

## Playing “Both Sides” of the Saxophone

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### Introduction

Thank you for joining me this morning 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 through the use of 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, 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.



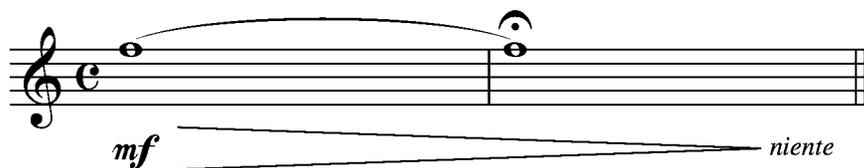
## 2. Scales as Long Tones

Once a student is able to 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.

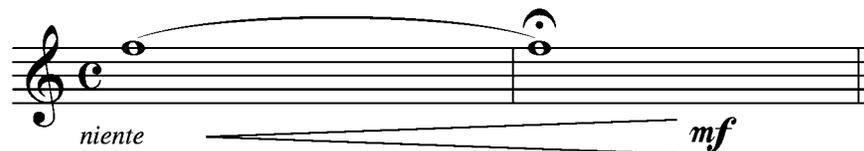
## 3. Tapers

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. 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 essentially sets 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 of time 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*

This exercise should be performed in all 12 keys, playing each successive key at a slightly faster tempo. Start at a conservative tempo, and continue to increase speed until you cannot execute the exercise.

Continue through full range of instrument

### 2. *Tongue-finger Coordination Exercises*

The next exercise comes from the master saxophonist Jean-Marie Londeix. Take a number of scales through the full range of your instrument (ascending and descending) using each of the six articulations below. 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 eighth-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.

I would suggest using this articulation over any number of scale and chord patterns – full range scales, scale segments, arpeggios, etc. – and in a wide range of keys. Also, it is

important to use this articulation whenever we see swing eighth notes in our music, regardless of whether it is marked to do so.



## Saxophone Equipment

Not even the best equipment can hide or fix one's fundamental flaws as a performer. However, for the fundamentally sound student, playing on the highest quality equipment can make a tremendous difference. Each player is unique and will almost certainly need to **experiment** to discover her/his ideal setup. When you try new equipment, pay careful attention to your sound, intonation, ability to articulate (if applicable), control, and especially the **feel** of the equipment in question.

### *1. Saxophones*

Selmer and Yamaha have long dominated the marketplace, and are still some of the very best choices among saxophones. The **Yamaha YAS-23** (YTS-23 for tenor saxophone) continues to be an outstanding choice for beginning-level students. The **Yamaha YAS-475** (formerly the YAS-52) is a solid intermediate/step-up instrument. **Yamaha's YAS-62** could be viewed as an affordable entry-level professional horn or very nice intermediate horn. When you are ready for a professional-level saxophone, try many and buy the one that you like the best. Here is where the Selmer saxophones begin to be a good option. Base your selection on sound quality, craftsmanship, intonation, and comfort. Professional horns might include:

- **Selmer Super Action 80 Series II or Series III**
- **Selmer Reference 54 or 36 (tenor)**
- **Yamaha YAS 82Z**
- **Yamaha YAS 875EX**

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)  
Vandoren Optimum AL3 or AL4,  
Vandoren V5 A28  
Rousseau 4R

#### Jazz

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  
Claude Lakey 6\*

### **Tenor Saxophone**

#### Classical

Selmer C\*, C\*\* or S90 (170, 180, or 190 facing)  
Vandoren Optimum TL3 or TL4,  
Vandoren V5 T20  
Rousseau 5R

#### Jazz

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

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. Here are some that are commonly used:

- Vandoren Optimum
- Winslow
- Selmer stock ligature
- Bonade
- Bay
- Brancher
- Francois Louis
- Harrison Hertz (no longer made, but Rico has a copy called the Rico H)
- Rovner

### *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 or both the classical or jazz/commercial player in mind. Different brands have slightly different reed strengths, so some experimentation may be required to achieve the best fit. While I personally use the same traditional blue box Vandoren reeds for **both** classical and jazz playing, here is a list of additional options.

### Classical Reeds

- Vandoren Traditional 3 or 3.5 strength
- Vandoren V12 3 or 3.5
- Rico Reserve 3.5
- Hemke 3.5

I generally use a half strength softer on soprano than alto, and possibly a slightly harder reed on baritone. The Vandorens tend to run slightly harder than the others.

### Jazz Reeds

- Vandoren Traditional, Java, ZZ
- Rico Select Jazz Unfiled
- Lavozy
- Rico Royal

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. Start with your "normal" reed strength and adjust if necessary.

### Synthetic Reeds

More companies, like Légère, are producing synthetic reeds. Like all reeds, they have received mixed reviews, but it is worthwhile to experiment with them. I don't use them regularly, but I know musicians who do (and like them a lot), and I keep one in my tenor case – just in case.

### Reed Care

If there are a myriad of choices when it comes to equipment, reed care elicits the widest variety of responses. I recently asked a number 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. Rico makes a Reed Vitalizer bag and “Vitalizer Packs” that regulate the bag to a certain level of humidity. 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. Be certain to store your reeds flat, no matter what other techniques you employ. Keeping your reeds in a good reed case is absolutely essential. I personally try to rotate reeds to extend their life.
5. 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 EZO denture cushions as a covering for their bottom teeth. They are very effective and once you use them, you will never go back! Buy the pink box marked “Lower Heavy.”
2. A metronome, preferably a loud one!
3. A tuner that both sounds a pitch and shows you your pitch accuracy.
4. A recording device. I use the Zoom H2 digital recorder by Samson. Being able to listen to our own playing in a critical, objective way is absolutely essential. Most laptop computers have recording capabilities, as well.
5. Some things to help with better ergonomics, including a good neckstrap that is not too stretchy. For musicians with back or neck problems, try a harness, especially when playing the bigger horns. For musicians with right hand or wrist problems, Ton Kooiman’s Forza thumb rests may make the right hand more ergonomically efficient for you. You can find them at [www.tonkooiman.com](http://www.tonkooiman.com).
6. A good set of ears! Remember that we all teach ourselves how to play. Your teacher is a merely a guide and another objective set of ears. Also, use your ears to listen to **everything!** Immerse yourself in all kinds of music!

A native of Racine, Wisconsin, **Matt Olson** is Assistant Professor of Saxophone and Director of Jazz Studies at Furman University in Greenville, South Carolina. He holds a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 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, Jonathan Helton, and Curt Hanrahan.

Matt's professional work includes performances with Randy Brecker, Kurt Elling, Benny Carter, Ken Peplowski, Kevin Mahogany, Chris Vadala, Doc Severinsen, Manhattan Transfer, Aretha Franklin, Natalie Cole, Lou Rawls, Johnny Mathis, Wayne Newton, Bernadette Peters, the Temptations, the Four Tops, children's entertainer Shari Lewis, the Chicago Jazz Ensemble, the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, and the Charlotte Symphony Orchestra.



His performances have taken him to the Montreal Jazz Festival as well as to Chicago's Jazz Showcase and Orchestra Hall. Matt has performed at numerous conferences of the North American Saxophone Alliance and the 2003 World Saxophone Congress. He has also been a featured guest artist and clinician at Northwestern University, Arizona State University, the University of Idaho, the University of North Carolina-Charlotte, Samford University, and high schools throughout the United States. His article on Jerry Bergonzi's approach to intervallic improvisation appeared in the January 2006 issue of *Downbeat* magazine, and two of his original compositions for jazz ensemble are published by Walrus Music. Matt's debut jazz recording, *Vortex*, was released in 2006, and has received international radio airplay.

Matt is active nationally as a clinician and adjudicator and serves as instructor of saxophone for the South Carolina Governor's School for the Arts and Humanities. He previously served as the summer instructor of jazz saxophone and jazz combos 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, Pi Kappa Lambda, MENC, Music Teachers National Association, BMI, and Phi Mu Alpha Sinfonia.

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