



Clarinet & Saxophone

Spring 2020 Volume 45, No 1



CARLOS FERREIRA
New Philharmonia principal

*Destination
Dinant*

ADOLPHE SAX'S HOME TOWN

*Beethoven
transformed*

UNEARTHED WIND
ARRANGEMENTS

*Ligatures
ranked*

WHICH CAME TOP?

Best of British

REDISCOVERED
WORKS FOR CLARINET

PLUS: WEST COAST JAZZ SAX: PART 2 | PROFILING F GERARD ERRANTE | COLIN COWLES AT 80 | NEWS, REVIEWS AND DIARY | SINGLE REED DOCTOR

Latest ligatures

Following his article on clarinet and saxophone ligatures in this magazine five years ago, the Canadian clarinetist and saxophonist **Chuck Currie** revisits the topic to discuss various new models introduced since then, and to give his ultimate ligature ranking



*The Jody Jazz
Power Ring
ligature*

This follow-up to the previous article 'Ligature Choices for Clarinet and Saxophone' (published in *Clarinet & Saxophone* in 2015) was requested by reader Steve Wilson via the letters page a few issues back. I found the ligature of my dreams just after the previous article was published, so those ligatures are included in this update, along with other ligatures brought out in the four years since.

Some players maintain that ligatures make little difference to one's tone and articulation, but blind testing, both in person and with recordings, has yielded opinions from many players that contradict the nay-sayers. Differences can be discerned that are frequently far from subtle, and listeners are often largely agreed about their preferences. I note that many users of single-reed forums and bulletin boards mock differences in ligatures and other equipment without ever having tried them.

I've kept many ligatures that I've found excellent, and I regularly use many of them. There are obvious differences of sound between even these terrific products, let alone in comparison with poorer ligatures. They are ranked at the end of the article.

In the previous article, I established that ligatures with two vertical rails contacting the stock of the reed, with the least material of any kind contacting the mouthpiece, will seat the reed well while allowing both reed and mouthpiece to vibrate as much as possible. Yes, our imagination of our own sound is the most powerful element that influences our tone and articulation and musicality, but the design and quality of the mouthpiece, reed and ligature is next in importance. All this is more important than our instrument, as long as it is a decent horn with reasonable intonation and pads that seal!

Silverstein

I was an early adopter of Silverstein ligatures, and they are now well known and popular. I purchased 14 of them for all sizes of saxophone and clarinet in 2015, and Silverstein gave me an extra two for bass clarinet with silver-plated and gold-plated bars to test against the standard titanium. I found titanium darkest and most resistant, silver brightest with greatest ease of articulation, and the gold bars had the most burnished shimmering ring. I set up my jazz mouthpieces with the titanium version and my classical mouthpieces with the gold one. I also found that having two 'fine tuner' bars on each side (you can buy and add as many of these as you want) delivers a denser core sound.



Silverstein is the only non-two-rail ligature that has ever given me good results. I believe that this is because the cord on this ligature is so high-tech, firm and dense that it will not 'flatten' and maintains minimal surface contact with the reed. The 'fine tuner' bars on either side of the reed can be moved from right beside the reed to any point around the circumference.

The legendary British clarinetist Leslie Craven has worked with acoustic scientist Dr Robert Watson, using a high-end digital oscilloscope, to chart frequency response with the Silverstein ligature for all partials from 256 hertz to 12,536 hertz, capturing all possible harmonics of the fundamental tone. This scientific testing against four other highly respected ligatures backed up the subjective opinions of many single-reed players: that the Silverstein ligature provides an incredibly rich sound with great ease of articulation. The spectrum analysis proved that adjustment of the 'fine tuner' bars alters the focus of the sound, generally providing more high partials when closer to the reed, enhancing projection; and fewer high partials when moved towards the sides, giving a warmer sound.

I used these ligatures exclusively until I purchased some newer high-end ligatures for this article. ➡

Ishimori Wood Stone



Since Ishimori Wind Instruments opened as a repair shop and manufacturer in Japan in 1951, they have been trusted deeply by professional and amateur players all over the world. They are a small company that specialises in handmade saxophones, ligatures and reeds in addition to repairs. Their booth at the National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM) show – the largest music manufacturing show in the world – continually sells out before many players get to try their products.

One of the players in my bass clarinet quartet, Pacific Blackwood, uses their solid sterling silver ligature on both bass clarinet and clarinet. I liked them so much that I changed my setup on those two instruments from the Silverstein that I loved so well. They have a darker, more compact and focused sound – incredibly resonant. I found I could play harder reeds with them as well.

The ligatures are available in many metals and plating variations, including the Kodama models with massaranduba wood instead of metal rails. Ishimori provides a guide to the sound qualities of each model – my preferred solid silver model is described as more resistant with a dark tone.

It was hard to be sure what would fit my various saxophone mouthpieces, and there is a waiting list for these ligatures, so I did not spend the 5,000 Canadian dollars [approx £2,900] it would have cost to refit all my mouthpiece set-ups. I'm now glad of that since the next ligature is my new favourite, and it is one-third the price of the Ishimori – and half the price of Silversteins!

It is axiomatic that one must not contact the sides of reeds for them to vibrate properly. Daniel Bonade got that right in 1955 when he invented the two-rail ligature and filed his patent

I note that many users of single-reed forums and bulletin boards mock differences in ligatures and other equipment without ever having tried them

JodyJazz Power Ring

Jody Espina showed up at the NAMM show decades ago, carrying around bags of mouthpieces for players and dealers to try. Now JodyJazz is one of the best manufacturers in the world and has just established the Chedeville line of excellent classical mouthpieces. The JodyJazz Power Ring ligatures are made to fit all their products, and the HR* line will fit most alto and tenor hard rubber mouthpieces. The HR* tenor also fits the Vandoren V16 jazz baritone mouthpieces and most alto clarinet mouthpieces. The CL1 gold plated and CL1S silver plated clarinet ligatures fit almost any soprano clarinet mouthpiece.

I find it is better if they fit the slightest bit loose, as I can use a thin Vandoren mouthpiece patch on the back of the mouthpiece to get exactly the placement I like on the reed stock, and the fit is then snugger and more secure. There are two sizes of alto sax ligature: the HRA1, and smaller HRA1 minus. The HRA1 minus also fits most clarinet mouthpieces and it has more mass, so the tone is even richer and more resonant!

Unfortunately, the Baritone HRB1 is too small for classical baritone mouthpieces, but I've asked them to develop a version for their exceptional Chedeville mouthpiece, which would fit most classical baritone mouthpieces and possibly bass clarinet as well. Nothing is made yet for soprano saxophone or E flat clarinet.

The Power Rings are a work of genius. They are milled from solid brass with computer numerically controlled (CNC) equipment, then plated with 24K gold or sterling silver. They are concave both inside and out, so the reed and the mouthpiece are each contacted at only four points. I liked the first version of this product, but the second version is even better. It is designed with greater thickness and heft, together with more pronounced side curves and extreme contoured edges, both top and bottom. The heavy mass of the ligature lends incredibly rich resonance to the tone, while the limited contact points allow for great life in the sound and terrific ease of articulation.

These are 'power tone' ligatures, not just 'power-full'! Don't let the marketing of 'power' to jazz and commercial musicians deter you – these are also beautiful classical ligatures with the most resonant core sound you've ever heard for soloists, wind ensemble, and chamber players. For symphonic players, it's challenging to move the mouthpiece quickly from A to B flat to C clarinets without ligature slippage, so I still have my Ishimori ligature and two others in my double case.

These ligatures are incredibly convenient. I didn't realise how much time I spent fiddling with ligature screws before I started using Power Rings, and they are much less expensive than most high-end ligatures.



AK Ligature

This revolutionary new ligature from Nevada, USA is handled by four dealers worldwide:

USA: Kessler & Sons (www.kesslerandsons.com)

Canada: Backun Musical Services (www.backunmusical.com)

Japan and South Korea: Dolce Musical Instruments (www.dolce.co.jp)

Norway: G24 (www.g24.no)

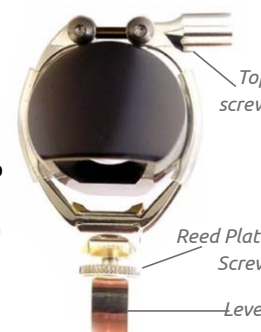


It is only available currently for clarinet, but there are plans to develop them for all single-reed mouthpieces. The design and engineering are amazing and yield a ligature that is a bit fussy to fit, but the results are superb. With the sterling silver plates (and so far, I have always preferred solid sterling silver when available) the results are very similar to the Ishimori sterling silver ligature: a very firm, compact and resonant tone, but just a little freer blowing with slightly easier articulation. If it weren't for the JodyJazz Power Ring, I would be using this ligature on clarinet.

The reed plates are held on by a magnet, which lets them vibrate quite freely, and there are two designs: one with full rails, and another with 'scooped out' rails so that they contact the reed a little less.

To set up the ligature:

1. Loosen the top screw so that the ligature can easily slide on to your mouthpiece to its playing position, with the ligature lever open, which is up over the screw. Once you have the ligature in position, tighten the top screw until it is snug. Do not over-tighten the screw.
2. Tighten the reed plate screw until you feel it get a little snug on the reed. Once you feel this screw get a very small amount of resistance, stop turning it.
3. Flip the lever down to add just the right pressure to the reed. As with any other ligature, I find this to be just barely enough pressure so that you cannot move the reed from side to side with your fingers easily.



This is an excellent ligature, but expensive. You cannot choose between the brass plates or sterling silver plates. You have to buy the ligature with the brass plates and then pay extra for the sterling silver plates. This comes to 425 Canadian dollars [£247] with customs and tax – the single most expensive ligature on the market.

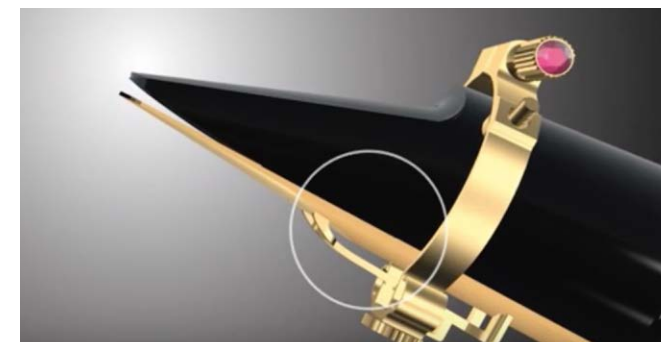
I had the Silverstein, Ishimori, AK and Power Ring ligatures in my double clarinet case all summer and kept coming back to the Power Ring. They're all fantastic and they're all still in my case. I use the Power Ring for everything but orchestral, and for that I use the others when I have to switch mouthpieces quickly from A to B flat or C clarinet. Clarinetists at festivals and rehearsals are forever trying these out and exclaiming over them.

I didn't realise how much time I spent fiddling with ligature screws before I started using Power Rings, and they are much less expensive than most high-end ligatures

JLV Ligature

Here is a ligature that is as original in design and engineering as the AK model, and nearly as expensive, but with very poor results. Jean-Luc Vignaud has designed a solution for a problem that does not exist!

The ligature is designed for the upper two prongs to go on the vamp of the reed and bottom two prongs on the stock, and then add enough pressure to counteract top to bottom warpage as shown in the diagram below. This is called the 'resurfacing feature'.



It's nonsense. When laid against a straight edge that is level to within a micron, one easily sees that there is no top to bottom warpage on reeds. The warpage is always from side to side, and can be easily corrected by scraping the reed table with a ReedGeek (see my article in the Autumn 2018 issue (Vol 43 No 3) on how to use this tool and others to adjust reeds).

Placing the prongs on the vamp of the reed dampens the reed's vibrations dramatically in the lowest registers, and when one adds more pressure to counteract non-existent warpage, this gets worse – very dull and unresponsive indeed.

Furthermore, the prongs for the clarinet ligature are 11mm apart and contact the reed at the very edge on each side, dampening vibrations. The Wanne silver clarinet ligature plate reviewed in my 2015 article was also 11 mm wide, and when cut and bent to 8 mm performed magnificently. So, I adjusted the JLV prongs to 8 mm apart and then placed the ligature so the top prongs were on the stock rather than the vamp of the reed – and it played very well. However, to spend over twice as much as a JodyJazz Power Ring for this poor design and then have to alter it doesn't appeal to me.

Great engineering to no purpose! I'm out 300 Canadian dollars [£175] on this one, and glad I sprung for the brass instead of the silver or gold model! ➡

Rovner Light

This is the least expensive and best value ligature I've tested in five years, but only if you adjust the ligature so that the metal pins are on the reed rather than the fabric. I'm not a fan of any fabric or leather ligature, even those with two rails contacting the mouthpiece, as I find the fabric or leather dampens reed and mouthpiece vibrations. This light version has thinner fabric than Rovner's dark model, with a 'window' cut into it, so it is preferred over the dark model when placed with the fabric over the reed as designed, but even better when reversed.

I have experimented with this ligature with students who have very little disposable income. The ligature has the virtues of being inexpensive and unbreakable, so I run into a lot of beginners who have purchased this ligature or who have had it supplied with their school instrument.

If I am lucky enough to run into the 'light' instead of 'dark' version, we have less fabric to dampen reed and mouthpiece vibrancy. We simply remove the knob, reverse the screw and refasten the knob so that the pins are now in front on the reed like so:



We now have a very inexpensive two-rail ligature with less fabric on the back of the mouthpiece to dampen the mouthpiece's vibrations!

I demonstrated this at last year's British Columbia Music Educators' conference to a few dozen educators while I was at the Vandoren booth handing out Juno reeds. The teachers were gobsmacked at the difference in focus and projection. I wish all the music educators at the conference had been there, because I'm forever having band teachers tell my students that they've got their ligatures on backwards and making them change it back!

Of course, I recommended the Vandoren Optimum ligature at the booth more highly, since it has three plate options and one of these plates is a true two-vertical-rail option. The Rovner is not in that league, but it is not bad when inverted and it is very inexpensive.



Selmer Gold Lacquered



Simple, elegant and inexpensive. I'm not a fan of ligatures with 'sideways' metal contacting the reed, but at least they have not compounded that problem by putting sideways 'rails' on the metal. That really does dampen reed vibration. The Selmer, if not tightened too much, is relatively warm and responsive, but not in the league of the better ligatures featured above.

Ligaphone Universal Ligature



An expensive ligature for what it is! For the same price as the stellar JodyJazz Power Ring, you get thin steel plate with thick or thin canvas contacting the reed. You can also spend up to an additional 60 Canadian dollars for various plating. The sound is very free and clear but characterless with very little colour. Its single virtue outside of being very free blowing is that it will fit any size of mouthpiece – there is even an extension for contrabass clarinet mouthpieces. Sandro of Massullo Music (Vancouver) gave this to me since he knew this article was in the works – and it is in my gig bag for emergencies only. Handy!

Yanagisawa Yany SIXS



Yanagisawa has long had a reputation for excellence of design, engineering and quality control, and this ligature is a brilliant idea with a critical flaw.

Using four ebonite strips for minimal contact with the mouthpiece and four brass discs for minimal contact with the reed is very forward thinking indeed. The only flaw is that this is marketed for both clarinet and alto sax, and the discs that contact the reed are spaced 13mm apart – far too far apart for clarinet, and also too far apart for alto saxophone reeds to vibrate properly. 8mm is ideal for soprano clarinet and 11mm will work for all saxophone reeds and bass clarinet.

It is axiomatic that one must not contact the sides of reeds for them to vibrate properly. Daniel Bonade got that right in 1955 when he invented the two-rail ligature and filed his patent. You'd think after 65 years that everyone would know... It's a shame, since this would be a top ligature if Yanagisawa got the side-to-side contact spacing right.

BG Duo

This ligature has a fatal flaw that it shares with the BG Tradition ligature. It's too 'tall' and its vertical rails are too long. It is 30mm from top to bottom. The average height of all my other ligatures is 23mm, so its rails are 30% longer than normal, covering far too much of the stock of the reed. The tone is dampened and the articulation is not free. It is slightly better than the Tradition version because there is some give to the rubber contacting the mouthpiece underneath the tightening screw, and there are side rails preventing full 'wrap-around' contact with the mouthpiece. Not recommended until BG redesigns the height to under 23 mm.

Our final two ligatures are back to speciality custom items, both marketed by Duo Music (www.duoclarinetshop.com).



Triebert Orphée



Here we have hand-hammered brass with rose gold plating. I was excited to try this, but it has two flaws in addition to being very expensive. First, there is not enough space across the plate holding the three brass studs. Secondly, the bent sides contact the edge of the reed – even the quite narrow Vandoren

V21 reeds I use. So the sound is dampened dramatically. I fixed that with some specialised pliers, a vice and a small jeweler's hammer, and it now looks like this:

Now, the reed is not contacted by metal on its edges at all. However, the tone and articulation are still muted because the three studs are too large. It's really a beautiful ligature but it doesn't sound that beautiful. Nice and warm, but muted.



Duo Glossy

This ligature is similar to the Triebert Orphée, and is designed by clarinetist Patrick Messina. This time there are four smaller studs. The previous model had one stud centred at the top of the reed stock and two at the bottom. I wish I could try that defunct version. This is more vibrant than the Triebert ligature I modified because the studs are smaller. It is silver plated and not that pricy. I would be willing to pay for a solid sterling silver model with just three studs, and I bet it would earn a place in my clarinet case with the JodyJazz Power Ring, Silverstein CRYO4, Ishimori Sterling Silver and AK Sterling Silver ligatures.



I had the Silverstein, Ishimori, AK and Power Ring ligatures in my double clarinet case all summer and kept coming back to the Power Ring

Silverstein is the only non-two rail ligature that has ever given me good results. I believe that this is because the cord on this ligature is so high-tech, firm and dense that it will not 'flatten' and maintains minimal surface contact with the reed

Combined ligature ranking from 2015 and 2020 articles

Highly recommended

Recommended

Recommended with reservations

Not recommended

1. JodyJazz Power Ring (too slippery for orchestral clarinet)
2. AK with silver plates (clarinet only)
3. Ishimori sterling silver
4. Silverstein CRYO4
5. Rovner Platinum (too slippery for orchestral clarinet)
6. Wanne Enlightened with silver plates (bent to 8 mm for clarinet, 11 mm for saxophone)
7. Peter Spriggs Floating Rail (clarinet/bass clarinet only)
8. Francois Louis with rubber coated sterling silver plates (or use Wanne silver plates bent to 8mm or 11mm)
9. Brancher (very thin metal body – solder can fail)
10. Duo Glossy (clarinet only)
11. Vandoren Optimum with two vertical rails (too much metal)
12. Rico H (sideways bar over reed dampens vibration)
13. Bonade (soft metal bends and touches reed edges)
14. BG Super Revelation (fabric dampens mouthpiece)
15. Rovner Versa (fabric dampens mouthpiece)
16. Rovner Versa X (fabric dampens mouthpiece)
17. Rovner Light with pins on reed (fabric dampens mouthpiece)
18. Selmer (sideways metal contact on reed)
19. Yanagisawa SIXS (brass discs contact reed edge)
20. Ligaphone Universal (thin metal, colourless)
21. BG Duo (metal too long on reed stock)
22. BG Tradition (metal too long on reed stock)
23. Triebert Orphée (metal contacts reed edge)
24. JLV (prongs too long and wide and contact reed edges) ■

Clarinetist and saxophonist Chuck Currie performs with the Vancouver Island Symphony, the Pacific Symphonic Wind Ensemble, Amici Musica, Sax Noir sax quartet and Pacific Blackwood bass clarinet quartet. He is a Vandoren, Backun Canada, Conn Selmer and Vandoren artist-clinician performing on Backun Lumiere Clarinets, a Selmer Privilege Bass Clarinet and Yanagisawa Silver Sonic Saxophones.

www.saxnoir.com