

gear

GEAR REVIEWS

THE SAXSEAT

c.£300

When I was asked to review a new seat for playing the saxophone that cost around £300, my initial reaction was to question what was wrong with every other chair that I'd sat on to play the saxophone for the best part of 20 years. I was reminded, however, of the first saxophone course I went on with Rob Buckland. For some reason, it stuck in my mind that Rob brought his own stool with him for the course; at the time I thought this was somewhat poncy, but more than a decade on I now fully understand his decision.

You don't have to look far to find a saxophonist that has suffered from back, shoulder, neck or arm pain at some point in their life. There can be a multitude of causes for this, but I expect that if we all took a step back and considered our playing position, we would be able to identify and even rectify many of these causes.

Enter The SaxSeat – a fully adjustable stool with a removable backrest and a (patented) adjustable instrument arm. The real innovation of The SaxSeat is the adjustable instrument arm, designed to support the weight of the saxophone. When playing, the instrument is fully supported by the instrument arm, taking all the weight away from a player's neck, back and shoulders. My first thought was that this was probably little more than a gimmick; however, when adjusted correctly it is surprisingly comfortable and does indeed remove all the weight of the instrument. After playing baritone on The SaxSeat for just a few minutes, I was surprised at how heavy the baritone felt when I returned to playing it without the seat. I was also pleasantly surprised that it did not feel restrictive at all in terms of being able to move while playing. There was just the right amount of motion in both the seat and the instrument arm so the instrument feels secure but still allows you to move. Another opportunity The SaxSeat allows is for larger instruments to be played directly in front of the player rather than to the side, a position I actually found much more comfortable on both tenor and baritone.

Not content with trying The SaxSeat in the comfort of our homes, Gerard McChrystal and I decided to put it to the test at our Summer Saxes Course at Benslow Music, where we tested the seat further, as well as giving students on the course the chance to try it out. We were very fortunate that Kostas Efesopoulos, the designer of The SaxSeat, kindly spoke to us about it via Zoom as well as telling us how to adjust it optimally. Kostas also told us a little of the story behind the seat, which he designed in response to wanting to play the saxophone without putting any excess strain on his body and to be able to continue to play pain-free as he entered middle age and beyond. It was also useful to learn that the demonstration seat we had been sent was a prototype and not the finished version that would be shipped. This put my mind at rest a little, as we had received the seat with no instructions, and it took a little while to work out how to assemble it correctly! A few of the joints also had a little more play in them than I would have ideally liked; however, the finished product has had a few updates, so I don't think this should be a major issue.

One final and perhaps unexpected discovery of The SaxSeat is that using it does change the sound of the instrument. This is due to some of the vibrations of the instrument being absorbed by the seat, causing the sound to be slightly muffled. While the change is not huge, it is enough to be



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noticeable, especially when playing soprano, since the end of the soprano is partially covered by the instrument holder. As Gerard demonstrated, you'll also struggle to get the adjustment high enough for a soprano. Not a problem for most people...

Interestingly, the response from students on the course was quite polarised; some shared my initial reaction that it is rather a lot to pay for a seat, while others thought it was a bargain to be able to play the sax for longer and reduce the strain on their bodies. Could an investment now save you hundreds of pounds of osteopath appointments in the future? Quite possibly.

However good a product The SaxSeat is, one of the most important things is how it is set up. Owning The SaxSeat alone is not enough to improve your posture. It would be quite easy, for example, to set it with the instrument attachment in too low a position, meaning that you are constantly leaning forward to the instrument or bending down to it; a sure-fire way of getting back pain. For that reason, if you do decide to invest in The SaxSeat, I would highly recommend asking a teacher or colleague to help you set it up, ensuring that it is in the optimum position so the

mouthpiece enters your mouth without you having to lean forwards, backwards, up or down. If you are prone to squeezing too hard on the keys, biting too hard on the mouthpiece or other similar technical problems, The SaxSeat alone will not alleviate this. I would therefore see it as a useful tool and an aid for your technique and posture, but not a magical fix.

So, would I recommend The SaxSeat, and would I use it myself? If I owned The SaxSeat I would definitely use it while practising to help reduce tension and take the weight off my neck, back and shoulders. That said, I wouldn't always use it when practising, as when I perform much of the time it is standing up or sitting on a chair that is not The SaxSeat, and it is important to spend a fair proportion of your time practising in the same way you're going to perform. That isn't to say that you couldn't take The SaxSeat with you to use at gigs, as the inventor does himself; however, I'm not sure I could cope with the strange looks if I turned up with it for an orchestral gig, or even for



Baritone in front

a quartet concert. I would also find it quite tedious continually taking it apart and putting it together.

The types of people I would recommend this seat to are those doing a large amount of practise, such as students at conservatoire or university, and professionals, who often practise upwards of three hours per day and may find it useful to help extend practice sessions without risking injury. I would also recommend it to those with existing back, neck or shoulder issues or who suffer with tension when playing. In particular, baritone players will probably be the people who find The SaxSeat the most useful due to the weight of the instrument.

Overall, The SaxSeat is an interesting and potentially very useful addition to the range of instrument supports available and is certainly somewhat of a novel design. There is no doubt



Tenor to side



Soprano in front

that it could provide relief to players that struggle with the weight of the saxophone and to those that practise for extended periods. There are, of course, a plethora of slings and harnesses available that could serve as cheaper alternatives, but that's an article for another day.

Alastair Penman

The SaxSeat is now available to pre-order at www.saxseat.com



Tenor in front