

Unlocking the Secrets of Saxophone Articulation

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Saxophone and clarinet articulation are very often viewed as being identical. While they are quite similar, both instruments utilize slightly different parts of the tongue when coming in contact with the reed. While the clarinet articulation is often called a “tip to tip” method of tonguing (the tip of the tongue touches the tip of the reed), the saxophone articulation is caused by an area of the tongue slightly behind the tip touching the reed. This is necessitated by the different angle of the saxophone mouthpiece, the amount of mouthpiece in the oral cavity, and the larger amount of reed in the mouth.

Another common misconception in regard to saxophone articulation is tongue-motion. While some might equate the tongue’s movement with a vertical “swinging,” this can cause several problems. When thinking in this way, a young saxophonist is much more prone to tongue on the flat part of the reed, perhaps even creating the dreaded, accidental “slap-tongue” so often associated with beginning players. Instead, a more appropriate method of

articulation is to think of the tongue as moving more horizontally in the mouth, so that the performer will be much more likely to just strike the tip of the reed with the tongue.

One extremely common articulation problem stems from another source, entirely: The performer’s breath support. Very often, a young saxophonist will attempt to “puff” streams of air in time with their articulation, creating lack of tonal support, out-of-sync articulations, “thud” tonguing, and many other undesirable side-effects. The performer must be given to understand that the air-stream should be a constant, no matter the articulation marking: The tongue, alone, should be responsible for the job of articulating (except in the case of marcato accents, or other musical markings that are traditionally viewed as being combined efforts of both breath and tongue).

An associated problem with the above is the common mistake of many saxophonists to neglect to have proper breath support at the beginnings of phrases. Most harsh or improper initial articulations are

due to the performer not having the necessary air-pressure in place before the tongue touches the reed. Students should be reminded that, before each phrase, they are to breathe in, set the breath, and only then should they articulate.

Sometimes, so-called articulation problems can actually be reed problems. A reed that is too hard, too soft, or poorly made can make the job of the performer far more difficult than it should be. High-quality reeds, such as D’Addario Reserve Classic reeds, should always be used, with medium strengths (3, 3+, or 3½) working well for nearly all saxophonists.

If this advice is followed, many common problems of young saxophonists can be alleviated from the start. Many supposed deficiencies in the performances of beginning players can be traced back to the cause of improper articulation technique. It is hoped that, with this information, many young saxophonists will be able to play with more confidence, much less prone to “pops,” “thuds,” and other, unfortunate sound-effects.

Dr. Andrew J. Allen will be joining the faculty of Midwestern State University in Wichita Falls this August as assistant professor of woodwinds. He has previously served on the faculties of Valley City State University and Claflin University. Dr. Allen’s performances as a solo, chamber, and orchestral musician have taken him throughout the United States and Europe, and he has commissioned and premiered more than a dozen new works for the saxophone. He holds degrees in music education and saxophone performance from Tennessee Tech University, Central Michigan University, and the University of South Carolina. His teachers include Phil Barham, John Nichol, Joseph Lulloff, and Clifford Leaman.