



The Saxophone from Bach to Bop

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The Saxophone From “Bach to Bop”

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This presentation is intended to clarify some basic concepts on playing the saxophone in the classical and jazz/commercial idiom concurrently. The playing of these styles does not need to be mutually exclusive! In fact, understanding all styles and actually attempting to perform in this versatile manner will enhance the ability of any classical or jazz/commercial player, regardless of whether or not he/she ever intends to become truly proficient in all areas. After all, we are dealing with many aspects of musical interpretation, which are universal, no matter what the style may be. Application of these “universal” aspects needs much study and practice (phrasing, articulation, vibrato, etc.).

The first item(s) on our agenda is to determine which equipment (horn, mouthpiece) will best suit the requirements of the style being played.

EQUIPMENT

This is perhaps the most personal subject we will cover. The equipment used by the saxophonist should be such that it enhances his/her ability to make an authentic presentation of the style that is attempted. The player’s ability must be supported by the proper combination of instrument, mouthpiece and reed. Even the best player cannot expect to give a good performance if he/she is using the wrong equipment!

THE INSTRUMENT

Not much needs to be said about choosing a good instrument. At one time, the choice was very easy. If you wanted the best possible instrument, you bought a Selmer Mark VI. Today there are many choices for the saxophonist and the choice of instrument should be a very well thought out procedure. Selmer, Yamaha and Yanagisawa are just several of the quality names in saxophones today. Some still prefer the older varieties of Selmers, Kings, etc., but overall the bottom line remains the same. You choose the saxophone which will enable you to perform at the highest level, whether you’re playing a Bach transcription or from the Charlie Parker Omnibook!

THE MOUTHPIECE

Definitely a more difficult quest than finding a good instrument, it seems that everyone from the beginner to the professional is constantly looking for the “magic mouthpiece” that will solve all of his or her problems. As we all know, that mouthpiece does not yet exist, but there are several guidelines for choosing the correct mouthpiece. My recommendation is that the student first plays on a set-up (reed-mouthpiece combination), which is not too extreme (that is, extremely open on the jazz side or closed on the classical side). Good middle of the road mouthpieces for starters on alto are the Selmer C*, C** or Vandoren Optimum (AL3 or AL4) (or something comparable) for classical

and the Meyer 5M, Vandoren V16 (A6, A7) (or something comparable) for jazz. These choices should provide the student with a reasonably characteristic sound in both idioms. Reed choice may vary according to personal preference or this week's quality control standards, but something in the range of a Rico Reserve Classic #3 or Vandoren #3 for classical and Vandoren Java #3 or Rico Jazz Select 3S should work for jazz. The Rico Reserve Classic and regular Vandoren reed provide a somewhat "cleaner" sound for classical while the Java and/or Rico Jazz Select give the sound the "buzz" or "bite" that may be desired in jazz. On tenor, a good place to start with a classical set-up would be a Selmer C*, C** or Vandoren Optimum (TL3 or TL4) with a Vandoren 2 ½ or 3 reed and an Otto Link 5 or 5* or Meyer 6 for jazz with Vandoren Java #2½ or 3 reeds. For baritone, once again I would recommend the standard Selmer C* or C** for classical with Vandoren #2½ or 3 reeds and Berg Larsen 95 or 100/0 with Vandoren Java #3 or Rico Jazz Select 3S reeds for jazz. For soprano, the Selmer C** with a Vandoren #3 reed would be a reasonable place to start for classical and an Otto Link 5* or 6 with a Vandoren Java 2½ or 3 should work well for jazz. These mouthpiece/reed suggestions are not meant to be the "bottom line" but merely serve as a guideline on where to start as mouthpieces will differ and each player's physical make up may dictate the use of a "softer" (more free-blowing) or "harder" (more resistant) reed/mouthpiece combination. Mouthpiece and reed comparison charts are a regular part of many of the saxophone product websites that are now up and running. I would suggest you check these out to get a more complete list and comparison of the many mouthpiece types now available.

TONE PRODUCTION

The basics of tone production remain the same no matter what the idiom. Without a vivid tonal imagination or "tonal concept" one cannot ever expect to produce the sound that is desired. Listening to recordings of professional saxophonists can always help to reaffirm the student's own tonal imagination, but listening to a good tonal quality produced by other instruments as well can help the student understand what lies at the foundation of a good sound. For wind instrumentalists, this foundation consists of correct balance and posture, breath support, and a functional embouchure.

BALANCE/POSTURE

Balancing the saxophone properly and playing with good posture are items not to be overlooked in the production of a quality tone. I regularly stress the "three points of balance" to all of my saxophone students. The first point is the most obvious – the neck strap. It is my preference to use a standard neck strap or harness versus one of the more "elastic" variety as this will give the instrument AND the embouchure more stability during performance. Although the elastic variety may seem more comfortable at first, it does not reinforce the stability needed in forming the correct embouchure. The second point of balance is the right thumb under the thumb rest. The final "point of balance" is the point at which the top teeth rest on the mouthpiece. This concept stresses the importance of keeping the corners firm and the lower lip cushioned. As mentioned earlier, this balance point will be easier to achieve with a standard neck strap versus an elastic type. It has been my experience that students playing with the elastic type of neck

strap tend to “grab on” to the mouthpiece in a vertical manner rather than using the corners of the mouth to provide stability horizontally. With regards to standing or sitting, the saxophone should be held in the same position to promote consistency in the playing technique. Some adjustments may need to be made for the larger saxophones, but the playing position should generally be the same whether sitting or standing.

BREATH SUPPORT

Sermons preaching the virtues of good breath support will continue to echo throughout teaching studios and practice rooms all over the world, but the fact remains that without it nothing else matters! The perfect embouchure, virtuoso technique and most vivid tonal imagination are all for naught without this one vital element. A good sound is not easy to achieve. It is demanding both mentally and physically; a concept that is sometimes hard to understand for the younger student. The concept of breath support and its application need not change from classical to jazz performance.

EMBOUCHURE

One variable that may change slightly from classical to jazz playing is the embouchure. Referred to earlier as a “functional embouchure,” this implies that the embouchure should not get in the way of producing a decent sound. The traditional concept of “cushioned but firm” applies in both instances, with the corners of the mouth firm and the lower lip acting as a cushion between the reed and the bottom teeth. The idea of the embouchure being “horizontally focused” is essential in keeping the lower lip relaxed and maximizing the vibration of the reed. Fine tonal control, as a result, consists of the ability to keep the corners of the embouchure directed inward at all times. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this position is to imitate a small child “sucking his/her thumb.” The corners of the mouth move inward while the upper lip flexes and the bottom lip forms a cushion over the bottom teeth. This is a very simple way to illustrate the correct saxophone embouchure. For the jazz saxophonist, the embouchure is traditionally a bit looser as a result of the greater flexibility demanded by certain stylistic considerations and more open mouthpiece. The corners remain somewhat firm but the embouchure must not interfere with the reed’s vibration. This balance usually requires what may seem to be a greater volume of air to the classical saxophonist, but it can be thought of as a wider airstream with the same amount of breath support. (The “classical” air stream should be thought of as somewhat smaller and more focused.) The main difference in “feel” will be that there is less resistance in the jazz set-up.

VOICING/TONGUE – THROAT POSITIONING – THE “VALVE”

This is sometimes a topic that is not addressed until the student is exploring the altissimo register, but I believe that it is essential to talk about it in terms of overall tone production. In over 30 years of college level teaching and 40 years of playing on the professional level, I have experienced that most players “voice” the saxophone very naturally unless they have developed some serious bad habits in their formative years. I am speaking, of course, of the concept of the tongue being more forward and lower (“Ah”) in the lower register and back and more elevated (“E”) in the upper register. This

technique naturally helps to move and shape the airstream appropriately for the register being played. I like to think of a “relaxed” and not “open” throat position as I feel the “open” throat tends to spread the airstream and cause the player to rely on a tighter embouchure for tonal control. With regards to the differences between classical and jazz playing, for me the classical side is a little more focused with the tongue being a bit more elevated and pulled back than it is in the jazz setting. The “valve” that I refer to above is the opening at the back of the throat, which I use to help focus the air and provide a faster air stream. Referred to as the “cough muscle” by one of my great teachers (Jim Riggs at The University of North Texas), it was described to me as the position of the throat when you “whisper” in order to make the air faster and save on the amount of air you need to produce a good sound. Our brass-playing colleagues (and flutists) would be totally adverse to this technique as they use their “chops” to do this, hence their concept of the “open” throat. I think of this as the “nozzle” at the end of the hose with your breath support (always turned on) being the faucet on the outside of your house.

STYLE/INTERPRETATION

Some aspects of style and interpretation are universal between classical and jazz. There are other areas where there exists quite a difference. The following is a brief discussion of some of the most basic differences from one style to another.

PHRASING

The concept of “phrase” does not really change no matter what the style may be. Certain melodic and harmonic elements in the music help govern the phrase length and overall phrase continuity. There are many elements within the phrase (rhythm, articulation, vibrato), which differ depending on the style of music that is being performed.

RHYTHM

In regards to rhythm in the classical style, what you see is what you get. The only rhythmic considerations that are left up to the discretion of the performer are those involving tempo changes within a phrase. Note values (eighths, sixteenths, etc.) are strictly interpreted as they are written with little room for discussion. In the jazz idiom, the interpretation of rhythm is dependent upon the performer’s experience and familiarity with the style. In the “swing” style, eighth notes are no longer played straight up and down but rather have more of a triplet feel to them. Even this description of how the correct “swing” eighth note should feel is not truly accurate, since it cannot be effectively notated. A slower tempo would require a more “exaggerated” swing feel while at the fastest tempos the eighth notes are virtually played “straight.” For this reason, it is necessary for the performer to be familiar with the proper “feel” and sound that he/she is to produce when playing in the swing style. There is no better way than to listen to the jazz masters who have defined the style. There also exists occasions where the “straight” eighth note is still the best way to interpret a different style within a jazz framework. Sambas, bossa novas, etc. along with more contemporary fusion/funk tunes are interpreted rhythmically “straighter” than their swing counterparts. Again, the best way to interpret this music is to become totally familiar with the style.

ARTICULATION

In the classical style, the desired articulation is almost always written at the same time a composition is conceived by its author. The pattern of tonguing and slurring is usually determined well in advance of the performance of any piece. Changes may be made to facilitate speed or cleanliness of attack, but the basic articulation will remain the same.

In the jazz style, an aural tradition has been handed down over the years, which gives us some guidelines for articulation. In a jazz piece it is not unusual for articulation not to be written at all but left up to the knowledge and discretion of the performer. As a result, the performer should be familiar with some basic patterns that are found in jazz articulation. Tonguing every offbeat of an eighth-note line is a very common practice as is tonguing the last note in any group of eighth notes and tonguing the highest note of any eighth-note passage. Syncopations, changes in harmonic or melodic direction can all be highlighted with the tongue. These patterns of articulation coupled with the rhythm discussed in the previous section are some of the key elements in jazz interpretation. These may seem a bit vague, but since this is mainly an aural tradition, many of these concepts simply cannot be put into words. You have to hear it to be able to play it!

VIBRATO

Perhaps the single most personal aspect of any style is the concept of vibrato. Good “classical” vibrato, whether on the saxophone or any other instrument, should be an integral part of the sound and help enhance the phrasing and interpretation of the performer. The speed and width of the vibrato may change for musical considerations and for a more dramatic effect, but it should never distract the listener or be in fact the only thing an audience will remember about your performance! In jazz, while used somewhat more as a coloring device, the vibrato still needs to support the musical line and is responsible for conveying a great deal of emotion and musicality. As in the classical style, this takes much listening, practice and **patience!**

INITIATING VERSATILITY

One question that might arise out of this discussion is “When is the best time to begin the journey of being a more versatile saxophonist?” My answer would be “Now!” The standards placed upon the 21st Century musician suggest that he/she needs to be as versatile as possible in order to become more “marketable” in today’s workplace. One way to initiate this concept of versatility is to listen to as much music as you can in every style and work to be able to perform in that style when called upon. This doesn’t mean that every saxophonist needs to have a box full of mouthpieces to take to the next gig (although most of us do), but have a couple of options that work. I’m always dismayed at seeing the young player trying to play jazz/commercial music on a mouthpiece that’s too open for them to handle. This can only lead to bad habits and technique, which need to be corrected as some point. Solid development of all of the fundamentals already mentioned is imperative **BEFORE** the player takes on any added musical responsibilities. I always suggest that the young performer start on a basic set-up that will help them develop a good sound and good habits, then work from that point to build versatility. This might take the first full year of playing, but setting a strong foundation will most certainly help insure success down the line.

SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

In order for the performer to become proficient in any style of musical performance, he/she must be totally immersed in the style being studied. It is not enough to listen to a few classical recordings or a few jazz recordings. Make lists of your favorite performers in any style and on any instrument. Try to copy them - exactly! Your own style will emerge out of your own concepts combined with the musical memory that you develop through listening. The style becomes not only something that you do, but something that is a real part of your personality. Individuals who are fortunate enough to be bilingual will tell you that they not only speak in more than one language, they can actually think in more than one language. This is not an unheard of goal for the musician! It is essential to know the similarities between these styles, but it is imperative that eventually each style is approached, as it's own means to achieve the same end. That end is musical expression. I welcome any/all input into this discussion. If you'd like to reach me you can do so at the address below:

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