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# A Story of Saxophone Craftsmanship: Implications for Public Administration Theory

*Terence M. Garrett*

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## **Author's note:**

While having breakfast and visiting with my friends, Ralph Hummel and Camilla Stivers, last week at the 2005 American Political Science Association annual meeting in Washington, D.C., we were sharing stories about the loss of American (and, indeed, outside of the U.S.) craftsmanship and the propensity for manufacturers and service providers to obey the laws of mass production. When it was my turn, I recounted the story of my own experience when it came time for me to buy a "new" baritone saxophone. After having talked about the story, my friends told me that the story had important aspects pertinent to public administration.

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## **Background**

I have played the saxophone, clarinet and flute now for about thirty-seven years. I consider playing professionally (or semi-professionally) to be my avocation. Currently I play in a jazz ensemble in South Texas, where we play for the public in the Rio Grande Valley and in Corpus Christi. I collect and have several musical instruments. Before moving to the Valley and working at the University of Texas-Pan American (my current full-time "gig") as an assistant professor of public administration, I performed with big bands in the Oklahoma City metropolitan area and played weekly at retirement centers and rest homes for a number of years with the "Talk of the Town" – big band from Norman, Oklahoma, as a community service. My primary "ax"<sup>i</sup> is the tenor sax, but occasionally the bands needed me to play the baritone sax, which is the bottom voicing in the five-piece saxophone section that also includes two alto and two tenors. The first baritone I had was a 1970 Selmer Mark VI<sup>ii</sup> that had at one time been a high school band instrument and was pretty much a "beater."<sup>iii</sup> The bari did not have a low "A," or concert "C," that I needed to do some of the work in the

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saxophone section. So, I decided to see about trading it for another baritone saxophone. This is the story about the search.

### Searching for the “Best” Horn

eBay seemed to be a good place to start looking at what was available, not to buy from, but to get an idea of the price. Baris are expensive, and it is rather unusual for an individual to own one, as institutions (high schools and colleges, for example) usually provide them to their students to play in ensembles. I wound up going to several musical instrument shops in Oklahoma City and Wichita, Kansas, and trying the newer horns that they had on hand. My friend and high school band director told me long ago not to be too obsessed with the brand and to find what worked best for me. His advice was this: “If it is frozen spit and plays well for you, then that is all that matters. Who cares what it looks like or what it says on the horn?”<sup>1</sup> I found the adage to be true. One of the musical instrument shops in Wichita (one of the biggest in the Midwest) had a rather large selection of new and used instruments, so I decided to make the trip there. I called the shop and set up an appointment to give their stock a test run.

The day finally came in the fall of 1998, and, when I arrived at the store, the salesman had twelve baritone saxophones, old and new, laid out on tables for me to try. He pointed me to the new Yanagisawa first. It was visually beautiful! The brass lacquer and engraving on the bell were perfect (a bit too perfect, though). I picked up the horn, put my own mouthpiece on it and went into the practice room to try it out. The key work was very comfortable as my hands and fingers gripped the instrument. As I blew into the horn, the sound emanating from it was pleasant enough, but I noticed that it made me sound like every other baritone saxophone player on the planet. This is not good. I wanted a distinctive sound. So, while the “mechanics” of the horn were okay, I was bothered by the “character” of the instrument (at that particular moment, I could not quite put my finger on what was wrong, but my gut was telling me something). I took it back to the salesman who informed that he had another horn made by “Vito,”<sup>iv</sup> which happens to be made by Yanagisawa, too, though with less engraving on the bell, and it was less expensive. I tried it and found it to play *exactly* like the other Yanagisawa! Ugh! Okay, now I was really bothered and wanted to know why the two were so much alike. So, I went to the salesman and he told me that both horns were mass-produced in a Japanese or Asian factory using computers and lasers to make the instruments *exactly* alike. He further went on to add that this was a “virtue” and a breakthrough in the modern manufacturing process that allowed for “precision” and reductions in “human interaction” which would add to manufacturing costs and “flawed” instruments. Basically, the laws of production and profit making were the dominant core values now in the musical instrument business. I was stunned. Yanagisawa (unlike Yamaha) had been well-known previously for their great hand-craftsmanship since the late 1800s. At this point in my journey to find a bari, there was no way I was going to go with either of these two horns.

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<sup>1</sup> This Oklahoma colloquialism is roughly the equivalent of the old adage “don’t judge a book by its cover.”

There were other new horns I tried there, including the top-of-the-line Selmer, Cannonball, Jupiter and Keilwerth brands.<sup>v</sup> The Keilwerth bari was the best of that lot, but the price was too exorbitant for the “sound” that came from the instrument. Finally, there were two “old” baris left to try out. One was an old Conn “12M” made in the 1960s, but the “neck”<sup>vi</sup> was not the original and did not fit properly, so the air leaked out before it made it into the horn. The other bari, however, was a real eye-opener: a 1967 King “Super 20.”<sup>vii</sup> The Super 20 is my favorite<sup>viii</sup> tenor saxophone, and this bari version was far and away the most superior of all the baritones I tried in Wichita.

After finishing the last of the baris, the salesman wanted to know which of the instruments I thought was the best. I told him hands down it was the Super 20. Disappointment and shock seemed to spread over his face. “But, but, how can that be?” he sputtered. Basically, I gave him my perspective as to the virtues and failings of each of the instruments. The King had a “sound” and “feel” unmatched by the mass-produced newer instruments laid out on the table, and I was strongly tempted to buy it. It was unique and had a sound that I wanted, though I would not buy it because it did not have the low “A” key that I needed for the ensemble work I was doing. I left the shop disappointed that all the new manufacturers were seemingly obsessed with mass-producing cookie-cutter horns that have lost their distinctive style. The values of economy and efficiency were stressed over the values of character and artistry. Large numbers of cheaply made, non-distinctive instruments are hurriedly pushed onto the “market” in order to turn quick profits. While this may be somewhat understandable, given the propensity of business towards the “bottom line,” the problem was that they were trying to live on their past reputations while skimping on the metal work and craftsmanship of their current production. I went back to Oklahoma City without a “new” instrument and distressed over the present state of instrument manufacturing.

A few weeks after the bari trials in Wichita, I talked to my favorite instrument repairman, Weldon Collier, about what happened. He told me he was not surprised given the fact that a lot of the mass-produced “junk” found its way into his repair shop. Weldon let me know about one of his former shop apprentices, Bobby Black, who was now the owner of “The Saxophone Shop” in Evanston, Illinois, and “Chicago Band Instruments.” Weldon knew Bobby carried a wide array of new and used instruments and suggested that I make a trip to see what he had in stock. Keeping what Weldon told me in mind, the next chance I had to go to Chi-town meant that I would go to The Saxophone Shop.

In the summer of 1999, my opportunity to go to Chicago came as my family and I went to visit my sister and her family. After a few days, I drove to Evanston and found the Saxophone Shop. I had called Bobby Black in advance and made arrangements. When I arrived, Bobby placed me in a room with a dozen or so baritones. As I glanced at the instrument cases, I eliminated most of the instruments (at least initially) and explained to Bobby the problems I had with each. He then brought into the room a bari and opened it to show me a stunning, black nickel-lacquered, gold-plated keys “B & S” brand<sup>ix</sup> baritone sax made in the former “East” Germany. I immediately proceeded to try the horn and loved the

response of the key action, but most importantly, I loved the “sound.” It was far and away the best baritone sax I had ever played!<sup>x</sup> Bobby brought in another and let me try it. It was nice, too, but didn’t quite get the response as the first horn. The “feel” of the keys was pretty much the same, but the sound did not quite resonate well with my ear and interpretation of what I wanted to project. I asked Bobby Black why there was a difference and he pointed out to me that each instrument was handcrafted. He said the B & S instrument line under the GDR and before 1999 had never modernized for mass production. Each instrument had personal care and attention, all the way down to the engraving and finishing touches. Needless-to-say, I wound up buying the first B & S baritone sax, taking it back to Oklahoma, and have been playing it ever since. This baritone saxophone is unique and contributes mightily to my own personal sound.

### **Implications for Public Administration and Public Administration Theory**

You may be wondering at this point what the hell the story above has to do with public administration. Well, it is like this: managing well in the public sector is an art. Like selecting the “right” ax to perform at our best, we (those who serve the public) need to know what works best in order to perform. We know what is best as we use our judgment (Vickers 1995). Each of us has her own idiosyncrasies that have to be developed in order to realize one’s full potential in the art of public administration. Much of the practice of public administration today reflects the modern musical instrument industry values, namely “cost-effectiveness,” the “laws of production,” “cost-benefit analysis,” and “profit-making.” These principles take precedence in the discourse of public administration over the values of “responsiveness,” “artistry,” and personal “craftsmanship.” The fixation of many academics with science and the “big questions” of public administration (see Lynn, 1998, for example, on the science of economics and public administration) pertaining to “science” dominate the discourse. On the other hand, the stories that managers (and others) tell are as valid as science (Hummel, 1991) and help us to know our shared art. Like the language of music and the importance of instruments and voices being used to convey the aesthetic sounds of the art, in public administration the language we use affects how we view our craft, and the primary object of our craft is public service.

As in the musical instrument industry today, the rush in the public sector to replace public service and personal care with market-based values is, and has been, well underway. Executive-centered abstractions based on arithmetical knowledge undermine and overwhelm everyday experiential knowledge and craftsmanship. The dominant executive values based on an emphasis of economic production drive today’s public sector to the point where personal care is hardly a thought in terms of service delivery or work-related issues like safety, which can suffer as a consequence (Garrett, 2004). One only has to look at the Hurricane Katrina disaster and the war in Iraq to see the manifestation of the effects in the mind-numbing body counts and finger-pointing by today’s executives in pursuit of their public, ill-defined personal agendas. The lack of response and personal care for those lost

souls with all their dramatic stories of survival, while compelling, is lost in the sheer magnitude of the numbers. We (scholars, executives, managers, and workers serving the public) need to recover our public sector identity. And a good place to start is through stories.

### **The Moral of the Story**

The uniqueness of craftsmanship for the building of great saxophones (as opposed to mediocre, mass-produced cheap ones) represents a metaphor useful for the delivery of public services today. Obsessions with executive-centered numbers and abstractions distract from service delivery which would otherwise be based more on personal everyday experience and artistry. The “craft” of public service is overwhelmed by the dominant management ideology based on science to the point where the nurturing effects and needed patience of good public administration are lost.

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### **Endnotes**

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<sup>i</sup> The word “ax” is musician lingo for one’s musical instrument.

<sup>ii</sup> The French “Selmer” brand is one of the most famous saxophones made. The best ones, and most sought after by saxophone players, are the old hand-crafted instruments made from the late 1930s up until 1972 and carry the motif “Balanced Action,” and “Mark VI.” Personally, I generally do not like them because they are too “stuffy” in the low registers, whether you have an alto, tenor, or baritone.

<sup>iii</sup> “Beater” in this case means a mistreated horn by uncaring (or care-less) high school students who did not appreciate the value of the instrument. The horn had suffered through three “re-lacquering” jobs that resulted in a loss of the original metal on the horn after each removal of the old lacquer process. The original engraving, while exquisite at one time, was now almost completely gone.

<sup>iv</sup> The “Vito” name has long been owned by the LeBlanc Corporation. Apparently, they have also bought out Yanagisawa.

<sup>v</sup> Keilwerth saxophones are made in western Germany. Cannonballs and Jupiters are made somewhere in Asia.

<sup>vi</sup> The neck is the tube that connects the mouthpiece to the instrument.

<sup>vii</sup> King and Conn instruments are American made. A semblance of them exists today under the overarching music corporation titled “United Musical Instruments.” The new horns produced by UMI are in no way, shape or form as good as the originals. Conns effectively “died” after the 1960s while the King “Super 20s” made it all the way to 1981 before the brand failed as a “professional” model. Kings are the last of the great American saxophones (Grief and sigh here).

<sup>viii</sup> I own a 1964 King Super 20 tenor and believe it to be the best horn ever made for me. Believe me, there is such a thing as love for such a fine object!

<sup>ix</sup> B & S are the initials for *Blaserinstrumenten und Signal* (translation – Wind instrument and sound).

<sup>x</sup> The next best baritone sax I ever played was one I had in high school – a Conn 11M.

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In addition to being a gifted and passionate jazz musician, **Dr. Garrett** works as an associate professor at the Master of Public Policy and Management Program of the University of Texas at Brownsville. At the time of writing this article, he was teaching public administration at the University of Texas-Pan American.

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