

# Playing “Both Sides” of the Saxophone

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## Introduction

Thank you for joining me today to explore some ways that saxophonists of every ability level can learn to play successfully in multiple musical styles, from classical to jazz and beyond. In reality, we are simply using our skills as saxophonists to interpret whichever musical style is before us. As a result, there are many aspects of saxophone performance that do not change at all from one style to the next. I will touch on some of these aspects but will spend the majority of our time discussing the ways in which classical and jazz performance are different for the aspiring saxophonist.

## Tone Production

No matter what instrument you play, the *way* you sound is your most important musical quality. Our musical sound is akin to our human voice – it *identifies* us as musicians. As a result, everything for a saxophonist starts with tone production. Regardless of what genre of music you are performing, two things about tone production are always true. First, quality saxophone tone is achieved using a fundamentally sound embouchure, correct oral cavity shape (voicing), fast air stream, and a good model of sound from which to base our own tone. We must be able to have a consistent tone throughout the instrument. Second, we must control our instrument and not allow it to control us. The following exercises may be quite helpful in addressing these issues, regardless of the style of music we are seeking to perform.

### *1. Long Tones*

Everyone plays (and many folks hate playing) long tones. If I had to give a young student just one exercise that was certain to help them, I would prescribe a healthy dose of long tones. It really does not matter which set of notes you use, as the goal is to play long sounds at a full volume, without vibrato (at least to begin with), paying careful attention to producing a consistent and steady tone throughout the instrument. I have students play notes for eight counts, with their metronome set at 60 beats per minute, moving up and down the chromatic scale, breathing every other note. Meanwhile, I try very hard to encourage them to *listen* to the sound they are making while they play.



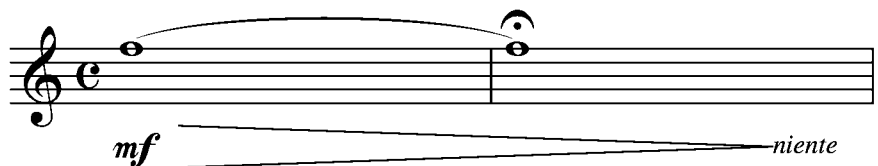
## 2. Scales as Long Tones

Once a student can play with a consistent, steady tone, I often encourage them to use scales (full range or just one or two octaves) and/or arpeggios as vehicles to work on sound. Here, we are merely blowing a great stream of air while moving our fingers. The goal with this sort of practicing is to achieve evenness of tone throughout the instrument, paying careful attention to the upper and lower registers of the instrument. It is in these areas that students tend to make subconscious adjustments (jaw, chin, voicing, etc.) to compensate for the “lowness” or “highness” of the notes.

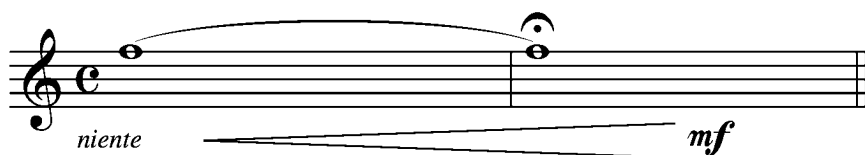
## 3. Tapers

Learning to taper the end of a phrase properly, as well as how to sneak into a note, are extremely helpful ways to control saxophone tone and expand our expressive capabilities. Specifically, having firm control over the very softest dynamic on the instrument is essential. I use two conceptually simple (yet often practically difficult) exercises to work on this skill. In the first exercise, I begin a note (in the middle of the instrument at first) at a mezzo-forte volume, and I slowly decrescendo to silence, focusing most on the softest part of the decay. In the second, I simply reverse the exercise, starting with silence and gradually gaining volume.

### Tapering Exercise #1



### Tapering Exercise #2



## Articulation

Articulation is an essential part of our saxophone playing, as it helps us communicate the *style* of the music we play. It is also inherently rhythmic and can be extremely helpful in solidifying our time and technical evenness. Articulation can be frustrating to work on, so we must be very patient with ourselves. Try to measure progress with your articulation over a longer period than you normally might with other areas of your playing. Your tongue is a muscle and needs time to gain strength and dexterity. You must work consistently on your articulation to achieve success.

I suggest that you incorporate some rotation of the articulation exercises presented below into your regular practice routine. Each exercise works on a slightly different articulation concept, but together, they can dramatically help your articulation, presuming that your tongue mechanics are solid. None of these exercises are my creation, but I have found each of them to be of great help in my own practicing.

### 1. Single-note Exercise

I generally play this exercise in a few different keys every day. More importantly, I play it at three tempos – one I can generally control but isn't *too* easy, one that challenges me but I can more or less execute, and then one that is at the very brink of what I can do. My goal is to gradually increase those three tempos over time.

Continue through full range of instrument

### 2. Tongue-finger Coordination Exercises

The next exercise comes from the master saxophonist Jean-Marie Londeix and covers the main six articulations we see in 16th-note passages (you can certainly modify this for triplets, too). While I illustrate this exercise with full range scales, it is just as effective to use shorter scale segments (a 5 note segment, for example) that repeat several times – the focus should be on the *tongue* and *not the fingers*. Work to increase speed over the long term.

Two slurred, two slurred



Two slurred, two tongued



Two tongued, two slurred



One tongued, two slurred, one tongued



Three slurred, one tongued



One tongued, three slurred



### 3. “Jazz” or “Bebop” Articulation

I often find that young jazz students have learned very little about how to articulate swing 8th-note passages in jazz. While there are many exceptions, I often teach students to begin with – and master – the traditional “every other note” articulation favored by many jazz musicians. I encourage them to work on this as a home base of sorts, knowing that as they mature they will be better equipped to explore their own personal approach to articulation.



There is a robust used market for all of these instruments, and the cost savings might make it possible to own a top-of-the-line horn. Reach out to me for suggestions on places to look.

Many musicians, especially jazz players, prefer older, vintage horns. While these horns are, in many cases, substantially more expensive, they may deliver the specific sound that you seek. Playing the **Selmer Mark VI, Balanced Action**, and other vintage horns can be a highly rewarding experience that may well be worth the investment.

## ***2. Mouthpieces***

Of all the equipment choices saxophonists confront, choosing a mouthpiece can be especially bewildering due to the sheer number of options, particularly for jazz players. Experimentation is critical when it comes to finding a good mouthpiece. Many players own multiple mouthpieces that they use for different purposes. The list below is designed with the average student in mind. I list the traditional choices for classical mouthpieces and some medium faced, standard jazz mouthpiece choices. There are a number of people who make custom mouthpieces, of course, and there is also a vintage mouthpiece market, so the choices are probably endless! Use this list as a starting point.

### **Soprano Saxophone**

#### Classical

#### **Selmer C\*, C\*\*, D, or S90 (170 facing)**

Vandoren Optimum SL3 or SL4, Vandoren V5 S15  
Rousseau 3R

#### Jazz

#### **Selmer D, E, or F**

Meyer 6 or 7  
Otto Link tone Edge 5\*, 6, or 6\*  
Vandoren V16  
Claude Lakey 6\*

### **Alto Saxophone**

#### Classical

#### **Selmer C\*, C\*\* or S90 (170, 180, or 190 facing)**

#### **D'Addario Reserve (D145, D150, or D155)**

Vandoren Optimum AL3/AL4, Vandoren V5 A28  
Rousseau 4R

#### Jazz

#### **D'Addario Select Jazz (D5M, D6M, D7M)**

Meyer Rubber 5M, 6M, 7M, or Meyer G Style 5M,  
6M, or 7M  
Morgan 7M  
Beechler M5S  
**Selmer E or F**  
Vandoren V16 A5, A6, or A7, or Java A35

### **Tenor Saxophone**

#### Classical

#### **Selmer C\*, C\*\* or S90 (170, 180, or 190 facing)**

#### **D'Addario Reserve (D190)**

Vandoren Optimum TL3/TL4, Vandoren V5 T20  
Rousseau 5R

#### Jazz

#### **D'Addario Select Jazz (D6M, D7M, or D8M)**

Otto Link 6\*, 7, 7\*, 8, or the "New Vintage" in  
the same facings  
Berg Larsen 100/0, 105/0, 110/0, or higher  
Morgan 7M  
Vandoren T45, T55, T75

## Baritone Saxophone

### Classical

#### **Selmer C\*, C\*\* or S90 (170, 180, or 190 facing)**

Vandoren Optimum BL3 or BL4, Vandoren V5  
B25 or B35

Rousseau 5R or 6R

### Jazz

Vandoren B7

Berg Larsen 110/0, 110/1, or higher

Otto Link 6, 6\*, 7, 7\*, 8

Meyer Rubber 6M, 7M, 8M

Rousseau JDX 5

In general, saxophonists who are beginning to play jazz should use mouthpieces with medium facings and openings. Also, mouthpieces to be **avoided** include “no-name” mouthpieces, mouthpieces that “come with the instrument” (especially for beginner horns), and mouthpieces that are in any way chipped, broken, or damaged.

### *3. Ligatures*

The ligature on the mouthpiece **does** make a difference! There are many brands from which to choose, so some experimentation may be necessary to find one that fits your mouthpiece and provides the best possible fit. Some that are commonly used include the Vandoren Optimum, Rico H, Bay, Brancher, Francois Louis, Ishimori, and several others.

### *4. Reeds*

Reeds make our sound, so woodwind players have a love-hate relationship with reeds. Reed companies continually are hard at work trying to create more consistent reeds, but because they are working with a product of nature, that work is an ongoing experiment. Consistency is certainly the major point of frustration when it comes to reeds, so we need to learn to be patient when we deal with our reeds!

There are many different reeds on the market, designed with either the classical or jazz/commercial player in mind. Different brands have slightly different reed strengths, and it is also very important to match the right reed/strength with the mouthpiece, so **experimentation is essential**.

### Classical Reeds

#### **D’Addario Reserve (3, 3+, or maybe 3.5 strength)**

Vandoren Traditional 3 or 3.5 strength

Vandoren V12 3 or 3.5

Hemke 3.5

I generally use a half strength softer on soprano (and often tenor) than on alto, and possibly a slightly harder reed on baritone.

## Jazz Reeds

### **D'Addario Select Jazz Unfiled**

Vandoren Traditional, Java, ZZ

I don't recommend specific strengths here because the reed will need to be matched to the mouthpiece. Some mouthpieces require a softer or harder reed, depending on the construction of the mouthpiece. Start with your "normal" reed strength and adjust if necessary.

## Synthetic Reeds

More companies, like **D'Addario's Venn** and Légère, are producing synthetic reeds. Like all reeds, they have received mixed reviews, but it may be worthwhile to experiment with them. I often use my Venn when I teach, and I use a Légère for classical tenor quite frequently.

## Reed Care

If there are a myriad of choices when it comes to equipment, reed care elicits the widest variety of responses from saxophonists. I recently asked several of my colleagues what they do to their reeds, either before they play them or once they are playing them regularly. I heard everything from "I lick them, play them, and chuck them if they don't work," to very elaborate schemes involving humidity control, to one colleague who stores some of his reeds in vodka! Here are some things that might help:

1. Be sure that the reed gets soaked before it is played on any given day. I see too many students who play on a dry reed and then wonder why their tone isn't perfect. Soak the **whole** reed, not just the tip, and be certain that it gets soaked completely. The reed is like a sponge and absorbs water. When we play it, it is like the sponge you wring out after you do the dishes – it isn't dripping, but it's still wet. Some musicians fill sterilized film canisters or prescription bottles with water and soak their reeds in them.
2. On some of my reeds, I use 600-grit sandpaper, placed rough side up on a square of glass (buy a cheap, small picture frame and remove the glass), to sand the back to ensure that it is flat. Some folks also "burnish" or "polish" the top side of the reed as well.
3. Some folks believe in maintaining the humidity level of the reeds, especially if they travel frequently or live in a volatile climate. There are several ways to experiment with this. The idea behind this is that the soaking and drying cycle that we put reeds through is ultimately what shortens their life, so keeping them at the same moisture level all the time may increase their life and/or make them more consistent.
4. Many folks use a reed knife and/or clipper to work with their reeds on an ongoing basis. This requires some skill, patience, and practice, but those who are good at it swear by it.



### *5. Other “Saxophone” Accessories*

Here are some other pieces of equipment that every saxophonist should have:

1. Many folks use a covering for their bottom teeth to minimize the possibly painful “ridge” that forms on the inside of the lip. For years, people used a denture cushioning product called EZO, but it is no longer made. You might consider the Lagan Lip Saver (available at Meridien Winds’ website) or Silverstein’s Omniguard instead.
2. Metronome, preferably a loud one, and a tuner that both sounds a pitch and shows you your pitch accuracy. There are many good smartphone metronome and tuner apps that work perfectly well, so there’s no excuse not to have a metronome and tuner!
3. A recording device. I use the Zoom H2 digital recorder by Samson, but once again, a smartphone or tablet app should be fine. Being able to listen to our own playing in a critical, objective way is essential.
4. Some things to help with better ergonomics, including a good neckstrap, one that is not too stretchy (like the Neotech straps). For musicians with back or neck problems, try a harness, especially when playing the bigger horns. There are lots of new neckstrap concepts on the market today that are worth experimenting with.
5. A good set of ears! Remember that we all teach ourselves how to play. Our private teachers are merely a guide and another objective set of ears.

**Thank you for coming today!!!**

## Matt Olson, Saxophonist

Equally at home as a jazz and classical saxophonist, Conn-Selmer and D'Addario Endorsing Artist **Matt Olson** is the Charles Ezra Daniel Professor of Saxophone and Director of Jazz Studies at Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina. He hails from Racine, Wisconsin, and holds a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Illinois, and a Master of Music degree in Jazz Pedagogy and Bachelor of Music degree in Saxophone Performance from Northwestern University. Matt's teachers have included Frederick Hemke, Debra Richtmeyer, Mike Kocour, Don Owens, Paul Bro, Ron Bridgewater, Tom Wirtel, Thomas Matta, and Jonathan Helton.

Matt's professional work includes performances with Randy Brecker, Chris Potter, Kenny Barron, Joe Lovano, Stefan Harris, Kurt Elling, Benny Carter, Wayne Bergeron, Jeff Coffin, John Fedchock, Jason Marsalis, Byron Stripling, Ken Peplowski, Veronica Swift, Kevin Mahogany, Doc

Severinsen, Ryan Keberle, Andy Martin, Wycliffe Gordon, Chris Vadala, Manhattan Transfer, Aretha Franklin, Natalie Cole, Bernadette Peters, Lou Rawls, Michael Feinstein, Johnny Mathis, Ben Folds, Bob Newhart, Wayne Newton, the Temptations, the Four Tops, children's entertainer Shari Lewis, the Chicago Jazz Ensemble, the South Carolina Jazz Masterworks Ensemble, the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, and the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra. His performances have taken him to the Montreal Jazz Festival, Carnegie Hall, and Chicago's Jazz Showcase and Orchestra Hall.

As a recording artist, Matt released his third solo recording, *Open Spaces*, featuring his undergraduate student Adib Young, on OA2 Records, in January 2022. His previous solo recordings, *789 Miles* (OA2 Records) and *Vortex* (self-released), along with his two recordings with the collaborative jazz sextet Unhinged Sextet, *Clarity and Don't Blink* (both on OA2 Records), have received worldwide radio airplay and numerous positive reviews, including being featured on Joey DeFrancesco's Sirius/XM radio program "Organized."

Matt has been part of commissions that resulted in new works for the saxophone by composers Frank Ticheli, John FitzRogers, Christopher Dobrian, Don Owens, and Roscoe Mitchell. He has performed and presented master classes at numerous national and regional conferences of the North American Saxophone Alliance, World Saxophone Congress, and the United States Navy International Saxophone Symposium. He has also been a featured guest artist or clinician at Northwestern University, the University of Michigan, Arizona State University, the University of Chicago, the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, the University of Idaho, and high schools throughout the United States. He has published articles in both *Downbeat* magazine and *The Saxophone Symposium*, and eJazzlines publishes Matt's original compositions for large jazz ensemble.

Matt is active nationally as a clinician and adjudicator. He has presented clinics at the Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic, the Jazz Education Network Conference, and the South Carolina Music Educators Association conference. He was previously the instructor of saxophone for the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities and a summer instructor for the National High School Music Institute at Northwestern University. He also conducted one of two 2005 South Carolina Band Directors Association All-State Jazz Ensembles. He holds memberships in a variety of professional music societies including the North American Saxophone Alliance, Jazz Education Network, National Association for Music Education, BMI, Pi Kappa Lambda, and Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia.

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