

SAXOPHONE FOR THE NON-SPECIALIST TEACHER

by Rob Buckland

The Saxophone is currently undergoing its most significant popularity explosion in this country to date, consistently appearing in the top three instrumental sales figures nationwide. The resulting increase in demand for tuition has left many clarinet/woodwind teachers with ever increasing numbers of budding saxophonists knocking on their doors.

The Saxophone is a relative newcomer to the classical music scene in this country - relative that is in comparison to say the flute or clarinet - and as such there is a far greater diversity of acceptable saxophone styles to be found, let alone the fantastic array of sounds and styles encountered in the jazz world! This article therefore is a personal view of the many technical fundamentals of playing the Saxophone which have been formulated from tuition that I have received, and my experiences performing in classical, contemporary, jazz, solo and ensemble contexts as a professional Saxophonist.

1. THE INSTRUMENT

Most Saxophone teachers will find themselves confronted with a whole array of different types of student Saxophones, some excellent, and some less so. I would be inappropriate for me to use this magazine as a vehicle for my own preferences, suffice it to say that the following guidelines are worth considering:

1. Is the instrument in mechanically sound condition? Are the pads in good condition (not dried out or waterlogged, and do the pads cover the tone holes? Look out for incorrect adjustments of the screws on the linkage mechanisms on the instrument - ie the two large adjusting screws that link the right hand keys to the articulated G# key and button Bb keys. These ensure that the G# key closes securely when low C#, B and Bb are played, and that the button Bb key closes properly. Is the linkage between the octave key on the crook and the body of the Saxophone correctly adjusted (so that the octave key opens from A (above the staff) upwards only, and is secure when playing below this?). Fine tuning with a screw driver, and a little sensitive bending respectively are the best instant solutions. Encourage your pupils to keep the stopper in the top of the body of the Saxophone at all times when in the case, as this will stop any accidental bending of the octave key linkage.

2. Check that the instrument is relatively in tune with itself, and mark a position on the cork on the crook with pencil so that your pupil gets used to the sound of the instrument when it is in tune (There is often a tendency to push the mouthpiece right over the cork). Some of the keywork on the cheaper student instruments are manufactured from very soft alloys, and are very easily bent in the rigours of everyday school use, and even the pressure from a few pieces of music being crammed into the case on top of the keys can quickly result in the instrument adopting a whole-tone scale tuning system!

3. Some of the spacing of keys, and position of the strap ring, on some cheaper student instruments encourage bad habits - if the ring that you fasten the strap to is not in the optimum position, it can make holding the instrument very awkward, and widely spaced keys (left and right hand little finger keys for example) can result in difficulty negotiating these keys efficiently. Also check the weight of the springing of the keywork on the instrument - keys that are too firmly sprung can cause tendon problems for example.

4. Be wary of the mouthpiece that comes with the instrument. Again in some cheaper student models, these are often less than satisfactory - badly made, uneven rails and tip opening etc - and will encourage many bad habits. Pupils will find it very discouraging that no matter how much they practice, their sound never improves, and although not cheap, the selection of a good mouthpiece at as early a stage as possible will make their playing a lot more enjoyable. (More about mouthpieces later)

5. Finally - the deciding factor (if you are fortunate enough to be choosing a new student instrument with your pupil) should always be this: if you find the instrument cumbersome to play, difficult to play in tune, and impossible to play without sounding like a fog-horn, then how can you expect your pupil to do so.

2. POSTURE

Try to encourage your pupils to adopt good habits in terms of posture from the outset. I am thinking particularly in terms of the angle they hold the instrument, height of neck strap, and finger and hand position, as general posture is the same as for all instruments - as relaxed as possible. Ensure that the instrument is allowed to hang from the sling, which should take the entire



Rob Buckland is a Saxophone soloist, member of the Apollo Saxophone Quartet, and professor of Saxophone at the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester.

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weight (Placing the strap as far back on the neck as possible gives the least restrictive position for this). This will result in the bell of the instrument pointing slightly to the right of the player as you face them. Allow the base of the instrument to rest against your leg, hip etc, but do not hold it out with your right hand - the right hand thumb should NOT be taking any weight, only stabilising the instrument. Adjust the height of the strap so that the Saxophone enters the pupils mouth without having to lower, raise or tilt their head in any way (In other words don't allow the larynx to be stretched or restricted, thus distorting the sound). Fingers should be curved at all times, trying to avoid "locking" of any knuckles. Watch out particularly for straight third (ring) fingers on each hand - this can be as a result of the pupil holding the instrument at an angle as opposed to letting it hang on the hook. If your fingers are relaxed they naturally adopt a curved position, and when applied to the saxophone, should feel as if they are moving towards you when you press the keys down. Try and keep the fingers at approximately 90 degrees to the instrument. (When stretching for low Bb, simply move the left hand position to make the stretch smaller by rotating your wrist in an opposite action to looking at your watch this should allow you to reach these awkward keys and still maintain a curved finger position) The most efficient finger position for the little finger keys on both hands is to operate them with the tip of your (curved) finger (as opposed to the flat pad/locked knuckle of a tensed finger) (See also diagram 2).

3. TONE PRODUCTION

1. Diaphragm: I will assume here a good basic understanding of general theories and practices regarding diaphragm support, suffice to say that the diaphragm is the fundamental source of a good, controlled sound on the Saxophone, and all of the practices outlined below depend on this support to function at their optimum.

2 Open throat: An open throat is essential when trying to create an open, singing sound. When using the diaphragm fully to expel air from the lungs, the throat opens automatically to allow this large volume of air through into the instrument. Thinking about opening the throat without relating it to an airstream often results in a closing or tensing of the throat - so always think of allowing the throat to open naturally.

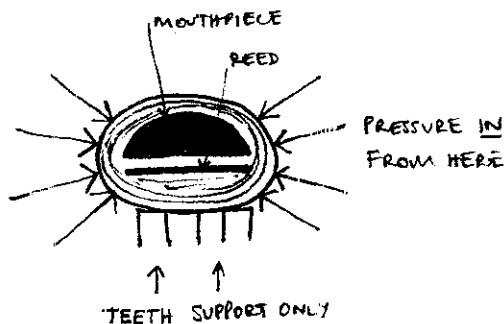
3 Embouchure: This is the area where the most interference occurs to a players potential sound - the point where you meet your instrument. One of the commonest mistakes is to adopt too tight an embouchure, in terms of lower jaw pressure, or bite. Try and make a very clear distinction between clarinet and saxophone embouchures - this has been said a million times before, but I will repeat it anyway - but it is still a fact that many saxophonists/teachers started on the clarinet and moved to the saxophone later (certainly when I started learning, I was told this was the only way!) and many pupils follow the same path today. The Saxophone embouchure is an open, muscularly supported embouchure, with the lower jaw/teeth playing a supporting role only.

Points 1,2 and 3 (essentially, the production of the Saxophone sound) can be summed up in one word: HAW. H for the diaphragm push, A for the open throat, and W for the correct formation of the embouchure. Also be aware of what your jaw does naturally when you form this HAW shape - it drops out of the way slightly, thereby opening up the oral cavity, and thus helping to open the sound even further.

Exercise: Stand in front of a mirror. Place your index finger onto your lip as if it were your mouthpiece. Gently rest your teeth on top (again as with the mouthpiece) and say HAW (as if you were a member of the aristocracy!). You will feel your lower lip very naturally bunching in around your finger, and it is possible to apply a not inconsiderable amount of upward pressure with your jaw without causing any discomfort because of the amount of flesh/muscle cushioned directly between the teeth and the reed/finger (as opposed to the "smiling" type of embouchure sometimes adopted by clarinet doublers, which can result in a lot of pain when biting into the stretched lower lip).

Then, thinking of your embouchure as a clock face, increase the inward pressure from the muscles between 2 and 5 o'clock, and 7 and 10 o'clock (see diagram 1). This muscular support replaces the equivalent amount of bite found in a tight/smiling embouchure. The lower jaw/teeth can then play a supporting role to this muscular foundation - and because it is muscular, you can control it much more accurately and sensitively than by simply biting harder and strangling your sound.

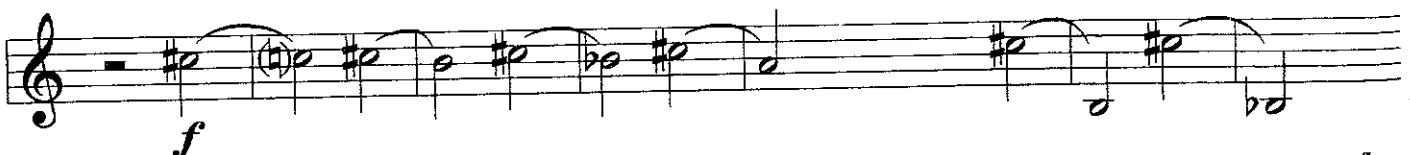
Diagram 1.



By adopting this embouchure, with full diaphragm support, you should now be able to produce an open, singing sound (Remember; think HAW!) By keeping this embouchure position, it is possible to play over the whole range of the Saxophone without any significant embouchure adjustment. Try Exercise 1 as an example of a good warm-up/method of practising this.

Exercise 1a

$\text{♩} = 60$



The effects of the techniques outlined in 1,2 and 3 above have immediate effect, but take many months of practice to become reflex. The bonus of this style of playing is that it releases the potential to create a highly individual sound: if you think of the sound of the

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Saxophone as being in two distinct parts, (the instrument/mouthpiece and the body of the individual player) then it can be seen that the more of the latter that is allowed to shape the sound, the better. (See diagram 2)

Exercise 1b



4. VIBRATO

Vibrato is as vital to the Saxophones sound as it is to the Flute, Violin, or human voice itself. Whilst diaphragm vibrato is occasionally useful for musical/technical reasons, jaw vibrato is widely accepted as being the most desirable (the diaphragm maintains a constant, even pressure as in normal playing). It can be described and executed very simply: Play a G (above the staff) with a good, full sound. Take your right hand index finger and push your jaw down on it's axis/hinge - you only need a small movement to make a difference to the pitch (Remember that you are only flattening the pitch (jaw drops), not sharpening it (jaw bites). Once you can do this successfully, try moving the jaw without using your finger. Once you have this mastered, try some of the exercises below, and think about the implications of the diagram below in terms of potential types of vibrato that you can use to enhance your playing.

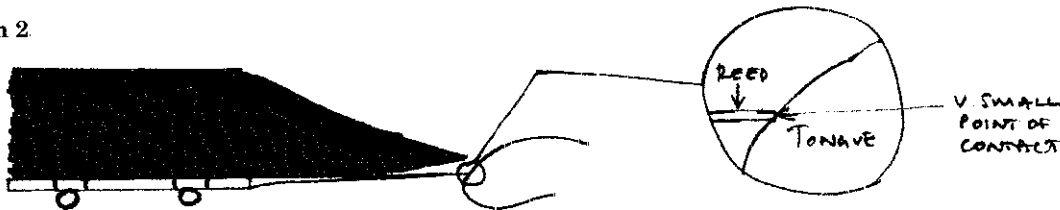
Exercise 2



5. ARTICULATION

Here are a few personal thoughts about articulation: You will come across several variations on which phonetic sound best suits the action made when tonguing. I personally favour DA for several reasons; firstly, it has less high frequency sounds in it - the T part of TA for example never really converts into sound, and you end up with a very obvious tonguing sound, secondly, the shape that the tongue adopts when saying D, namely, slightly dome shaped, encourages the smallest point of contact with the reed (more below), and thirdly, the A part of DA encourages the throat to stay open, and the airstream to keep moving over the reed, thus creating a constant airstream that is articulated, as opposed to short tongued bursts (See diagrams below). The tongue, just back from the tip, should come into contact only with the very tip of the reed, causing only the briefest interruption to the vibration of the reed. I find the best way to think about this is to be aware that tonguing is the wrong word for what you are in fact trying to do: UN-tonguing is more accurate, and when applied with the very natural DA action (which is after all one of the very first sounds that you ever made) is very simple and effective.

Diagram 2



Also be aware that tonguing is one of several ways to articulate music: you should encourage the mastering of skills such as starting notes with diaphragm alone as and when the music dictates.

6. ALTISSIMO REGISTER/HARMONICS

This is really a whole article on its own, but I want to make a few comments about the extended range of the Saxophone at this point. There is nothing difficult or mystical about the extended range of the Saxophone - provided you have a good, secure embouchure, and are supporting the sound with you diaphragm, this extra octave should be accessible to you. I feel very strongly that this part of the Saxophone should be taught as a natural progression and not as an extra. The very fact that most of us were taught or encouraged to believe that the Saxophone stops at F (or F# if you have an extra key) is the major stumbling block in achieving confidence and competence in the harmonics. When a clarinettist learns to play up to C above the staff, he is then taught the fingering for D, E and F as a matter of course, without being made aware of the fact the these are in fact harmonics or overblown notes. After a short struggle, these are usually mastered quickly, and by about grade 5 or 6, most clarinettists have mastered playing certainly to top G, if not all the way to top C. Needless to say, if the Saxophone were taught the same way, I am sure that Saxophonists would achieve the same results at the same level.

Find a book/teacher who knows a workable set of fingerings, and then try approaching these notes from above, rather than adding tones or semi-tones. For example, try playing top D (one and a half octaves above the staff) and coming down scally, instead of trying to play G and G# which are the hardest to grasp. As I say, this is a whole article in itself, and there isn't space to cover this topic in sufficient detail here.

7. MOUTHPIECES AND REEDS

I have left this section until last, because as you will no doubt be aware, if Saxophonists start off a conversation talking about M&R, then you may not ever hear about anything else. I will be brief and only share some general thoughts here. There is an unbelievable range of mouthpieces and reeds available to the Saxophonist these days, to suit all tastes, and budgets. It is my

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experience that beyond very elementary levels it is not possible to play classical and jazz music on the same set up - the demands that this different styles of music make on the Saxophonist in terms of articulation, volume, attack etc are so far removed that to try and lead a big band on a C* lay for example is almost impossible, similarly, to play the solo in Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition on an 8* jazz mouthpiece is not only almost impossible, it's liable to attract the wrath of even the most tolerant conductor!

Select a reed strength and cut that suits your mouthpiece and playing context - reeds with a more gradual cut offer a response and tone better suited to classical playing, whilst reeds with a thinner cut offer a response better suited to the demands of jazz playing (see diagram below). Take the time to experiment and find a solution that suits you. As all single reed players are only too aware, it is rare to get more than one or two (at best) reeds from a box of ten that are actually half-decent, so a relatively modest investment in a sanding block and some reed rush or a reed knife, and a bit of experimentation/guidance from your teacher or other players will enable you to "rescue" several more from the rest of the box.

If you play more than one Saxophone, be aware that it does not always follow that one make and size/lay of mouthpiece that works for you on, say, Alto, will give you the same response on Tenor. You should again experiment to find the set up that allows you not only to play the way you want to, but to move freely between instruments.

8. FINALLY

One of the problems of the current upsurge in popularity of the Saxophone is that once you have five players in the Big Band, and say five or six in the wind orchestra, what do you do with the rest! There is an increasing quantity of quartet, quintet, sextet and ensemble music available, and unlike some woodwind instruments, the more Saxophones you put together, the better it sounds! Honestly! So I encourage you to get your pupils together and try out some of this music

Here are some excellent books to add to your pupils repertoire. I have included publishers details and rough estimate of standard:

Streetwise	Karen Street	Grade 1-2	B&H
Take Ten	James Rae	Grade 2-4/5	UE
20 Modern Studies	James Rae	Grade 3-8	UE
John Harle Sax Album	arr John Harle	Grade 3/4 -8	B&H
Basic Jazz Conception (4 vols)	Lennie Niehaus	Grade 2/3 -8	Try Publishing Co
Not the Boring Stuff (+ Tape)	Mike Mower	Grade 4-7	from Jazzwise Pubn
Cops, Caps & Cadillacs (+ Tape)	Chris Gumbley	Grade 3-5	Saxtet Publications

(The whole catalogue from Saxtet Publications is excellent) Tel 0121 565 5484

Summer 97 launch: Comprehensive new series of Saxophone music composed by the APOLLO SAXOPHONE QUARTET especially for young saxophonists, including study book two books of duets, two books of Quartets scored for AAAA/AAAT. Watch this space!

As the title suggests, this article is aimed at the non-specialist teacher, and I hope that some of the above will be of assistance in coping with the increasing number of young saxophonists out there.

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