

Saxophone Vibrato Basics

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Vibrato is an essential expressive element of the saxophone sound, and is a concept that can and should be taught to all intermediate and advanced high school students, and perhaps even very advanced junior high school students. However, teachers should ensure when instructing a student to use vibrato that he or she has the basic mechanics of the horn well established, is already producing a pleasing sound, and can play relatively well in tune. In other words, it should not be used to mask deficiencies in tone quality or intonation!

Vibrato on the saxophone is accomplished by very slight up-and-down motions with the jaw, not with the diaphragm or the throat as on various other wind instruments. This motion should not be visually perceptible, but when first teaching vibrato, it is important to allow the student to overdo these movements. He or she will likely not be accustomed to moving the jaw and exaggerating it will more quickly teach the proper action for producing vibrato. Below are several exercises that will introduce the mechanics required.

Before attempting vibrato on the horn, we must discover how to produce it. Have your student say the following syllables: "wa-wa-wa" and "ya-ya-ya," overdoing the jaw movements. Both of these syllables produce the correct jaw motion, but beware that the latter also has a tongue motion that accompanies it. We do NOT want the tongue to be used in the vibrato, only the jaw. Another very good teaching tool is to gently chew on the lower lip, first without the mouthpiece in the mouth, and then with it in playing position.

Once these preliminary exercises have been accomplished, it is time to attempt them on the saxophone. Have your student pick a note in a comfortable range (third space C works well), start the pitch with a straight tone, and then begin moving the jaw using as a model one of the above examples. Do not practice with any rhythm or meter in mind, and again, it is important to overdo the motion at first.

When your student is somewhat comfortable moving the jaw while playing, then he or she can begin to practice the vibrato in a rhythmic context. Set a metronome at 60 beats per minute, and play a long tone with one undulation per beat; increase this to two undulations per beat (eighth notes), then three (triplets) and four (sixteenths). Gradually increase the tempo, ultimately reaching a goal of producing sixteenth notes at a metronome marking of 80-90. Subsequent practice should utilize scales, playing each scale degree as a whole note and using vibrato on each pitch. Then change the note values to half notes, then quarters, etc. This will allow one to work for a seamless transition with the vibrato from one note to the next. Further practice could include playing one note with vibrato and the next without; or, playing one note with two undulations, the next with three, the next with one, and so on. These exercises will increase flexibility with the vibrato, so it is not simply "on" or "off."

You will find that introducing the element of vibrato adds a great deal of personality and musicality to your saxophonists. Again, it is important that one has the basics of the horn (a good embouchure, proper air support, and good finger technique) well established before introducing the concept. By the same token, an advanced student who does not use vibrato should certainly be taught to use this expressive device. It is also important to realize that a saxophonist who can play with vibrato does not have to use it all of the time. It is certainly acceptable, and sometimes necessary, to play passages non-vibrato. Finally, a truly musical vibrato is not metered but should be very free and might be best characterized as a "spinning" sound; using a metronome and purposefully measuring it is for practice only.

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