

The Saxophone: The Easiest Instrument to Play . . . Badly

Dr. Carolyn J. Bryan

By design, the saxophone is a forgiving instrument. Compared to other wind instruments, it is easy to produce an acceptable initial tone. Unlike the flute or trumpet, the embouchure accommodates a wide array of oral structures. Keys cover the tone holes, so hand position is seemingly not as exacting as that required on the clarinet. Consequently, we become accepting of many of the undesirable sounds (and habits) that students of the instrument are capable of producing. Careful attention to the following points will help beginning students develop a beautiful sound and good technique.

The Instrument: An instrument in good repair is essential for success. Student model saxophones today are far superior in intonation and mechanism to their predecessors of 20 or 30 years ago. If a student has an older or used instrument, remind the parents to have it serviced prior to the first lesson.

The Neckstrap: The strap must be adjusted so that the saxophone comes to the student. Ribbon or web straps are durable and easy to adjust. Be wary of comfortable straps made of springy material: the instrument usually sinks too low and contributes to poor posture.

The Mouthpiece: Most stock mouthpieces are adequate for the first year, but all mouthpieces are not created equal. If everything else looks correct and problems persist, experiment with other mouthpieces. Intermediate and advanced students should upgrade to a mouthpiece with medium facing and tip opening. Popular models include the Rousseau New Classic, Selmer C* S80 and VanDoren Optimum.

The Ligature: The ligature is crucial for creating a seal between the mouthpiece and reed. Ligatures that are bent or missing screws will not allow the reed to seal. Fabric ligatures are less susceptible to the rigors of daily band room life.

Reeds: Starting beginners with at least a 2-1/2 reed will require them to use a firmer embouchure and will result in better tone and intonation from the beginning. Encourage students to keep four reeds in a reed guard (to prevent warpage) and to rotate their reeds daily. Reeds will also seal and vibrate better if they are wet. Soak the entire reed in warm water while assembling the instrument.

Assembly: Attentive care will prevent many mechanical problems.

- Place the case on the floor - not in the lap - when assembling the instrument.
 - Put the neckstrap on before picking up the saxophone and hook it on immediately. Never pick up the instrument by the strap.
 - Grease the cork so that the mouthpiece can be adjusted for both pitch and position.
 - Remove the ligature from the mouthpiece and twist the mouthpiece onto the neck. Place the ligature on the mouthpiece - screw(s) to the right - then insert the reed and tighten the ligature.
 - Align the reed so that a sliver of mouthpiece is visible above the reed tip.
 - When not playing, use the mouthpiece cap to protect the reed and mouthpiece and maintain moisture.
- Embouchure:** A firm but cushioned embouchure is crucial for good tone quality and intonation.
- Whistle or pretend to sip on a straw. This will draw the lips into a circle with a bit of cushion in the bottom lip.
 - Roll the upper part of the lower lip over the bottom teeth. Only the tough, thick part of the lip should roll over the teeth, not the tender inner flesh.
 - Place the upper teeth firmly down on the mouthpiece. Test the grip by gently trying to wobble the mouthpiece from side to side or by pulling it out while the student is playing. A plastic stick-on

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mouthpiece patch will help students maintain a better hold.

- Seal the corners of the mouth around the mouthpiece. Think of hugging the mouthpiece with the lips or of sipping a milkshake through a straw.

- Have the students hold a mirror so they can see what the embouchure looks like. In the first lesson, the teacher should place the mouthpiece for the student. Emphasize how the embouchure should look and how the tone should sound. Demonstrate both visually and aurally.

Air: Blow gently, but maintain sufficient air speed. The pitch produced on the alto mouthpiece and neck is G#. The pitch on the mouthpiece alone (a more reliable measure of correct embouchure) is an A (2nd octave above the staff).

- Inhale through the mouth, never through the nose. Nose breathing results in a constricted throat and a tight sound.

- Practice moving air at the correct speed by blowing a piece of paper, approximately 5x4, onto a wall.

Articulation: First, say “Tu” repeatedly while continuously blowing air.

Next, take a breath, form the embouchure, and place the mouthpiece. With the tip of the tongue on the reed, bring the air to the front of the mouth behind the tongue. Release the tongue to initiate the sound. Articulate and sustain a whole note, then two half notes and finally four quarters.

- If you observe excessive motion in the throat, the student is moving too much of the tongue. Keep the tongue high in the oral cavity and move only the tip.

- Be alert for any chewing motion. Have students pretend to be ventriloquists to keep the lips and jaw still while articulating.

- Remind students to blow air continuously and not let it stop when they articulate.

Hand Position: Place the left thumb on the thumb rest, angled to 2 o'clock.

Curve the fingers around the palm keys. Place the right thumb under the thumb hook and curve the fingers over the keys. The right thumb helps to position the instrument but should not support the weight of the saxophone.

Posture: Sit with feet flat on the floor. Sit toward the front of the

chair and to the right side so that the instrument does not hit the chair. Position the instrument forward (toward the knee) on the right side. Turn the mouthpiece so that the player's head is straight. The arms should be slightly away from the body. Don't allow the left arm to rest on the leg when playing any member of the saxophone family. Saxophonists are ready to hold the instrument in front when they can do so without the instrument resting on the chair or the arms resting on the legs.

Keys to Success: Developing a correct embouchure and consistent sound may take a week or two.

It is far more productive to work on embouchure and articulation using only the mouthpiece and neck. Keep students interested by varying the length of the notes. Have contests to see who can hold a good sound the longest. Keep a beat to instill a sense of pulse and rhythm. Teach note values. Students who develop in this way will have superior tone quality on their instruments. It may seem slow at first, but the results will be rewarding for everyone.

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