 mouthpiece and Vandoren blue box reeds. For flute I'm currently using a Yamaha 881.

I have found that all of these setups work best for my sound, control, range, response, and articulation with the least compromises. My teeth are shifting and sometimes they hurt so I have to switch abruptly sometimes and I find having a couple mouthpieces for tenor really helps.

I switch tenors as needed depending on which direction my ear is pulling me. Sometimes I feel more comfortable with a brighter sound, sometimes darker. I'm not really married to any horn in particular, but I found that these vintages work best for me. I try to remain on a horn as long as I can. I own a few that I dig, but I'm not afraid to trade or try something else! I don't know much about modern horns but I've played a few Yanagisawa horns and Yamaha horns that worked well.

**Technical Sgt. Grant Langford**  
**Tenor Saxophonist, Airmen of Note**

I play on a Selmer Mark VI Tenor with a Ted Klum Sterling Silver FocusTone 8\* mouthpiece, a Selmer ligature and Rico Jazz Select Reeds 3S Unfiled.

The Ted Klum mouthpiece is modeled after the classic Otto Link Mouthpieces of the 1950s and 1960s. It has a darker sound while still being able to have a nice core and edge. I enjoy playing the Mark VI Tenor because it has a fast response, full body, distinctive tone and the ability to play at loud and soft volumes which is very important when playing primarily in a Jazz Big Band. In the past I have played a Keilwerth and I also have a Yamaha Custom that is a backup horn.

**Master Sgt. Doug Morgan**  
**Baritone Saxophonist, Airmen of Note**

I play on a bronze Yanigasawa 992 with a metal Berg Larsen105/2M mouthpiece and Rico Royal #3 reeds. I prefer my personal Mark VI from 1969, but I'm not comfortable playing that horn on gigs where it might incur damage. The Yanigasawa is very similar in sound and ergonomics to my Mark VI. I've found the Berg to be very versatile in sound production with excellent subtone and response in all registers. It is VERY user friendly.

For alto, I play on a silver Yamaha Custom Z with a rubber Morgan Excalibur 6 mouthpiece and La Voz medium reeds. Much like the Yanigasawa the Yamaha alto is very similar to the Mark VI. My Morgan 6 is a bit smaller than my Meyer 7 with a wedge, but works great in our Glenn Miller settings under the clarinet.

On bass clarinet I play a Selmer w/ low C, a Charles Bay mouthpiece with Vandoren #2 reeds.

For Bb clarinet I use a Buffet R13 with a Morgan r28 mouthpiece and Vandoren #3 reeds. I'm fortunate enough to be able to play a Haynes flute, when required.