

# HOW GREEN IS YOUR SAX LIFE?

*What can be done to ensure your musical life is as environmentally friendly as possible? And what role does music play in inspiring others to do their part? Saxophonist and vegan Alastair Penman shares his best tips for going green*

As we charge headlong into a climate catastrophe with most governments and big corporations doing little more than paying lip service to the greatest problem of our time, have you ever considered the impact that your music making might be having on our planet? It often seems as though the situation is so hopeless that there is little we can do as individuals, but if everyone makes small changes then together we can make a big difference. I don't have all of the answers, but as I consider some of the biggest areas of concern for saxophonists and clarinetists, I hope you will be encouraged to try some new ideas when it comes to having a sustainable musical life. From the materials your instrument is made of to how you travel to concerts, listen to music and even purchase sheet music, there are so many areas in which you can make a difference.

Aside from being free from animal products, this pad aims to be a more environmentally friendly option for saxophonists

## Instrument materials and repairs

Perhaps one of the most obvious things to consider when 'greening' your musical life is what materials are used in the manufacturing and maintenance of your instrument. Did you know that saxophone and clarinet pads usually contain animal products, whose production can be damaging to the environment? Saxophone pads are typically made of leather, most often taken from calves. Leather is so ubiquitous in our daily lives that most people don't think twice about using it. Quite aside from the ethical implications, leather is incredibly damaging to the environment. Not only does raising the animals for leather production take up huge amounts of land and water, directly leading to deforestation (to make space for both the animals themselves and the crops to feed them), but the tanning process of converting the animal skin to leather uses numerous toxic chemicals and large amounts of energy. There is therefore a strong argument for moving away from using leather for saxophone pads as well as accessories such as slings and cases. Until recently there weren't many alternatives; kangaroo leather is probably the most common option after calf leather.

Recently, however, I was delighted to have the chance to help Dawkes Music with the creation of their V-Pads. In collaboration with Pisoni (a leading pad manufacturer), Dawkes Music has created a fully synthetic saxophone pad. Aside from being free from animal products, this pad aims to be a more environmentally friendly option for saxophonists and it is expected they will have a longer lifespan than traditional pads. I have had the chance to test these pads, and they play fantastically well, with a lovely, rich, dark sound.

For clarinetists, synthetic pad options have been around for longer, and there is a wider range of materials used. Did you know that clarinet pads may contain materials such as fish skin or leather as well as synthetic materials? These have the same negative impacts as saxophone pads,

however there are now many synthetic options that are barely distinguishable from their animal-based ancestors. I recently had both my Bb and A clarinets re-padded with Pisoni PROCLS20S pads, which are fantastic and commonly used. I'm unable to tell them apart from the leather-containing version.

Pads are of course not the only part of clarinets and saxophones that might contain animal materials. For saxophonists, many slings are made from leather. Whilst there are synthetic options available, unfortunately many of my favourite designs (from a point of view of comfort and support) are only available in leather, so I continue to petition manufacturers to create synthetic leather alternatives! If you have been persuaded about the benefits of avoiding leather, the next step is to consider your concert clothes; it's now very easy to source synthetic belts and shoes.

instrument manufacturing. All its products are non-toxic, and come in packaging that is biodegradable, compostable and recyclable. Key Leaves has a similar focus, with an emphasis on all their products being designed for durability and washability, and using sustainable or recyclable material for their packaging. They also recycle their scrap silicone to make industrial lubricants that are useful to other manufacturers.

## Reeds

If you're anything like me then you'll get through a lot of reeds in a year. Some manufacturers, as well as placing every reed in a plastic case, individually wrap each reed in plastic and then place them in a box which is wrapped in, you guessed it – plastic! As consumers we often have little choice about the amount of packaging we receive with products. However if enough

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Animal derived materials are also often used in the glues found on instruments. Shellac is commonly used for seating pads, and many lac bugs are killed in its production (over 200,000 lac bugs are killed per kilogram of shellac). Synthetic shellac is now widely available and many repair technicians actually prefer using this. A favourite among technicians is the Music Medic Clear Shellac Stick.

Some companies in particular focus consciously on their environmental credentials. Edgware by BBICO is a new range of quality musical instrument products for woodwind and brass instruments, aiming to help revolutionise the environmental impact of musical

people contact companies and ask them to reduce this unnecessary packaging then eventually they will take heed! It is worth noting that much of this packaging is recyclable or biodegradable, so it's always worth checking this and putting it in the appropriate recycling bins. Some companies however, must be commended for their use of cardboard packaging and conspicuous lack of plastic – D'Addario has recently announced that their reeds for saxophone and clarinet are 100% certified organic (see page 35 for an interview with their cane farmer).

Of course, synthetic reeds are now available too, giving a wider choice to woodwind players. It might seem logical ➡

V-pads



at first glance that cane reeds are more environmentally friendly than plastic reeds. I'm not sure that any research has been carried out into this, but I suspect that plastic reeds are probably no worse than cane reeds in this respect. If we consider that a synthetic reed should last many times longer than a cane reed, and then take into account the amount of plastic packaging included with many cane reeds, there is no clear winner. One final thing to consider is what actually happens to cane reeds at the end of their lifetime; if anyone has ever tried composting them then they will know that it takes a very long time for them to break down. I certainly get through them at a faster rate than I can compost them at home!

## Sheet Music

Do you find yourself constantly printing music, or do you have huge amounts of physical sheet music? I currently have seven crates' worth of sheet music in my garage, ranging from grade exam books past and present through to saxophone

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and clarinet ensembles, study books, solo repertoire and technique books. I hate to think how many trees have been sacrificed to produce it all. [Editor's note: we do realise this also applies to magazines!] A few years ago I switched from physical sheet music to playing from my iPad. It's now possible to purchase most sheet music as a digital download, which means you can transfer it directly to a tablet to read from, removing the need to print music. This may not be for everyone due to accessibility issues, but if you already own a tablet it may be worth a try.

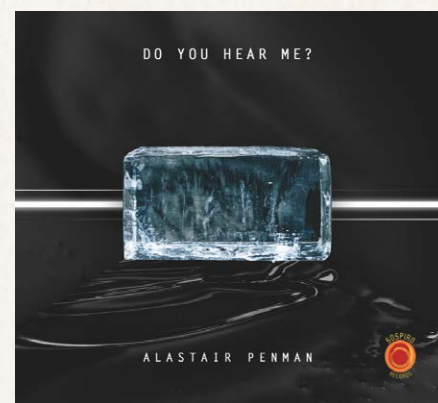
There are many apps available for organising your sheet music digitally. Perhaps the most popular is *forScore*. If you pair this with a Bluetooth pedal for turning pages (such as those from *AirTurn* and *PageFlip*) then you have an excellent solution for performing without the need for printing sheet music. It's difficult to estimate whether this is in fact greener than printing out music, as it surely depends on how often you need to charge the tablet and how much repertoire you're getting through! However data on e-readers such as the Kindle suggests

that even taking into account the manufacturing of the e-reader, it is more environmentally friendly than buying physical books, as long as you read around 35 books per year. If you are thinking of buying a tablet, why not buy second-hand – not only is it cheaper, but it is better for the environment than buying new.

## Streaming versus CDs

Surely streaming music can't be bad for the planet too? Unfortunately, streaming music (or any other online content) has a much larger environmental impact than you might imagine. When you stream music, you probably don't give a second thought to how it is arriving on your device. Any data that you can stream has to be stored, and this has given rise to colossal server farms to store such data. Not only do these server farms use huge amounts of power to operate 24/7, but they are taking up increasing amounts of land. If you intend to listen to an album many times, the environmental impact of buying a physical CD may well be lower

*Do You Hear Me?*, which aimed to raise awareness of the climate crisis. One of the most frustrating parts of the whole process was the discussion with the distributor surrounding the packaging of the CDs. The packaging was made entirely from cardboard, however the distributor refused to take the CDs unless they were plastic-wrapped. Their argument was that if the CDs aren't wrapped in plastic then they can suffer damage in transit, leading to wastage. I struggle to believe this would happen if they are properly packaged, but this was a deal-breaker for the distributor. I ended up having the CDs sent to the distributor plastic-wrapped, whilst those delivered to me (to sell at concerts) are not plastic-wrapped.



## Travel

Do you travel a lot for your music-making, either within the UK or further afield? Obviously, I'm not suggesting that we only perform within walking distance of our homes, but there are a few things worth considering. Is it possible to travel to the concert or rehearsal via public transport? Is it possible to car-share? Can you take the train rather than flying? I was pleasantly surprised recently when looking at the website of a saxophone quartet I was depping for to discover that they had a section on their website about how they are minimising their carbon footprint! Wouldn't it be great if every ensemble was able to take small steps to minimise their carbon footprint?

Inevitably the life of a musician will involve travel, possibly a lot of it. One of my favourite apps, which I use every day, is *Treeapp*. This app allows you to help offset your carbon emissions by planting a tree for free every day (in exchange for watching a short advert.) So far this year I have planted 294 trees and offset 160% of my estimated carbon emissions, meaning that I'm already carbon negative for the year. I'm under no illusion that if we all used this app daily it would solve all of our carbon emission problems, but it is an easy (and free!) way to start on your journey to reducing your carbon footprint.



Alastair Penman

than that of streaming it. Recent estimates from researchers at Keele University suggest that streaming an album more than 27 times has a greater environmental impact than the energy it takes to produce and manufacture it as a physical CD. Usually purchasing the CD will also give more money to the musicians (especially if you buy direct from their website), helping them to keep creating music!

For artists, manufacturing CDs can also be a minefield. In 2020 I released an EP,

I run the Facebook group Vegan Saxophonists, which brings together those interested in animal-free products

### Community and Activism

It is very easy to feel alone when trying to help tackle climate change on an individual level. Fortunately, there is an increasing number of groups bringing people together to discuss these issues. On a very small scale, I run the Facebook group Vegan Saxophonists, which brings together saxophonists (clarinetists are also very welcome!) interested in animal-free products. (You don't have to be vegan to join, just interested in the animal-free options.) On a larger scale, perhaps one of the highest profile musical communities fighting climate change is Music Declares Emergency, a group of artists, music industry professionals and organisations that, in the words of their website, 'stand together to declare a climate and ecological emergency and call for an immediate governmental response to protect all life on Earth.' You may have seen their merchandise featuring the slogan "No Music on a Dead Planet". There are resources on their website for musicians of every kind. Any students should also be sure to look out for environmental groups at their university or conservatoire. Earlier this year I had the pleasure of meeting with the Royal Northern College of Music Climate Action Group who have been doing great things to make RNCM a greener place to study.

### What else can you do to help?

There are many other changes that we can all make as individuals, regardless of our musical activities, to reduce our impact on the planet. Here are some simple actions that you can take with relatively little effort.



#### Reduce or eliminate your meat and dairy consumption

Animal agriculture generates more greenhouse gasses than all transportation in the world combined. Reducing your meat intake is the easiest way to reduce your carbon footprint. Dairy has a similarly high impact; why not try one of the many alternative milks such as oat, soy, almond, pea or even potato. If you're not convinced, check out the film *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret*.



#### Don't waste food

About a third of the world's food goes to waste, and the process of that food rotting releases about 8-10% of global greenhouse emissions. As well as focussing on not buying more than you need, why not look for local initiatives. Where I live there is a Food Rescue Hub where volunteers collect surplus food that would be thrown out by supermarkets, and anyone can go and take what they want in exchange for a small donation. Around 75% of the food I eat comes from local food rescues, saving food from going to waste. (It will also save you a small fortune on your weekly shop!) Some of these food rescues also help the local community; one of our local hubs uses the donations from the food rescue to buy food for the local food bank, so not only are you saving food from going to waste and saving money, but you are also helping those in need in the community.



#### Don't buy new items unless you have to

Fast fashion has a huge impact on our planet. We are constantly being pushed to buy more things, and in particular, clothes. When purchasing, consider if you really need an item; could you buy a similar item from a charity shop, ebay or borrow from a friend? Facebook groups can also be an amazing place to find items being given away. Since moving house last year, on our local Reuse/Recycle group we have received/given away items including a sofa, computer monitor, carpet, paving slabs, wardrobes, curtains and blinds to name but a few.



#### Use Planet saving apps

Two apps I use every day that are completely free are Treeapp and OneSave/Day. OneSave/Day gives you one challenge every day of a simple action you can take to help save the planet, from

having a shorter shower or turning down the thermostat by one degree to having a meat free meal or walking or cycling rather than taking the car for short journeys.



#### Donate to effective charities

When working on my EP *Do You Hear Me?* (featured in CASSGB Winter 2000 issue) I spent some time researching the most effective ways to save the planet. The action that came up consistently as being most effective is donating to effective charities. This is why I decided that all proceeds from the sale of *Do You Hear Me?* would be split between two charities: Coalition for Rainforest Nations and Clean Air Task Force. Which brings us to...



#### Make Music focused on environmental issues

Why not perform or even write music focused around environmental issues? This is a great way to combine your love of music with a love for our planet and use the platform that you have to spread this important message. (You can find my own contribution in this arena at [doyouhearme.info](http://doyouhearme.info))

I hope this article has opened your eyes to some of the environmental issues that we face both as musicians and as humans. Whilst this article may not provide all of the answers to our problems, my aim is to help raise awareness of the issues and I hope it has given you some ideas of small actions you can take to help reduce your impact on the planet. ■

### Find out more

• **Music declares Emergency**  
<https://www.musicdeclares.net>

• **Vegan Saxophonists**  
[vegan.saxresources.co.uk](http://vegan.saxresources.co.uk)

• **V-pads**

For more information on V-pads, see [www.dawkes.co.uk/sound-room/vegan-saxophone-pads-the-v-pad/](http://www.dawkes.co.uk/sound-room/vegan-saxophone-pads-the-v-pad/) and search YouTube to hear a demonstration.



VEGAN SAXOPHONISTS



[www.musicdeclares.net](http://www.musicdeclares.net)

### Recommended reading

- *Who Care Wins* by Lily Cole
- *No One is Too Small to Make a Difference* by Greta Thunberg
- *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer
- *How Not to Die* by Michael Gregor

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