

Transforming the Honkophonist into a Saxophonist

*“What do you do when your saxophone section is louder than
your entire brass section?”*

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I. EMBOUCHURE

The ideal embouchure is one that allows a student to play well in tune with a beautiful sound.

A. Key points of a well constructed embouchure

1. Place the knuckle of your index finger between your front teeth. Most students play with their teeth too clinched.
2. Curl the lower lip slightly over the bottom teeth.
3. Form the shape of an “OO” with the mouth and lips (as in saying the word “too”).
4. With the teeth still apart, insert the end of a straw between the lips and front teeth. The “OO” shape of the mouth and lips should create a soft cushion with vertical wrinkles in the lower lip region (similar to a closed drawstring bag). Try to produce vertical wrinkles in the bottom lip region.
5. Insert the mouthpiece alone in the mouth. Place the top teeth on the mouthpiece approximately 1/2 inch from the end. The weight of the head should rest here, thus allowing the bottom jaw to move freely.
6. The chin should be in a natural position.
7. The mouthpiece alone should produce the following pitches:
 - a. For alto, a concert A
 - b. For tenor, a concert G
 - c. For baritone, a concert D
 - d. For soprano, a concert C
8. In many cases, the pitch will be too high. If this occurs, relax the embouchure and direct the air stream down.
9. **Locating the correct placement of the mouthpiece on the neckpiece.**
 - a. Assemble the instrument and have an experienced or professional saxophonist place his or her mouthpiece on the neckpiece. The correct placement of the mouthpiece will be determined by having the experienced saxophonist tune to a written fifth line F or F#.
 - b. Place an ink mark on the cork of the neck to identify this position.
 - c. Have the student place his or her mouthpiece at the mark on the cork and will begin to learn correct pitch placement. **This sets the length of the instrument.**
 - d. Most young players place the mouthpiece too close to end of the neckpiece, creating a longer instrument. This requires a tighter embouchure to play in tune.
10. **A word of caution: 90% of the students that I have seen play with too tight of an embouchure, creating a thin, bright sound.
AVOID THIS PITFALL!**

- II. BREATHING – The breath is a mirror image of the tone we produce.
- A. Embouchure alone produces no sound. It is the air that causes the reed to vibrate, thus producing tone.
 - B. Air flow studies. Exercises that allow one to work on the concepts of air flow.
 1. Does the line of notes have resonance and beauty?
 2. Does the air flow through consistently?
 3. Are all of the notes the same volume and fullness?
 4. Do the notes match?
 - C. Practice breathing away from the instrument.
 - D. Crescendo – decrescendo exercises
- III. PLAYING POSITION
- A. Sitting
 1. Hold the alto in front and the tenor and bari to the side. I recommend a position similar to a horn player when playing the alto sax.
 2. Keep both feet on the floor with legs uncrossed.
 3. Adjust the neck strap so that it supports the weight of the instrument. Allow the weight of your head to rest firmly on the top of the mouthpiece.
 4. Place the music stand in front of you looking straight ahead. Avoid turning your head to the left or right to see the music. This is often the root of embouchure problems!
 - B. Standing
 1. Keep the weight of the body equally distributed between both feet.
 2. Spread your feet for balance and stability.
 3. Adjust the neck strap so that it supports the weight of the instrument. Avoid the weight of the instrument being directed towards the bottom lip. The top teeth should feel firm on the top of the mouthpiece. Additionally, the bottom of the alto saxophone may rest lightly against your body.
 - C. Performing
 1. I recommend that you always stand while performing solo literature for audiences or judges. Face or angle towards your audience.
 2. Quartets should be performed sitting down. A string quartet set-up is ideal.

Alto	X	X	Bari	Violin II	X	X	Cello
Soprano	X	X	Tenor	Violin I	X	X	Viola
	Audience				Audience		
- IV. HAND POSITION
1. Keep your hands and fingers relaxed.
 2. Keep your fingers close to the keys.
 3. Left thumb should be at 2 o'clock.
 4. Left index finger should roll back to play the Front F key.
 5. Left little finger should rest on the G# key.
 6. Right little finger should rest on the E-flat key, while using the roller to slide to low C. Use the roller, it's there for a reason!
 7. The second and third joints of the right index finger will be used when playing high E. The angle of the right hand will change slightly by altering the wrist.
 8. **Use a Mirror!**

V. TECHNIQUE

A. How to practice- This is one of the most important things that you can teach a student.

1. Practice means repetition. It is how you practice that is vital. Practice does not make perfect, however it does create permanency
2. Never allow yourself to make a mistake. Accuracy is always more important than speed. Practice at "easy" tempos.
3. Use a metronome that is loud enough to be heard over your instrument. Use the different knobs on your metronome, they are there for a reason!
4. Have goals. Know what you are going to practice and how you are going to proceed.
5. Isolate problem spots. Don't practice the stuff that you can already play.
6. Play five times perfectly before advancing to the next tempo.
- 7 Practice in rhythms
8. Use the fermata technique
9. Practice forwards and backwards
10. Shift the beat

B. Scales and arpeggios

1. Use a scale sequence that fits the level of your playing.
2. To become an advanced player, extended range studies are essential (up to high F or F# and down to low B or B-flat).
3. Stress beauty of sound and pitch placement.
4. It is vital to learn scales and arpeggios. However, the more important product of this is the training of correct muscle memory.
3. Use correct fingerings and appropriate alternate fingerings. Never use 1&4 for B-flat on scales.

Easy

major dom. 7th minor dim. 7th

Intermediate

Difficult

C. Hand position

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D. Saxophone technique anomalies

1. Bis B-flat

Two staves of music in treble clef, 4/4 time. The first staff contains a sequence of notes with slurs and accents, including the word "bis" written above and below the notes. The second staff continues the sequence, starting with a measure number "4" above the first note. The notes are primarily eighth and quarter notes, with some slurs and accents indicating specific techniques.

2. Palm Key 1, PK2, and PK3 keys
3. Side E, sC, sBb, sF# keys
4. The Altissimo F# key
5. Front F & E

A single staff of music in treble clef, 4/4 time. It features a series of slurs over groups of notes, with the word "front" written above each slur. The notes are primarily eighth and quarter notes, with some slurs and accents indicating specific techniques.

6. Articulated G#, low C#, low B and low B-flat keys

A single staff of music in treble clef, 4/4 time. It features a series of slurs over groups of notes, with the words "G# key", "C# key", "B Key", and "Bb key" written below each slur. The notes are primarily eighth and quarter notes, with some slurs and accents indicating specific techniques.

VI. TONGUING

- A. The tongue merely interrupts the reed's vibration. The air remains constant.
- B. Touch the area slightly back from the tip of the tongue to the tip of the reed.
- C. The attack is really a release. Visualize a door opening from a closed position instead of a door closing or slamming shut from the open position.

D. Steps for a correct release:

1. Breathe in.
2. Set the embouchure.
3. Touch the tongue lightly to the tip of the reed and hold it there.
4. Build the air pressure behind the tip of the tongue.
5. Finally, release the air to start the tone.

E. The air remains constant. The tongue will lightly touch the tip of the reed for each articulated note until the completion of the phrase.

F. There should not be any visible movement from the chin or throat regions while articulating.

G. Two ways of stopping the sound:

1. Stop the air stream (Air Stop)
 - a. Use this preceding rests and at the end of phrases and long notes.
 - b. The air release creates a dovetail shape to the end of the note.

Air Stop

The diagram illustrates the 'Air Stop' technique on a musical staff. The top staff shows a sequence of notes with a 'release tongue' label above the first note. A bracket labeled 'air begins' spans the first two notes, and another bracket labeled 'air stops' spans the last two notes. A 'shape of tone' label points to the end of the first note. The bottom staff shows a sequence of notes with a 'release tongue' label above the first note. A bracket labeled 'air begins' spans the first two notes, and another bracket labeled 'air stops' spans the last two notes. A dashed line labeled '(air flows without interruption)' spans the entire sequence of notes. The word 'touch' is written above the first note, and 'touch etc.' is written above the second note.

2. Touching the reed with the tongue (Tongue Stop)

- a. The tongue stop is used to separate articulated notes in a staccato manner.
- b. The tongue stop creates a block-style shape to the end of the note.
- c. Begin the sound by removing the tongue from the reed.
- d. Stop the sound by placing the tongue on the reed.
- e. Keep the air constant throughout the entire line.

Tongue Stop

release tongue

touch reed lightly with tongue

shape of tone

air begins

(air pressure remains constant, even during the rests)

air stops

6 continue above technique

11

14

The musical notation consists of four staves. The first staff shows a sequence of notes with a dashed line below indicating air flow. Labels indicate 'release tongue' at the start, 'touch reed lightly with tongue' during the notes, and 'air stops' at the end. A box labeled 'shape of tone' is placed above the notes. The second staff is labeled '6 continue above technique' and shows a sequence of notes with rests. The third staff is labeled '11' and shows a sequence of notes with rests. The fourth staff is labeled '14' and shows a sequence of notes with rests.

VII. INTONATION

A. Intonation is determined by:

1. Placement of the mouthpiece on the neck
 - a. push in to sharpen
 - b. pull out to flatten
2. Embouchure pressure
 - a. more embouchure pressure = sharper
 - b. less embouchure pressure = flatter
3. Volume of sound
 - a. soft = sharp
 - b. loud = flat
4. Voicing
 - a. low tongue position "ah" syllable – lower pitch
 - b. high tongue position "ee" syllable – higher pitch
5. Register
 - a. middle and upper register = sharp
 - b. low register = flat

B. Special fingerings for pitch alteration

Staff 1:

- +C# to raise
- +C# to raise
- +C# or Eb to raise
- +Eb to raise
- +Eb to raise
- +SF# & Eb to raise
- +SF# & Eb to raise
- +G# to raise
- +G# to raise
- +G# or sBb to raise

Staff 2:

- +sBb to raise
- +sC or sBb or OK 3/(4)(5)(6)(Eb) with sC or sBb to raise
- +low B to lower
- +low B to lower
- +low B to lower
- +low C key to lower
- +low C key to lower
- +low C key to lower
- +low Bb & low C to lower

Staff 3:

- +sF# & 5 or +6 to lower
- +sF# & 5 or +6 to lower
- nothing
- +5 or +4,5 & sF# to lower
- +4 & 5 to lower
- +4 or +2 or +2 & sBb to lower
- +4 or -PK1 or +2 or +2 & sBb to lower
- PK1 or -PK2 or +2 to lower
- PK1 or -PK2 or -sE to lower

C. Use a tuner. Many educators discredit the use of the tuner. I don't agree with the old saying that using a visual tuner trains the eye. In essence, the visual tuner trains muscle memory. This is an essential part of learning right from wrong! However, it is vital to play with pitch sources (piano, "Smart Music" or "Finale" programs by Coda).

D. Practice simple tunes by ear.

VIII. VIBRATO

The "jaw vibrato" is the most accepted method used on the saxophone.

A. This is similar to motion of chewing gum.

1. Say the syllables "Wa-Wa-Wa".

2. Practice a vibrato exercise daily throughout the range of the instrument.

B. Listen to recordings of singers, string players and various wind players to help establish a concept of vibrato sound. Remember to record yourself often!

quarter = 60-110

Gary Garner

Wa-Wa-Wa

IX. RHYTHM

Rhythm is a mental and physical process.

A. Use the Eastman Counting System.

B. The foot tap is a great practice tool.

1. A wise man once said, "The foot tap is a window to the rhythmic soul". If a student is not able to tap in rhythm, it is a good indication that something is wrong.
2. Use the sub-divided foot tap whenever possible.

X. Altissimo Register – Refers to the register of F# above the staff and beyond.

A. A slightly firmer embouchure is required, with a very slight forward movement of the bottom jaw to allow a larger amount of reed to vibrate within the mouth.

B. A subtle change in the voicing (tongue position) is required.

C. The altissimo register requires a manipulation of the fundamental tone into the upper partials of the harmonic series. The first eight notes of the harmonic series may be practiced in the following manner.

The Harmonic Series

The image displays three musical staves, each representing a different fingering for the harmonic series. Each staff begins with a treble clef and a common time signature (C). The notes are represented by stems with dots, indicating pitch. The first staff is for a Bb fingering, the second for a B fingering, and the third for a C fingering. The notes are arranged in ascending order from left to right. The first staff has a flat sign (b) above the seventh note. The second staff has a sharp sign (#) above the seventh note. The third staff has a flat sign (b) above the seventh note. Below each staff is a horizontal line with the text: "finger low Bb for entire series", "finger low B for entire series", and "finger low C for entire series" respectively.

D. Matching Exercises – These exercises will help one learn the muscle memory required to produce the upper partials of the harmonic series.

Matching Exercises

Exer. 1

sustain F *sustain F#*

finger F to B \flat + oct. key finger F# to B + oct. key + low C# key

+ low C# key + low Eb key

Exer. 2

produce top pitches

finger bottom notes + C# key

+ C# key + Eb key

E. Mouthpiece and rubber hose exercises.