

Alastair Penman introduces the Freedom Player – a device, currently at advanced prototype stage, that makes silent practice possible on the clarinet or saxophone

Freedom Player

Every so often, something happens that reminds you just how small and interconnected the musical world is. A couple of months ago, I was performing for Musical Rendezvous, a fantastic organisation that takes music into care homes and community centres. Their regular pianist was unavailable, so Lindsay Bridgewater (whose credits are as diverse as The Philharmonia Orchestra and Ozzy Osbourne!) was standing in. After the gig, I was talking to Lindsay and mentioned my interest in electronics. He said I must meet his friend Paul Davey, who was working on a clever new device for clarinet and saxophone. Fast forward a fortnight and I am at Paul's house learning all about Freedom Player, an ingenious patented mute for single-reed instruments, developed by Paul alongside his business partner Dr Brian Smith.

In the past, a number of companies have tried to design a mute for the clarinet or saxophone, with limited success. Most attempts simply deaden the sound by putting something inside the bell, but this makes the instrument resistant to play, affects the tuning and doesn't completely silence the sound. One of the more sophisticated devices is the e-Sax Whisper Mute. This is essentially a saxophone case with holes for your hands and the mouthpiece, so you can play the saxophone inside the case and listen through headphones. This is not only a strange playing setup, but also a very bulky item; certainly not the sort of thing you would want to travel with. The Freedom Player works on completely different principles, and its closest parallel is probably Yamaha's Silent Brass system that has become the standard for 'silently' practising brass instruments.

How it works

Freedom Player is a small plastic unit that is inserted between the mouthpiece and the clarinet barrel or saxophone crook. Now comes the clever bit. When Freedom Player is switched on, it emits a very quiet sound signal that causes the air in the instrument to vibrate. By detecting the vibrations coming back from the instrument, Freedom Player identifies which note you are fingering and plays a digital representation of that note through your headphones.



It is important to make the point that the sound Freedom Player produces is digitally-generated so the device is essentially allowing you to practise fingerings in near silence; it is not a tool for practising tone quality because you hear a computerised tone, not your actual sound. Having taken courses in audio signal processing at university, I find the use of the technology in Freedom Player incredibly clever, and the device is truly unique in this sense.

Since Freedom Player was launched at Musikmesse in Frankfurt in April, there has been a lot of interest in it. I am told that Freedom Player will be commercially available before the end of 2019. I am lucky to have an advanced prototype of the clarinet device, which I have been putting through its paces. The first point to make is that it truly is a near-silent device, so you really could use it anywhere without disturbing anyone. While it is slightly strange hearing yourself as a synthesised clarinet rather than your natural sound, you get used to this quickly, and it is not an issue if you are using it to work on finger technique, as is intended. At the moment, the device does not reproduce vibrato, but this function may be introduced at a later date.

Computer software and a smartphone app have been developed to complement Freedom Player, connected via USB or Bluetooth. There are some neat features such as an on-screen display of which note you are playing. For beginners in the early stages of learning both how to read music and the

fingering system of the instrument, this could prove invaluable. You can also choose to transpose the notes you are playing so that you could read piano music, or play A clarinet music on a B flat clarinet. In a similar vein, because your blowing is controlling the volume but not the tone, you can adjust the device so you only have to blow very softly to produce a sound (or indeed not at all) in order to save your energy while practising. Also in development is the option to play along with your favourite pieces via the app.

Other features are perhaps more niche but equally interesting. Because the device can connect to MIDI devices, you could actually change the sound to any MIDI instrument you like, essentially converting your instrument into a wind synthesiser.

The target market for this product is beginner and intermediate

students who want to be able to practise without disturbing others, or who may feel embarrassed when practising. For this purpose, I think the device works excellently, is easy to use and is compact enough to fit into

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most instrument cases. When I have a production model I will be able to assess whether it can also keep up with the speed of an advanced player. The launch price has not been announced yet, although I am assured it will be competitive.

The team behind Freedom Player has asked me to make a demo video of the device, so watch this space to see Freedom Player in action! In the meantime, you can find out more and sign up to hear information about the release of the product at www.freedom-player.com.

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