

**“Buzzing” the Saxophone Mouthpiece**  
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We have all, no doubt, heard brass players practicing diligently, or “buzzing,” on their mouthpieces away from the horn itself. Similarly, playing on the mouthpiece alone is an extremely beneficial exercise for saxophonists at all levels. It not only helps us develop and reinforce proper embouchure formation, air support, and tongue position, but it can also aid in our quest for good intonation and even tone color throughout the registers of the horn. Below I will discuss the basics of mouthpiece playing and offer some exercises.

The first issue that must be addressed is that of the correct pitch to be produced by playing on the mouthpiece alone. (Please note that I am presently referring to “classical” mouthpieces; that is, those intended for solo and/or concert playing, such as the Selmer C\*, rather than those intended for jazz performance.) Since the mouthpieces of the different saxophones are of different sizes, each has a unique pitch it produces when played alone:

Soprano saxophone: concert c3

Alto saxophone: concert a2

Tenor saxophone: concert g2

Baritone saxophone: concert d2

Students will likely be reluctant to play on the mouthpiece since it does create a rather unpleasant sound. However, it is important to play loudly and confidently at first, since loud, sustained long tones can be very telling in regard to one’s embouchure/air/tongue position set-up. Also, make sure to play with proper posture and that the hand holding the mouthpiece does not cover up the end of it.

If you find your student playing above the preferred pitch, then there are a number of potential reasons for this. Firstly, and most likely, the embouchure is too tense. More specifically, the lower teeth and lip are biting into the reed too much. Perhaps the student may also not be taking enough mouthpiece into the mouth. Other reasons for a sharp pitch could be attributed to a constricted air stream or incorrect placement of the tongue in the oral cavity. The throat should be quite open, with the concept of “warm air” in use; a sharp pitch might indicate the opposite is being used. The tongue should be positioned with a downward curve in the mouth; that is, the back part of the tongue should be relatively high in the mouth, possibly even touching the molars, and it should curve downward toward the mouthpiece, so that there is an open area in the oral cavity just behind the mouthpiece. Thinking of the syllable “err” will place the tongue in the correct position.

Conversely, a student playing below the pitch will likely have some of the opposite issues. A very loose embouchure, for example, will lead to this flatness on the mouthpiece. Perhaps the jaw is pulled too far away from the reed, as when playing “subtone.” (Incidentally, a loose embouchure such as this is preferred in jazz playing; again, this article is geared toward classical performance.) A tongue that is placed too low in the oral cavity or an under supported air stream are other common reasons for this. See above for correct tongue placement; to correct the air support issue, the student must realize the concept of “low” breaths and must engage the diaphragm much more. In other words, breathing while playing a wind instrument requires more work than when breathing normally!

Once this basic pitch has been well established, there are a number of exercises we can practice with the mouthpiece alone. As mentioned above, when first working on the mouthpiece we must work for loud and sustained tones. Play the pitch *forte* or *fortissimo* and sustain it for as long as comfortably possible, striving for no fluctuation of pitch. Since the length of the tube with which we are dealing is so small, any change in embouchure, tongue position, or air stream, no matter how minute, will be exaggerated. Thus, we are working for absolute consistency with all of the above-mentioned aspects of our playing. If we notice lots of pitch fluctuation with just the mouthpiece, then we know we are doing it when we put the mouthpiece on the horn itself!

The next exercise will include dynamics. Of course, the saxophone plays sharp at softer dynamics, and this will be made painfully obvious on the mouthpiece alone. Begin the pitch at a loud dynamic, but now *decrescendo* to as soft as a dynamic possible, and unless some changes are made, the pitch will rise considerably. In order to counteract this natural tendency, it is important to open the oral cavity as we get softer. This can be achieved by opening the throat and by dropping the tongue slightly in the mouth, as when going from the syllables “err” to “aah.” A

common instruction to lower the pitch is simply to “drop the jaw;” while this is a quick fix and certainly works, it also has the side effect of distorting the tone color. Thus, we must work to keep the jaw stationary and allow the oral cavity to change shape in order to bring the pitch down. Once this has been mastered, we can then begin the mouthpiece tone softly and crescendo, or do any combination of dynamics, as long as the pitch remains constant.

Once we are consistent with the basic pitch at all dynamics, then we can begin to actually change the pitch and perform many of the same exercises. Try at first to bring the pitch down a half-step, accomplishing this change of pitch not by “lipping down,” but by changing the shape of the oral cavity, or “voicing.” Play this lowered pitch at all dynamics, again, maintaining a consistent (lowered!) pitch. Bring it down another half-step, then another, etc. Then play scales, simple tunes, such as “Mary Had a Little Lamb,” and other similar exercises. Work above and below the “standard” pitch, though we will obviously be able to move much farther below than above.

In conclusion, mouthpiece practice will help us to evaluate better how our students are doing in the areas of embouchure, tongue placement, and air support. With such a small “tube,” all of these potential pitfalls are greatly exaggerated, and by fixing the problems on the mouthpiece, it should lead to more favorable results when the mouthpiece is put on the horn. By applying the techniques practiced in these exercises to the saxophone itself, your students should better understand the mechanics required to play in tune (“voicing” instead of “lipping”) and they should also be able to produce a considerably more consistent tone throughout all registers and at all dynamic levels.

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