Ask Professor Osland

Miles Osland

Q&A from the Conn-Selmer Saxophone Corner message board, moderated by Miles Osland.

Cane vs. Synthetic

Have you ever used synthetic reeds? What do you think of them?

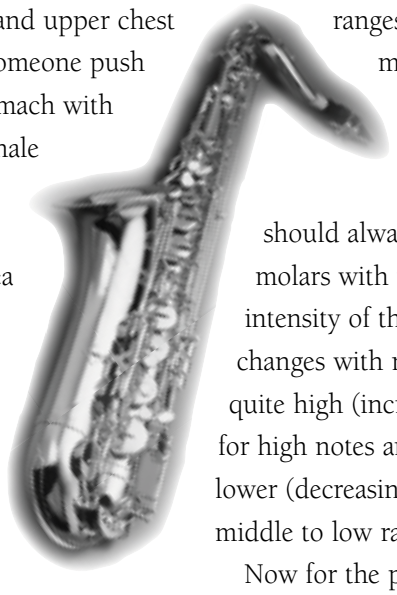
I have used Fibercell reeds on occasion—mostly on clarinet when I'm in a pit/show orchestra. When I found a Fibercell that worked well, I wouldn't have to worry about picking up the clarinet halfway through a show with a reed that you could surf on. I also have used plasticover reeds in the past—on bari with a hard rubber Berg Larsen to achieve a real "wet," barking sound. But there truly is nothing like great cane. Synthetic reeds have their place on the marching field also—they'll last a long time and they'll never warp. But please, never compromise the sound for the convenience. Find one that sounds good!

Breathing exercises

My teacher told me that I should "always feel my stomach muscles" when I'm playing. What does this mean?

You inflate your lungs as you inhale and your diaphragm becomes distended. What your teacher said was correct—you should always feel the area around the stomach muscles to be firm, even as the lungs deflate. Make sure that you fill from the bottom first, and then fill the upper portion of the lungs with a noticeable expansion in the chest.

Lie on your back and inhale—stomach area out and upper chest expanded. Have someone push down on your stomach with an open hand. Exhale and try to push against the hand as the stomach area deflates. This is what exhaling when you're playing should feel like—it's just easier to feel it when you are lying down and having pressure added. You can also try the same process while standing with your back against a wall.



The hee position: correct tongue position and technique

What is correct tongue position?

There are two parts to the tongue that you must concentrate on. They are the tip and the back part—I call this area "the hump." I'll talk about this first. Correct hump position is what's known as the hee position. When you say "hee," you should naturally feel the sides of the back part of your tongue lightly anchored against your top molars. This is correct hump position for all ranges. The hump may move slightly back and forward depending on range, but you should always feel your top molars with the hump. The intensity of the hump also changes with range. Becoming quite high (increasing air speed) for high notes and altissimo, and lower (decreasing air speed) for middle to low range.

Now for the part of the tongue that actually touches the reed—the tip. With the hump in the hee position, say "dee." Feel the area where the tip of your tongue touches the roof of your mouth. This is same area that should touch the tip of the reed. One of my pet peeves is that we usually learn how to tongue with the syllable "tah." What happens to the hump when you say "tah"? Incorrect position. Actually, I believe the correct syllables we should learn how to tongue with are "tee" (this is an accented articulation) and "dee" (this is

a legato articulation—feel how the tip flattens out). "Teet" would be a marcato or tongue staccato (as opposed to breath staccato) articulation (the tongue comes back up to the tip of the reed to cut the note off—the first T being the front-side articulation and the second T being the back-side articulation) and the syllable "hee" should be used for a breath attack.

Neck-strap position

Where should the mouthpiece be in my mouth?

First of all, make sure that the neck strap is positioned so the mouthpiece isn't resting on the lower lip. In general, most students need to bring the strap up so that the piece falls naturally into the mouth, with maybe just a little bit of pressure on the top teeth.

Reed soaking and storage tips

How do I go about "breaking in" a new reed?

If you suck on a reed to soak it, the tip will usually take the shape of your tongue and you'll have a tougher time flattening it out. Instead, completely soak a new reed in a glass of water for two to three minutes. It should be standard operating procedure to carry a small glass in your sax case for your reed water. After every usage of the reed, store it in a reed holder—there are many brands out there. Do not leave the reed on the mouthpiece!

Each time you play on a reed, take it out of storage beforehand and soak it thoroughly in your reed glass—but usually no more than three to five minutes. Any longer than this tends to make the reed waterlogged and will affect the seal. Basically, go by this rule of thumb: Soak the reed only as long as it takes to get the tip straightened out. This shouldn't take more than five minutes. If it takes longer than five to seven minutes for the tip to become flat, you probably need a new reed.

Basic practice tips

What should be my priorities for practice time?

Practice time and priorities are going to vary from person to person. Often enough practice time is very goal oriented, e.g., you have a concert next week and you must perfect your part. But when you do have a good amount of time to "go to the shed," you should work on perfecting the basics. One daily routine would be to start with at least 10 to 15 minutes of long tones, then run through all major and minor scales, altered scales, diminished and whole tone scales, and major and minor pentatonic scales (or whatever scales you need to review and/or learn). I also instruct my students to practice arpeggios in all their inversions on major and minor triads, dom. 7ths, minor 7ths, minor 7(b5), major 7ths, dim.7ths, augmented triads and aug.7th chords. Be sure to practice each of these in all 12 keys and the full range of your horn. It sounds like a lot, but once you have them memorized it only takes 20 to 40 minutes, depending on the tempo you choose.

This routine puts you through hundreds of different technique exercises. Since music is mostly made of scale and chord fragments, you'll be ready

for most anything that comes up. You can vary the daily routine by playing your scales in 3rds, 4ths, 5ths, etc.

After the scale/chord routine you can work on etudes, repertoire, jazz improvisation, etc., for the rest of your practice session.

Vibrato information and exercises

Is the current trend to play with less vibrato, or do people still use it on every note?

Good question!! My bottom line about saxophone vibrato (in classical and jazz) is this: Vibrato should be used musically as an expressive tool. If you use it too much (i.e., on every note), your musicality/expression becomes predictable. In jazz, there are certain "rules" (meant to be occasionally broken, of course) to follow for using vibrato. For instance: When in a sax section and playing a phrase in unison, you should not use vibrato (unless you're playing in an old-style, Guy Lombardo/Lawrence Welk-type ensemble). With bebop and post-bop players, you'll notice they sometimes use what is known as terminal vibrato. I believe this is what one poster was referring to when he said, "Occasionally I'll add small lip trills on the end of sustained notes." Although not necessarily an actual lip trill (much as what a brass player would do), I like to think of terminal vibrato as just a couple of vibrato waves added at the end of a sustained note that concludes a phrase or gives a line motion if the phrase continues after the long note. Listen to Cannonball Adderley—you'll hear exactly what we're talking about.

Here's a good exercise to work on for flexibility and control of your vibrato (of course this is a jaw or saxophone vibrato, not diaphragm or flute vibrato): With the metronome on 60 bpm, play a middle F# and practice your vibrato waves in eighth notes. For eighth notes think ooo-aah, ooo-aah. The "ooo" is the in-tune pitch, and the "aah" is achieved by slightly dropping or loosening the lower jaw. Remember: A vibrato wave is mostly on the flat side of the pitch. Concentrate on keeping the low side of the pitch (the "aah") consistent. Then try triplets: ooo-aah-ooo, aah-ooo-aah, aah-ooo-aah. When you go to sixteenths (still at 60 bpm) you want to start thinking wah-wah-wah-wah, wah-wah-wah-wah. Somewhere between sixteenths and quintuplets (at 60 bpm) is a good speed for general usage of vibrato. But you want to have flexibility and control of the eighth-note speed all the way up to sextuplets.

A vibrato wave has two components: speed and width. The width of your vibrato depends on how far you drop the bottom jaw. Work on being able to lower the pitch evenly at least a half step on every pitch of your instrument. When you have complete control over a wide range of width and speed of your vibrato, then you can combine the different ingredients into an expressive recipe for musicality! Happy vibrating!

For more saxophonic FAQ's & INFO by Professor Osland, visit the Selmer Saxophone Corner at: http://www.selmer.com/phpBB/saxophone/

Miles Osland currently holds the positions of Director of Jazz Studies and Professor of Saxophone at the University of Kentucky. A busy recording artist, his debut recording, Saxercise, and follow-up disk, My Old Kentucky Home were both recommended for Grammy nominations by Sea Breeze Jazz records.Under Professor Osland's direction, five recordings by the UK Jazz Studies Department have garnered "four-star" reviews from Downbeat magazine, and the UK Studio Orchestra, UK Saxophone Quartet and UK Mega-Sax Quartet have all won top honors in their respective categories in the Annual Student DeeBee Awards, presented by the same publication. Mr. Osland has published over 75 articles on saxophone techinique and jazz improvisation for the Saxophone and Jazz Educator's Journals, Downbeat, Windplayer and Selmer Woodwind Notes.