

Taming the Saxophone

10 PRACTICAL TECHNIQUES FOR PRODUCING BETTER TONE

By Sean Murphy

The saxophone section of a wind ensemble can easily be one of the most frustrating to work with when it comes to producing a clear, characteristic tone. Sometimes, the road to an improved sound can be a long path of daily diligence and practice; however, there are many quicker solutions that will drastically improve a student's tone. Try the following techniques to troubleshoot your saxophone section.

1 Adjust the neck strap.

When used improperly, the neck strap can have detrimental effects on tone quality. Frequently, students have their neck straps too low. This causes a player's head to point downward, affecting the embouchure. It prevents proper distribution of weight along the top and bottom of the mouthpiece and constricts the throat, limiting breath support, resonance, and pitch manipulation. Conversely, students who set the neck strap too

high will place excess pressure on the bottom of the mouthpiece; their bottom lip will sit at a higher angle, limiting the reed's capacity to vibrate freely. To test strap height, first tell students to close their eyes so they can't compensate for the problem. Then tell them to bring the instrument up as if they were about to play, and have it lightly touch their face. This will give a visual of where the mouthpiece is touching. If it's above or below the lips, make the alteration.

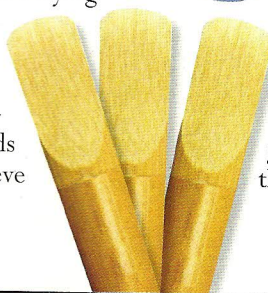
2 Rotate reeds and store them properly.

Reeds have the greatest correlation to tone production. To improve tone, have a rotation of at least four reeds. Playing the same reed day in and day out will drastically reduce its lifespan. Another important component is reed storage. Reeds come in a thin plastic sleeve

that prevents damage during shipment. Students frequently place reeds back in this sleeve after use, but the sleeve isn't designed to keep the tip of the reed flat. Over time, storing a reed in such a sleeve will cause the tip to warp and create irreversible damage. Some students leave the reed on the mouthpiece, which will most assuredly compromise its ability to produce a high-quality sound. An ideal way to store reeds is in a reed holder that keeps the reed's tip flat and allows it to dry out properly. There are many reasonably priced plastic reed guards.

3 Select the right reed.

Use double-cut reeds for classical music and concert band and single-cut for jazz. The stiffness or size of the reed is also a factor. A too-soft reed will often produce a thin, whiny tone. A size 2 is good for beginning students, but they should use at least a size 3—if





not 3½—by middle to high school to add depth to their tone. Give students the specific name of the reed if they're buying the reeds themselves. Some companies produce five different types, and if students just buy the first box they see of the approved brand, they may unknowingly be playing jazz reeds in concert band or vice versa. Many companies color-code their boxes to avoid this confusion.

4 Invest in a good mouthpiece. Most stock student mouthpieces are rather open to give beginners an ease of response. These mouthpieces, however, are more suited to jazz than classical music. If students use them in all ensembles, it will greatly inhibit production of the desired dark tone in a concert band. Encourage your middle school students to purchase a good classical mouthpiece; it will last

long past the remainder of their schooling if cared for properly. Another option is for the band program to purchase a set of mouthpieces: one baritone, one tenor, and at least one alto. It's especially helpful to own a classical mouthpiece for tenor and baritone saxophones. Students who play school-owned instruments aren't easily persuaded to buy mouthpieces for instruments they don't own. The standard and most widely used classical mouthpiece is from Selmer, size C*. If stored in a safe location with the cap on, a good mouthpiece will last for decades.

5 Use a mouthpiece patch. Mouthpiece patches are applied with a mild adhesive to the area of the mouthpiece where the front teeth sit. They have two benefits. First, they make the mouthpiece taller, causing students to open the oral cavity wider, which can help darken the sound of the instrument. Second, they enable you to visually monitor students' pressure on the mouthpiece. If they bite through the patch in only a few days, they may be using too much pressure, creating a pinched, less vibrant sound.

6 Check the ligature. Many students begin with a two-screw metal ligature. It's easy for the thin metal to become bent. A one-screw cloth ligature is a great step up from the basic model for producing a warm tone. These generally wrap around the mouthpiece with one screw on top. There are, however, many ligature choices. Some use plates that manipulate the type of response the reed gets, while others are designed to have limited contact with the mouthpiece. If the student wishes to move beyond the one-screw cloth model, it may take a bit of trial and error to discover the ligature type that works best.

7 Play overtones. A simple exercise to help students develop their control on the instrument is playing overtones. Many educators are familiar with overtones from brass pedagogy, but they can also be applied with great success to the saxophone. By playing a low B-flat, B, or C, saxophone players can manipulate their voicing in the oral cavity to play up the overtone series while still fingering the fundamental pitch. It's reasonable to expect a student to play an octave and then a fifth above

the fundamental, and some students can play up to the second octave and beyond. This is a fabulous way to improve tone, control, and intonation when used daily. Many textbooks include overtone exercises.

8 Warm up. Sometimes saxophonists believe that their octave key makes any type of warm-up unnecessary, because they can play in any range from the start. Even so, a methodical warm-up is still important for improving tone, vibration, intonation, breath control, and dynamic control. There are many more brass warm-ups available than standardized saxophone warm-ups; a good saxophone warm-up covers all keys and ranges. "Bob," a warm-up by Terry Steele, has stu-



dents play the descending diatonic pitches of any major key as follows: 5-3-1-5-3-2-1 (shown at right).

This exercise is most effective when starting on F above the staff in the key of B-flat major, since the lowest note in this key is the lowest keyed note on most saxophones, a B-flat. Moving the exercise up by half steps allows students to warm up in all keys and ranges, and using a drone pitch will lead to improved intonation.

9 Listen. This is a crucial component that frequently goes unconsidered. The sound of the classical saxophone is almost nonexistent in today's mainstream culture. Students are much more likely to be exposed to the

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sounds of jazz saxophone before they hear the saxophone solo in *Boléro*, for example. Without any knowledge of classical tone, students in concert band often reproduce

the sound that they believe is characteristic of the saxophone, usually in the vein of jazz or popular music, which is unacceptable for the wind ensemble. With the Internet, students can easily listen to classical music featuring saxophone. Having students purchase just a few albums will go a long way in developing their tonal conception, as well as informing them about famous saxophonists. Students can identify characteristics they like, as well as differences between their personal sound and a professional sound. The school could create a small library of classical recordings for students' use. A few artists with which to begin your classical saxophone collec-

tion are Claude Delangle, Timothy McAllister, Arno Bornkamp, Otis Murphy, Kenneth Tse, Frederick Hemke, Eugene Rousseau, and Donald Sinta. Also, students must listen to jazz artists to create a clear concept of an appropriate jazz sound, one that contrasts sharply with classical. Artists like John Coltrane, Chris Potter, Kenny Garrett, Sonny Rollins, and Cannonball Adderley all make for good listening. Saxophonists must be flexible and able to produce both jazz and classical sounds as appropriate.

10 Maintain the instrument, daily and yearly. The saxophone is known for its numerous moving parts, which need replacement or repair from time to time. Students should own a cloth or swab to

Bob (Saxophone Warm-up)

Terry Steele

remove moisture from the neck and body of the instrument after each playing. A swab used to remove moisture can prolong the life of specific pads. Drying out the palm keypads, A-flat pad, and low E-flat pad is a good habit: Moisture builds up there during storage and leads to sticky pads. Small squares of paper towel kept under the latter two pads while the horn is in the case will absorb any residual moisture. Also, a yearly trip to the repair shop helps. Leaks—difficult to spot—can be discovered and repaired. Pads wear away, key action needs to be regulated, and rusty springs need replacing.

Sometimes having the proper equipment can be half the battle. Implement some cost sharing between student and school. For example, the band program could purchase a classical tenor saxophone mouthpiece, while the student buys appropriate reeds and a storage case. Regardless, a good saxophone sound comes from methodical, daily, structured practice. Once good practice habits are in place, a student's abilities can easily be improved with any of these 10 tips.

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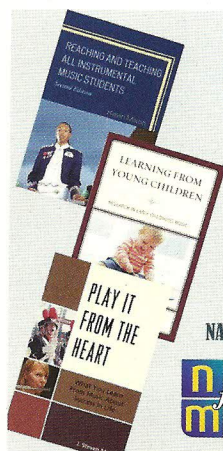
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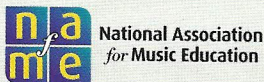
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