

The Easy Move from Alto Sax

By Andrew J. Allen

The transition from alto saxophone to tenor, baritone, or soprano is fairly easy, and for bands with an abundance of altos, this offers an opportunity for improved balance. Here are some tips for easing the transition between saxophones.

Equipment

All too often, improper equipment results in unnecessary difficulties for saxophonists switching to another member of the family. While any good-quality instrument will serve a young musician well, great care should be taken with the mouthpiece and reed combination. Many saxophonists will produce their best sound with a mouthpiece of medium tip opening, facing, and chamber, and with a medium-strength reed; a 3 works for almost all middle and high schoolers with nearly any saxophone. Sometimes adjustments must be made, but this guideline works most of the time. Avoid using jazz mouthpieces in concert band, saxophone quartets, or solo classical playing.

One other important piece of equipment is the neckstrap. Some of them

will not work for every size of saxophone. Students should be able to adjust the neckstrap so that the mouthpiece enters the mouth directly, without unnatural contortions of posture, and so that the student will not be supporting the weight of the saxophone with the hands.

Tone Production

Most problems that will arise from switching will be in producing a good sound. Any needed adjustments to the embouchure can be found quickly and by playing on the mouthpiece alone. This is an easy way for a student to learn what the best embouchure and air speed combination will be for the new instrument. They should match the mouthpiece to a reference pitch. A soprano saxophone mouthpiece, played correctly, should sound a concert D \sharp 6, alto a B5, tenor an A \flat 5, and baritone a D5. It should be noted that the student's embouchure for the new instrument should not be that far removed from the one used for their previous saxophone. If students are doing something drastically different to achieve the desired results, guidance may be in order.

Soprano

The soprano, used often in saxophone quartets but rarely in concert band and jazz ensemble works, is usually the least familiar to both young saxophonists and directors. When it is called for, however, it usually has an extremely important part, and soprano players definitely need to play with a good sound.

The most common mistake when switching to soprano is taking in far too much mouthpiece. This will result in a harsh, strident, and uncontrolled tone. On soprano, a player new to the instrument should take in less than feels necessary and then add a bit more if needed. It will be nearly impossible to play the correct pitch on the mouthpiece if it is too far in the mouth.

Always use a neckstrap with the soprano; this will alleviate a bit of the strain on the right hand and wrist. Avoid playing the instrument at the same angle as the clarinet; the soprano sax mouthpiece should enter the mouth at approximately the same angle as the alto or tenor mouthpiece. Students should avoid wrapping the right thumb around the back of the instrument.

Tenor

Surprisingly, students have quite a few problems switching to tenor from alto. This frequently is caused by the slightly larger size of the instrument. Recently, a colleague asked me for help with a student who had recently switched to tenor. Despite all appearances of a correct embouchure, the student was unable to produce a proper sound. I found that the young saxophonist was unknowingly bumping the left-hand side-keys open, most likely because he was unfamiliar with the size of the tenor. Once this was called to the student's attention, the problem vanished.

Students switching from alto will need to take in a bit more mouthpiece than they expect. If they start squeaking or have a harsher sound, they have gone too far and should back off a bit.

From L-R: tenor, bass (obscured by tenor player), contrabass, soprano, baritone, soprillo, alto



Photos courtesy of the National Saxophone Choir of Great Britain

The synergetic relationship created by the combination of reed and mouthpiece isn't complete without the inclusion of a ligature that has been engineered to coax out the finest attributes of each component, completing the circle and helping the player achieve his ultimate sound.

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Baritone

The largest problem in switching to the baritone saxophone is the sheer size of the instrument. Smaller students may wish to try a harness instead of a neckstrap. Directors should make sure that students are not resting the saxophone on the floor or their feet while playing. All of the warnings about bumping keys apply to the baritone sax as well.

Although I have seen some students take in too much baritone mouthpiece, it is a rare sight; students usually take in far too little mouthpiece. As with the tenor, students should take in more than they feel is correct, and if squeaks or a harsh sound occur, they will know that they have gone too far. A second concern with the baritone is the amount of air required to produce a large, beautiful sound. Students tend to tense up when playing this instrument. To prevent this, have students perform long tones, beginning on a written G4, crescendoing for four beats then decrescendoing for four beats, all with a large, beautiful sound. Have them do this, descending by half-steps, until they reach the lowest note on the instrument.

Alto

Although the alto is the most common saxophone among students, some students start on tenor and have never played another size. As with alto players switching to soprano, the most common problem has to do with embouchure formation and the amount of mouthpiece taken. Students should work toward producing a B5 on the mouthpiece.

The full saxophone family, from soprano through contrabass, spans nearly the range of a piano. One saxophonist, with the proper guidance and a few concentrated techniques, can gain fluidity and comfort on any of them in a very brief amount of time.

Andrew J. Allen is on the faculty of Claflin University and is a Presidential Doctoral Fellow at the University of South Carolina. He earned degrees in music education and saxophone performance from Tennessee Tech University and Central Michigan University, and has studied with Joseph Lulloff, John Nichol, and Phil Barham. Allen has premiered new works for saxophone throughout the United States and Europe, including a recent performance at the Sixteenth World Saxophone Congress in St. Andrews, Scotland.

New from Vandoren

Vandoren has launched its "We Are Vandoren" campaign to let players and friends know about the history of the family-owned company dating back to 1905. An accompanying website includes videos and whitepapers that outline various aspects of the manufacturing process for Vandoren reeds and mouthpieces. www.wearevandoren.com

Carl Fischer Christmas Music

Carl Fischer Music has released a new set of Christmas solo collections for advanced players, 14 Advanced Christmas favorites, arranged by Sean O'Loughlin. These distinctive arrangements include such holiday classics as "Angels We Have Heard on High," "The First Noel," and "Joy to the World," among others. O'Loughlin is a rising name in composition with commissions from the Boston Pops Orchestra and the Los Angeles Philharmonic. Each book will sell for \$16.99 and come with a companion CD featuring full orchestra accompaniment. www.carlfischer.com

Kaleidoscope Scholarships

Kaleidoscope Adventures, has announced that during this past spring, nine students were awarded it's annual Stellar Student Scholarship. Established in 2008, the scholarship gives funds to deserving students who cannot afford the entire cost of their school group trip. The scholarship is awarded to students based on financial need, academic eligibility, and dedication to their school. This year's winners were Mason Washer (N.H.), Larry Love (Indiana), Tre Roland (Florida), CJ Henderson (N.C.), Marissa Phillips (Virginia), Ryan Treadwell (Penn.), Katie Mignone (Penn.), Quinn Robert Kender (Penn.), and Jessica Loman (Florida). Based in Orlando, Florida, Kaleidoscope has specialized in student travel since 1993 and serves 40 destinations in the U.S. and Canada. www.kaleidoscopeadventures.com

Sherry Lee and Mateki Flutes

Mateki Flutes has announced that Sherry Lee is their sole U.S. distributor. Sherry Lee of Lee's Woodwinds in Grand Junction, Colorado may be reached at lflutes@aol.com or www.lflutes.com

New: National Sousa Registry

Directors may fill out an online form to post the names of winning students, current and previous, online. Go to www.sousawinners.com to register or view current and past winners.