



A Les Evans Mouthpiece Special

I first knew Berg Larsen, the man, way back in 1945, just after his first mouthpiece models were being produced, using what might be called a new concept in tone-chamber design. This was to introduce a variety of steps, or shoulders behind the rim-tip to help the types of tone which different players might wish to develop. Mind you, I knew of quite a few saxophone players who stuffed plasticine, or even chewing-gum inside the mouthpiece behind the tip, for the same reason. Whether Berg was aware of that, or whether he came first and players copied the idea by trying to change their own mouthpieces we shall never know. Sufficient to say that a new range of mouthpieces was born, and has long become known and respected world-wide ever since, over this period of some 56/57 years.

I respected Berg's expertise for many years, because apart from his knowledge in engineering, and his design ideas, he was, himself, no mean tenor player, and understood the problems and the desires of the reed-player. The present team out at the Potters Bar factory, led by Terry Bolger, also respect his memory, and want to make sure that his great tradition carries on. Although the factory has been modernised over the years, and that production methods have been up-dated, they are still very much as Berg set out. As Terry told me, the whole team are proud to be carrying on in the manner which Berg would have wished.

The latest model to be re-introduced is known as the Duckbill, which in fact Berg was making many, many years ago. In fact, one of his original models was found tucked away in a drawer, with design notes as well. The Duckbill is offered only for tenor, but in either bronze, or in stainless steel. There has already been quite a remarkable response from players in the U.K. and in the States, which has encouraged full production. The difference does indeed lie in the contour of the beak . . . hence the name. The beak of the Duckbill is longer, certainly flatter, and extends further back to the main body, and further in length beyond the normal tip of the other models. So, the beak is the same width, but quite a bit longer and flatter. In general it does indeed aid a great deal in projection, edge and power. Also to many players this flatter contour is more comfortable in the mouth.

Another earlier model brought back again a few years ago, is the bronze tenor with a normal beak, etc. which they are calling The Bullet. Both the Duckbill and The Bullet are available in all four tone-chambers: 0, 1, 2 and 3, and in the SMS or M length and style of facing, as standard orders.

The other long-established models are in stainless steel, black ebonite, or grained ebonite, for alto, tenor or baritone, or in the two ebonites for soprano.

As far as the actual tip-openings are concerned, then there is a great selection. However, since 1999 the factory has slightly restricted its standard-order range, as follows:— Soprano, 50 thou to 80, Alto 70 thou to 100, Tenor 95 thou to 120, and Baritone 100 thou to 120. The measurement of the tip-opening increases by 5 thou at a time. Any other narrower or wider tip may be ordered but would involve a surcharge. Also in some cases the No.3 tone-chamber (roundest sound) is only offered to order. The "0" tone-chamber is designed to give most brilliance or edge to the tone, and has the largest "shoulder" or baffle area behind the rim-tip so that the air-column is propelled forward with greater velocity. The baffle area in general terms, alters the shape and speed of the air-column. Then through chambers "1" and "2" (slightly less edge) to the No.3, which is scooped away much more deeply, and therefore designed to give the most mellow, or darker tone of the four chambers because the air dwells longer in the mouthpiece.

Terry Bolger tells me that during his eight years at the factory, there has been a noticeable decline in the number of orders from dealers/players for the 3 tone-chamber, and a marked increase in the demand for the 0 and 1 chambers. I think we all know about the changes, in general, of saxophone tone during the past 10–15 years.

The two types of facing are still offered, in all the mouthpieces, and a player will undoubtedly have a preference for one or the other. The M length facing is a gradual, flatter, and uniform type of curve. The SMS facing starts in a flat fashion, then opens up steeply at the tip.

This curtailing of models across the range does not really restrict the majority of players, but it certainly does help the stockist/dealer.

The apparently enormous permutation is considerably diminished, due to the fact that the player will almost certainly have a very good idea as to whether he prefers the comfort of a wider or a narrower tip-opening, the type of tone-chamber, and most often a decided preference for either ebonite or metal. So a player with a naturally stronger embouchure would not bother to try the closer tips, but go for something wider. Likewise a player with a less strong embouchure won't be happy trying the 100's and upwards. Player No.1 will close-up the narrower tip for a restricted or impossible blow. Player No.2's embouchure would tire very quickly. Even a modified choice of reed-

strength would not over-ride those factors sufficiently.

On all the mouthpieces I examined and blew, the "finishing" was excellent. I am also most pleased to say that the rim-tips and the side-rails were thin and certainly uniform in contour and size, side-to-side. If they are not equal, then the reed response is unbalanced, and I know that good players look for these important factors. I have also, always felt that too wide a rim-tip, or wide side-rails will produce a greater area of "dead-reed", when considering the closure of reed against the mouthpiece.

Every Larsen ligature, whether stainless or gold, uses the knurled head type of screw. But inside every mouthpiece shank is a little pack with two normal type "paddle-shaped" screws. Do remember if you lose a ligature, or need a replacement always state whether you use the 0, 1, or the 2, 3 type of tone-chamber, as in quite a few models the ligature has to be a different size fitting.

Since I first started to teach saxophone in 1944 (!) I would not like to estimate how many different faces and embouchures I have seen and studied. I also rapidly learnt that my embouchure, lips, teeth, jaw, tongue-action, even my hands were MINE and very little to do with influencing my pupils. Treat and help each person as an individual. As I have written so very many times in the past, there is no such thing as *one* correct embouchure for saxophone or clarinet. It depends entirely on the facial characteristics of each player, to adopt an embouchure which gives the most comfort, or possibly to aid the sound he wants to produce.

Likewise, of course, the choice of a mouthpiece is a very personal matter. Not much use finding out what your idol uses. Interesting, no doubt, but not very practical because his face is probably nothing like yours anyway!

The mouthpieces are still distributed only under the original name of Berg Larsen, although since its acquisition by Belgian business-man Morris Pavel, the actual company name is now Maydale. The U.K. distributor, and for orders and despatch is Bill Lewington Co. under Mick Seymour. All overseas orders are handled directly from the Potters Bar source.

Finally, always remember . . . the right mouthpiece will most certainly help, but in the long run it is very much down to the player. And it can all be spoilt by that troublesome little object, the reed. Best saxophone in the world, super mouthpiece, fine player, but with a lousy reed you're up the creek.

Which is why you should always have well-chosen blown-in reeds standing by.