

Anything You Can Do We Can Do Better — On the Baritone Saxophone

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After years of being a professional baritone saxophonist, I still can't shake people's persistent assumptions that the baritone saxophone is a lesser instrument.

This myth has understandable – if unfortunate – roots in popular perception. The only place most people see a baritone saxophone is in a rock horn section or anchoring a big band. It is rarely used as a soloing instrument or as part of smaller, more flexible groups. Perhaps most perniciously, it is often believed that this horn is somehow harder to play, or less agile than its smaller counterparts. It's unclear which came first, the baritone sax's under-representation in small groups, or the assumption of its sluggishness. But it's all hogwash, anyway: there is actually no reason why the baritone should not be featured in smaller groups, and aside from some incidental truths about the horn being physically larger, it is not any harder to play or less agile.

Early on in the history of Jazz you begin to see a basis for the unfair aspersions cast on the baritone. Simply put, there was no baritone champion among the coterie of musicians who created and popularized jazz. The trumpet has Miles Davis and Dizzy Gillespie, not to mention Louis Armstrong. The alto has Charlie Parker. Tenor saxophonists can claim John Coltrane as part of their lineage. Sure, there were baritone saxophonists around and playing back when these other musicians made their name, but none transcended to this exclusive and sanctified group.

The most vaunted of the jazz baritone saxophonists, Gerry Mulligan, was around and performing at the same time as many of the jazz giants. Mulligan had much success and certainly some hits, and no one can really say he was underrated or under-appreciated, but even he did not climb his way to the pantheon of untouchable jazz greats. This Olympus is presided over by Charlie Parker, and its members are fiercely guarded and promoted (perhaps even over-aggrandized) by modern jazz education.

Since jazz education these days generally means sax sections and big band charts, let's take a look at the love-hate relationship that exists between the baritone and the big band. Historically, many of the greatest baritone players have had very close bonds with big bands. Harry Carney, often considered father of the baritone sax's sound, will always be associated with the Duke Ellington Orchestra. Duke knew how to write for the baritone and utilized not only the rumbling brilliance of Carney's low end, but also the sweet luxurious tone of his upper register, often placing the baritone's voice above the entire band. Alas, Harry Carney's strengths lay in the subtle nuances that helped make the band the legendary. He was rarely seen improvising, took few solos, and recorded very few times as a leader. He never struck out to make his own name, and from his teens until his death shortly after that of Duke's, his leader and friend, he never left his station solidly anchoring the big band.

Pepper Adams played for years with the Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra, and could certainly hold his own with any other saxophonist to ever join that group. (He eventually struck out on his own to pursue smaller groups and greater improvisatory offers, one of the few baritone players to do so.) Gerry Mulligan,

who made his name playing in small groups and was rarely seen playing with anyone else's big band, eventually started his own big band, featuring himself out front. Yet even in a Baritone Saxophonist's big band there was another poor baritone player doomed to do nothing but play section parts.

Ah, section parts of a big band—here truly we explore the hate portion of this relationship. In western music the lower registers are generally used for bass notes, tonics related to the harmony, and other slower moving purposes. In an orchestra the string bases are lower and physically bigger, as is the tuba. These instruments are larger, lower and definitely not as agile as their smaller counterparts. As such, western music has developed in a way that lower instruments rarely tend to have as much movement as the higher pitched ones. Applied to a big band, this means that despite having a brilliant key system allowing them to play as quickly as the other saxophones (see below for more on this), the baritone is left with a lot of whole notes or “footballs” as they are somewhat unaffectionately referred to. Solos or changes for blowing rarely find their way into the baritone parts.

Given this trend of western harmony, when the watered down, bland charts passed off as high school big band arrangements reach the students, there is hardly anything left to keep a baritone player from wandering off in search of something shiny to look at. As such, band directors now have tendency to put a baritone in the hands of the perhaps less focused (read: talented) students, thinking the baritone parts may be more appropriate to their level. These students are then handed beat-up, barely functioning, horns that were probably poorly made in the first place. Obviously this exacerbates the problem and makes an unfair assumption self-fulfilling.

Now let's get right to the nitty-gritty: Is the baritone harder to play? It's bigger; it must be slower, right? How much more air does that thing take?

The physical properties of the instrument cannot be denied. In fact, as I write this, I am seated on an airplane headed for the next gig after having had to break down and plead shamelessly to allow my instrument on board instead of seeing it tossed underneath because of its size.

Does it take more air? Yes, of course it does. But any saxophonist with the proper diaphragm control, air support, embouchure, set-up, etc. can play the baritone without noticing too much more taxation on their air supply. Likewise, the way the keys are designed, they are only slightly more spaced out (relative to each hand) than a tenor. The mechanisms, keys, and levers, are not significantly harder to press and activate than the other saxophones (assuming your horn is in decent repair). Most importantly, as far as range goes, the baritone saxophones usable range is far greater than any of its smaller brethren – even without the addition of a low A attachment.

Altissimo is at least as easy on the baritone (I find it much easier), and far more usable. Take an alto playing an altissimo D. In the hands of all but the most adept musician this is a note that makes babies cry. Now, a baritone's altissimo D—assuming it's played in tune, and with a nice tone—is the same as an alto's high D (the baritone being exactly an octave lower). This is not objectively all that high—the baritone has a full additional octave to work with, without even surpassing the alto's standard range. Obviously, it takes years of practice to use altissimo effectively, smoothly, and cleanly, but that is true of all saxophones. And in the end, the fruits of that labor are more plentiful on the baritone.

The perception of the baritone saxophone can even make it an uphill battle just to find the right equipment. Players who like vintage horns have a hard time finding a decent horn in good condition, simply

because its size causes it to be damaged far more often. Players who like newer horns are even worse off. Horn manufacturers rarely pay as much attention to their baritone lines, assuming they even make one—many opt to only make altos and tenors. Those who offer baritones rarely provide as many options, and honestly, rarely make them as well. Forget trying to get a horn manufacturer to make you a horn without a low A.

Selmer's baritone line is so far behind its other horns that they skipped the Mark VII altogether and began stamping what were to be Mark VII's as Series I's just to catch up. Mouthpieces and reeds are no better, though some brands are finally expanding their products to include the baritone. While it irks me to no end, I understand that from a financial point of view there is far less money to be made on baritones and therefore less reason to invest in the category.

The truth is that the baritone can do what the other horns can, better or worse depending on the player and her dedication and talent. The harsh truth is that except for those who take the time to learn the horn and experience its beauty, the stereotypes and misconceptions will persist. When forming a quartet or quintet people rarely even consider anything other than the standard instrumentation. I am happy to do my best to disabuse people of their notions of the king of all horns, and at the moment I am fortunate there are people who ask me to play with their small groups. The harder I work and the better I can sound, the easier it will be for people to overcome their preconceived notion of the King of all Horns. As for now, I would like to say to all of you subway riders, fellow air-travellers and street-gawkers: No—this is not a cello, it's a baritone saxophone and it's going to melt your face off.