

Theo Wanne Mouthpieces: A Roundup

I kind of liked the good old days when your mouthpiece choices were limited to Berg Larsen, Otto Link, Meyer and Dukoff. But like the big automakers, they lived too long in the glory days, and up sprouted a host of custom makers in search of the sound of the past with the design of the future.

For years the name Theo Wanne was associated with all things vintage. First instruments, then mouthpieces and custom mouthpiece refacing: A player could do his or her one-stop shopping for the finest saxophone wares through Mr. Wanne. Wanne's Web site was and is a historian's vault filled with information and pictures of those aforementioned classics.

Today Theo and his brother Tom are celebrating the two-year anniversary of their classic tenor mouthpiece line. With seven styles available in a variety of finishes and sizes, there is a world of sounds and feels available for the modern saxophone player.

Theo's mouthpieces use what he calls a "True Large Chamber," which means that they have significantly larger chambers than the bore of the mouthpiece. These tenor mouthpieces are beautifully crafted in brass (the Parvati and Ambika lines are also available in Stable Wood), with a choice of a gold finish, old-school-evoking Vintified finish or, for \$25 extra, Rhodium finish. All mouthpieces are created using CNC technology, given a serial number and accompanied by a custom leather pouch, Reed Replacer Cap, replaceable bite pad and, except for the wood models, a Liberty Ligature. I was fortunate to be able to test the entire line. From brightest to darkest, the mouthpieces tested were the Durga (8), Kali (7*), Amma II (7*), Parvati Stable Wood (6*), Gaia (7*) and the Ambika (6*).

Again, each mouthpiece has the patented True Large Chamber, but the level and degree of baffle differ. The Durga (\$775 retail) has a high and long baffle; the Kali also has a high baffle, just shorter. The Amma has a medium-high baffle, the Parvati and Gaia have low baffles, and the Ambika has no baffle at all.

I found that using a recording device helped me understand the complexity of these mouthpieces. Theo has referenced

other makers to guide the player in choosing a model that is similar to what they use (e.g., Guardala, Otto Link, Lawton, etc.), but I found these mouthpieces to be like nothing I have played before. The player can be deceived if only listening from behind the horn. You experience the depth of a large chamber mouthpiece but have none of the backpressure. Furthermore, you hear edge and projection, yet it is not until you are out front that you experience the depth. You cannot truly get a sense of the complexity unless you place yourself in the audience.

Where each piece has a different character, they all play with tremendous ease. Attacks are effortless and the scale is even and full. The profile is neither thin nor thick. Those used to playing hard rubber or vintage will feel right at home.

The Durga is the brightest and boldest of the line. It is a fiercely powerful mouthpiece, ideal for the player who has to compete with electronics. I thought it was too bright and edgy until I listened to the playback. Although bright, it had tremendous depth, warmth and focus.

The Kali (\$775), next in the line, was a bit raspy. It had depth and character, but I kept getting a harsh edge, no matter what reed I used. I also found this model to be somewhat limiting in color. Although this model referenced the Guardala Brecker models of old, I could not make that same comparison.

The Amma II (\$775) had much more complexity and depth with a greater midrange. It is no surprise that this is a favorite among players who try it. However, this model was sent in the Vintified finish, which had a black oily residue on it. After carefully washing the mouthpiece I was able to remove the excess residue, but it still tasted horrible—a definite turnoff.

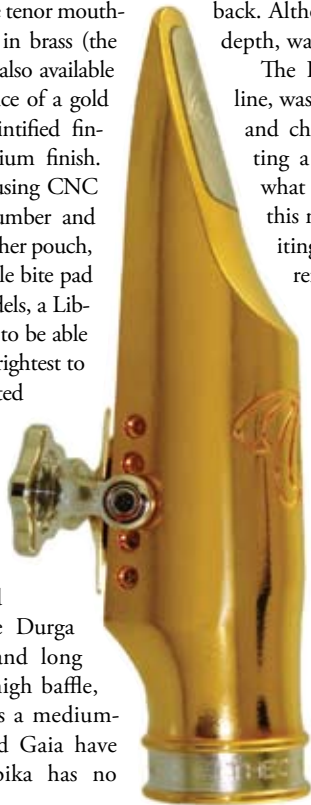
My favorite pieces were the Parvati, which came in the optional Stable Wood (\$700), the Gaia and Ambika. The Parvati played like a dream. Totally effortless, with an ease and tone

quality I had yet to encounter. It took any reed that I threw at it and asked for more.

The Ambika (\$775) was a total experience. Having no baffle and coming in a 6*, I was expecting it to be dull with little projection. To the contrary, it played with a tone à la the Texas Tenors of old. It had tremendous range and flexibility. The Gaia (\$775) was created to replace the metal version of the Parvati, with the Florida Link player in mind. It didn't quite feel like a Link but it had a full, complex tone with the right projection. Each mouthpiece (minus the Parvati Stable Wood) came with an Otto Link-esque Liberty Ligature that attaches directly to the mouthpiece via screws. The player can choose a variety of different tone plates and can reposition the ligature in one of five positions along the mouthpiece. While I can see the advantages of having a semi-fixed ligature, I have a problem with having to get the screwdriver out to move it on a gig (not to mention the fact that I'd probably lose the screwdriver shortly after buying the mouthpiece).

I liked the removable bite plate. This is a recessed area in which the player can insert an interchangeable pad, similar to a mouthpiece patch. You can choose a variety of plates, from soft to firm, depending on your preference.

One accessory I didn't like was the Reed Replacer Cap. This is a plastic cap that covers the tip of the mouthpiece and extends, like a



Durga



Parvati Stable Wood

reed, to fit under the ligature plate. This is a great idea, unless you want to use the ligature while the reed is on the mouthpiece.

Now let's get down to brass tacks, or in this case, the gold standard. Theo Wanne mouthpieces sell in the \$700-800 range, making them one of the most expensive custom mouthpieces available, more in line with the prices being commanded for vintage mouthpieces. This price is going to make any Theo Wanne mouthpiece less of a purchase and more of an investment. These mouthpieces are not for casual musicians or wannabes. They do not create sounds; they refine them.

After playing the entire line I found each mouthpiece gave me a different option. These mouthpieces are akin to a violinist choosing a custom bow or a pianist choosing an American or German Steinway. They don't make an artist—they simply make the artist better.

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