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GEAR REVIEWS

CRAVEN SONORO SM2 CLARINET

Packages from £775
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Every so often something a bit different arrives on my doorstep, and this was very much the case with the Craven Sonoro SM2 B flat clarinet. Professional clarinets are typically made of wood, with budget options made from plastic. However, the Sonoro SM2 is made from hard rubber. This is not an uncommon material for single-reed mouthpieces, but it is unusual choice for a whole clarinet. There are various advantages a hard rubber clarinet can offer. As they are not made from wood, they are immune from cracking and warping, and no tenon rings are required. The latter is interesting since many plastic clarinets have still retained tenon rings (presumably for tradition). However, the SM2 does away with these, giving the clarinet a slightly different look.

Leslie Craven (a fantastic clarinetist whose name will be familiar to many readers), designer of the Sonoro SM2, explained to me a couple of the clarinet's other features he hopes will put them a cut above other models in a similar price range. For starters, there are numerous anchored posts which help avoid play in the mechanism and should prevent the instrument going out of adjustment. Coupled with this there are extra adjusting screws, which means that should the instrument need adjustment, the player can quickly and easily do this themselves. Finally, Les sets up every clarinet himself to make it mechanically silent and also adjusts the tuning on every instrument, encouraging players to visit him in person so that he can tune the instrument to their particular playing style. With all of this, it really seems like you are getting an awful lot at a very modest price point. But now to the big question: how does it play?

Picking up the Sonoro SM2, I was pleasantly surprised the keywork sat very naturally under the fingers (unlike some other Chinese-made instruments I have tried). The hard rubber also makes the clarinet lighter than a wooden instrument. On playing, I was met with a beautiful, warm sound produced by the hard rubber. The clarinet played very evenly across the whole range and was particularly impressive in the altissimo register, which spoke with no effort at all. Really, it played and felt like a much more expensive clarinet than it is!

One catch, however, is that the clarinet's hard rubber construction means it doesn't have the same projection as a wooden instrument. For many players, this wouldn't present a problem, and indeed you may not notice the difference playing in a small room. But I think professionals and soloists are unlikely to find enough projection in these instruments, and therefore might favour wooden options. However, there is an option with the Sonoro SM2 to purchase a wooden barrel and bell designed to go with the instrument. This is something I would definitely recommend; when I switched to the wooden barrel and bell, there was an instantly noticeable increase in projection

and brightness in the sound. While this doesn't go all the way to replicating a wooden clarinet, it definitely gives the instrument a boost and an instant feeling of more power. The intonation on the clarinet was generally secure, and given that Les will set up the clarinet for each player (unfortunately, I wasn't able to visit him in person at the time of writing), I'm confident that players won't find intonation issues with the instrument.

Another option is to purchase a Craven mouthpiece alongside the clarinet. I found the mouthpiece to inhabit a similar soundworld to the instrument: warm, dark and smooth. For my liking, I actually found it made the SM2 a little too dark; while ideal for much classical repertoire, I like to have the flexibility in my set-up to add some brightness and ping for more contemporary or jazz-oriented playing. That said, when I put the Craven mouthpiece on my own wooden clarinet (Buffet Vintage) I found it very enjoyable to play, and for me it was better suited to this instrument than the SM2. The mouthpiece has a fairly narrow tip opening but still gave a warm sound, and I enjoyed the feedback from the mouthpiece: fairly resistant, but not overly. It worked well with the Marca Reeds that Les suggests using with it, and sounded equally good with my usual Vandorens. A final option with the instrument is to add a Silverstein CRYO4 ligature. While it's not my personal ligature of choice, it is a popular professional option, and is offered at a good discount when purchased with the clarinet.

Overall, this is an interesting clarinet with many positives: easy to play, warm sound, inexpensive and a personal service to name a few. It is worth being aware that you won't get the projection of a wooden clarinet, but that shouldn't come as a surprise at this price point. The instrument would be particularly suited to students or perhaps as a backup instrument for professional players who need to play outdoors or in extreme temperatures or humidities.

In addition to a B flat clarinet, the Sonoro SM2 is also available as A and C clarinets. If you're interested in trying or buying an instrument, you can find out more at theclarinetcompany.com

Alastair Penman

The three styles of barrel and bell available as optional extras



Sonoro SM2 B flat clarinet with Craven mouthpiece and standard barrel and bell