

Excerpt from “Part II: Writing for the Saxophone as a Solo Voice”

Writing for Saxophones: A Guide to the Tonal Palette of the Saxophone Family for Composers, Arrangers and Performers
by Jay C. Easton, D.M.A.

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- **B-flat bass saxophone**

Availability: uncommon, but becoming increasingly available, especially in most large communities in the USA, Europe and elsewhere.



Figure 2.7: B-flat bass saxophone.

Written Range
(Sounding pitch is a 2 octaves + a major 2nd lower)

B♭ Bass Saxophone

Musical Example 2.8: transposed range of B-flat bass saxophone.

The bass saxophone is the lowest member of the saxophone family ever widely manufactured, and if there was ever an unjustly neglected instrument, this is it. It was the original saxophone, invented to reinforce the bassoons as a more powerful low reed voice in the growing nineteenth-century orchestra. It was never accepted in this capacity, despite being praised highly by noted composers including Rossini, Donizetti and Meyerbeer. Upon hearing the bass saxophone in 1842, Escudier wrote "You cannot imagine the beauty of sound and the quality of the notes." Hector Berlioz called the instrument "magnificent and profound." Yet the bass saxophone never really caught on outside of military and concert bands. It had a surge of popularity as a bass instrument in early jazz groups, and even had a superstar soloist in the great Adrian Rollini. But as with so many of the other saxophones, it fell from favor during the Great Depression. Recently, it has experienced a significant revival in both concert music and jazz, and it continues to be the essential foundation of large ensembles of saxophones.

In this setting, the bass saxophone fulfills the role of the orchestral string bass, creating the foundation of the sound on which the other saxophones build their harmonies. Many existing important pieces in the mainstream wind ensemble repertoire also have bass saxophone parts added to the standard saxophone section.¹ It can provide an unmatched low end to an orchestral woodwind section, and it has been increasingly inspiring composers in Europe and America to write for it as a solo instrument. The bass saxophone can make a valuable addition to the standard saxophone quartet, either in place of one of the standard instruments, or as an additional fifth voice. It has a voice that

¹ Since there is a long-standing precedent of bass saxophone parts in band music, composers of new wind ensemble pieces may wish to consider including bass saxophone parts as an optional addition to the standard saxophone section. It is still best to cue important parts in another low instrument in case a bass is unavailable, but the bass saxophone can add great depth and richness to a woodwind section when it is included.

is distinct from the baritone saxophone, and the additional low range is very useful, so using a bass in place of a baritone is a good option for some pieces. Another interesting possibility is replacing the soprano with a bass – this leaves the quartet as alto, tenor, baritone, bass and gives an unusually lush, almost otherworldly sound.

There has been some confusion as to whether bass saxophones have a range that ends at written low B-flat or low A. The simple answer is B-flat. Almost all E-flat baritone saxophones are now made with an extended bell that allows a low A to be played. However, with very few exceptions this is not true of the bass saxophone, and low B-flat is the lowest note available for the vast majority of existing basses. The Keilwerth company of Germany made a few prototype bass saxophone with a low A extension in the late 1990s. A few Brazilian makers, led by Galasso began making bass saxophones with extended low range for use in local popular music in the mid-1980s. This has grown into a small movement in Brazil, and now several makers there are making basses with a keyrange descending as low as G or F. There have also been some contrabasses and extended-range baritones made in Brazil in recent years, however few, if any, of these have been exported to other parts of the world.

Unless one is specifically writing for a player who owns one of these unusual instruments, do not score for any notes below a written B-flat on the bass saxophone. Standard B-flat bass saxophones are now being made by at least eight companies worldwide in Europe and Asia, and many vintage American and European instruments have recently re-entered the market. Bass saxophones are now usually available in most large communities in Europe and the USA. They are seeing increasingly frequent use in both traditional and avant-garde jazz, and there are bass saxophone parts in several important pieces in the wind band repertoire and a number of popular musical theatre shows.