

The Music Trades

PUBLISHED CONTINUOUSLY SINCE 1890

Chop-Builders And Tone-Shapers

Warburton's recession-beating accessories sell where the big-ticket items can't, while creating new possibilities for brass and reed players

IT'S BEEN LESS THAN five years since a raging fire destroyed the Warburton factory, yet when *Music Trades* reached Terry Warburton for an interview on the newest additions to his accessories line, he was supervising construction that will expand his Florida workshop to nearly twice its current size. "When you've grown as much as we have, you have to make room for it," Terry says cheerfully as a workman hammers something in the background. In 2009, when almost no one found success in selling big-ticket items, Terry saw his business shoot up 118% on the strength of small-ticket items—two new practice tools for brass players—as well as one bigger splash, a new saxophone neck that changes the way the sax produces and shapes its sound. "Players who try this say they can't imagine ever going back to a normal saxophone neck," says Terry. "It's as if they just discovered they've been driving on square tires and I've invented round ones."

The first of Warburton's new products to hit the market last year was the P.E.T.E. (pronounced "Pete"), an embouchure-training device for brass players. "When you use this thing for five minutes, it's like you've practiced for an hour," says Terry. Short for Personal Embouchure Training Exerciser, the P.E.T.E. was devised by 25-year Warburton employee Ken Titmus, a trumpet expert who came to believe there were gaps in the conventional chop-building exercises used by trumpet players. Made up of a metal shaft and disc that's held behind the lips, the P.E.T.E. provides resistance as the player pulls back with the embouchure muscles toward



Warburton's Ultimate Sax Necks (top) and its BuzzMaster practice device.

the teeth. "It's an isometric exercise, and it works," says Terry.

At \$39.50 a piece, nearly 6,000 P.E.T.E.s have sold since they hit the market in earnest in October 2009. While the device has been adopted by professionals including Jon Faddis, Roger Ingram, and Wayne Bergeron ("As if those guys don't have the strongest chops in the world already," says Terry), its most promising angle might be its potential to jumpstart the development of beginning students. "The biggest problem for any brass player is that it takes time—a long time—to develop a strong enough embouchure to play the instrument," Terry says. "The speed of the progress kids have made using the P.E.T.E. is amazing. If you think of this from a dealer standpoint, it can be a key to keeping kids in band: What does this translate to for our industry if little Johnny and little Suzy *don't* return their rentals because suddenly playing a brass instrument is not so hard?"

A second practice device, the BuzzMaster, invented by trumpet player David O'Neill, was also introduced in 2009. Available for trumpet, cornet, French horn, tuba, trombone, and euphonium, it resembles a trumpet mouthpiece receiver with a thumb ring. Unlike a mouthpiece, however, it allows players to warm up or practice almost silently while providing resistance virtually identical to an actual brass instrument. "It's an idea that's been around for a while but has never been done correctly until now," says Terry. "It's taken off like crazy."

But Warburton's biggest introduction of the year, and the sharpest departure from its longstanding business in brass mouthpieces and accessories, is its new Ultimate Sax Neck. "This is the one that's going to make my retirement income," says Terry, whose sax-playing brother James Warburton collaborated on the development of the product. "Simply put, I've reinvented the saxophone neck. It's as if Mr. Sax forgot one of the pieces he should have had in there when he invented it, and to me it made perfect sense."

In the patent-pending Ultimate Sax Neck, Warburton has removed part of the length of the traditional neck and replaced it with a piece called an initiator that controls resistance, tone quality, and intonation. Several different initiators are available, each of them calibrated to a different playing style—jazz, rock, orchestral, etc.—allowing players to switch gears instantly by swapping one initiator for another. Warburton's complete neck system is priced at \$840 for alto sax and \$890 for tenor, with initiators

available for individual purchase at \$195. “What this means for the dealer is that instead of trying to sell someone a new saxophone in this economy, they can sell them a new neck that’s going to improve their playing dramatically,” says Terry. “It’s an easier sale, and the customer is likely to buy not just one of these initiator pieces, but several.”

The Ultimate Sax Neck’s reception in shows and demonstrations has been nothing short of electric. At the annual convention of the Texas Music Educators Association (TMEA), Warburton did more business on its first day than it normally does over the entire four-day show. Although the Ultimate Sax Neck has been marketed primarily as an aftermarket product, the TMEA show resulted in a deal with Austin, Texas-based MACSAX

to use Warburton’s necks in its saxes. Terry recalls, “One of their clinicians tried it at TMEA, went back to the owners, and said, ‘If we don’t use this guy’s neck on our saxes, we’re missing out.’” Orders have poured in from Warburton’s overseas sellers in more than 20 countries. And when a YouTube video of sax artist Ron Holloway playing on the Ultimate Sax Neck was posted on the Warburton website, a customer called to say, “Whatever he’s playing, I want one.”

Since the introduction of its three new products last year, Warburton’s direct shipments alone have increased from about 70 per month to just under 700. This spring and summer Terry is booked solid at conferences and trade shows including the MIAC show in Toronto, Canada, and the National Trumpet Guild

in Sydney, Australia. Meanwhile, Warburton has also taken delivery of a new five-axis CNC milling machine for the production of its next big product release: a line of premium saxophone mouthpieces, both metal and hard rubber, which will be available shortly. The company has brought in longtime mouthpiece refacer Eric Falcon to oversee the operation. “I’m totally excited—my business is through the roof,” says Terry. “In this economy you can’t waste your time moaning about how you can’t sell a saxophone—you need to concentrate your brain on where you can increase your sales. It’s not horns; it’s accessories. It’s a matter of having a good product, believing in it, and promoting it.”

www.warburton-usa.com