Sound Concepts for the Saxophonist (Part 2)

Glen Gillis

This part of our two-installment article on the saxophone focuses on articulation, equipment and assembly, listening, tuning, scales, and how to approach new repertoire. The previous installment, published in the last issue of Canadian Winds / Vents canadiens (Spring 2008), discussed the instrument’s history, posture, hand position, breath support, embouchure, long tones, and vibrato.

Articulation

For the most part, the tongue should remain down or flat in the mouth, similar to saying “AH” when playing the normal range of the instrument (Bb below the staff to F# above the staff), and avoid forming syllables similar to “EH” or “EE.” It is helpful to visualize the middle and the front of the tongue acting like a slide where the air passes over the tongue directly into the tip of the reed. Anomalies arise involving voicing techniques when playing in the extended range. Successfully performing in the altissimo range requires the ability to shift the tongue quickly with minimal effort.

A common problem with novice musicians is articulating randomly. Unfortunately, if first learned incorrectly, extra time and effort are required to correct it. Not only is articulating in the proper places important, it is also crucial to differentiate between articulation styles and in some instances being careful not to over-accentuate, particularly if it is not indicated in the music. Style is enhanced through articulation, which is created with the air by releasing the tongue from the reed. The key is understanding that the tongue releases in the same manner whether playing staccato, marcato, or tenuto, etc. Thus, style is created by controlling and shaping the air immediately after the tongue releases from the reed. Even when the student grasps this concept intellectually, dedicated practice is still in order.

For students having difficulty with articulation, a simple exercise to address this issue is starting the tone with just the air and in slow motion stopping the note with the tongue, all the while maintaining consistent air support. Then release the tongue from the reed, again in slow motion. Repeat this several times and gradually speed up the exercise while maintaining the same audible attack and release. For the majority of players, the tip of the reed should make contact with a point slightly back from the tip on the upper side of the tongue. Since everyone’s physical make-up is different, there will be subtle variations of the tongue-to-reed contact. However, if the attack and release are executed correctly, the player should potentially be able to tongue lightly on the instrument as fast as s/he can repeat the syllable, “TU.”

Developing saxophonists should strive to match their articulation style and approach to the attacks and releases of a bowed string instrument. This may require listening episodes with recordings of professional musicians. String instruments are acoustic, constructed with a hollow body to allow the sound to resonate naturally, whereas wind instruments are not. When the saxophonist stops the air, the sound immediately stops; thus, the player must learn to subtly taper pitches by artificially inducing decay in the sound at the ends of phrases and articulations to match the resonance of an acoustical instrument.

Equipment and Assembly

It is important for developing saxophonists to play on good-quality equipment that includes a standard mouthpiece and ligature manufactured by a reputable company, and an instrument in good mechanical condition. Fortunately, there are a few excellent brands on the market to choose from. Students need to be educated about the brands available and watchful for new products on the market, though it is important to be vigilant for trendy brands, products, and accessories that do not truly address saxophonists’ needs.

Preferably, individuals should consider purchasing the highest-quality saxophone they can afford, particularly when upgrading from another model or brand. In many instances, developing players unfortunately cannot upgrade from a beginning to an intermediate- or professional-model saxophone due to financial constraints. In these circumstances, they should seriously consider purchasing a professional model mouthpiece and ligature, and if possible, a reconditioned used professional instrument as an acceptable interim compromise.

Good equipment also includes reeds. While it may be difficult to predict which reeds will produce a good sound, the best option is choosing a professional brand name that has an established reputation. It is crucial for both novices and advanced players to purchase several reeds at the same time. It is equally important to rotate at least four reeds at a time in one’s practice/performance routine as it not only keeps the embouchure from conforming to any one reed in a given time period, it also ensures several back-ups for practice and performance situations. Reeds eventually lose strength and sound-quality over time, but not as quickly when used on a rotation basis.

Most beginning players start on a 1.5 or 2-strength reed, and as they advance, the reed strength should be increased. Most professional players settle around a 3-strength reed, and the notion that “the stronger the reed the better the player” is a misconception. Advanced players who use reeds harder than 3-strength do so purely out of preference. An excellent resource for information on reed adjustments, amongst other material, is Larry Teal’s The Art of Saxophone Playing.

It is also important to position the reed accurately on the mouthpiece. Avoid rushing the process, as this can compromise proper assembly. To align the reed on the mouthpiece accurately, start by installing the mouthpiece on the greased saxophone neckpiece, and then place the ligature and reed on the mouthpiece. The reed should be flush with the rails and tip of the mouthpiece. Once the reed is correctly in place, one can do a blow-check to make sure the sound and resistance feel familiar. The last step in the assembly of the instrument should be to align the neckpiece/mouthpiece/ligature/reed apparatus properly on the body of the saxophone.

Listening

Attention to sound and heightening awareness to all nuances of one’s playing can be quite revealing. One suggestion is to practice in a quiet dark room. When sight is taken out of the equation, more energy and attention tend to shift to the senses of touch and hearing. To a lesser degree, this can be achieved by closing the eyes to focus and listen more intently. The player should also get in the habit of being in the mind-set that s/he is not only a player/performer, but a listener as well. Focusing on sound through all practice/performance activities is a powerful way to discover many facets of the individual’s playing. Another way to heighten attention to sound detail is through recording sessions, both formal and informal. Recordings provide accurate feedback as to how one really sounds, as distinct from one’s perception. In addition, videotaping a
practice session or a performance is also helpful to capture other aspects of one’s playing.

Listening to recordings is important but, whenever possible, attending live concerts of professional artists is extremely beneficial. Over time, both types of listening activities can help solidify a sound concept or sound preference in the developing musician’s mind. Striving to emulate (or what I refer to as “chasing the sound in your head”) is, again, an effective way to help advance a student’s sound.

Tuning
Developing saxophonists should be familiar with all alternate fingerings of the saxophone. These can foster improved technical fluency in a given musical passage, provide desired timbre change at a particular moment in the music, and facilitate adjustments for blending/tuning purposes. Although the latter function may produce subtle changes, many times it is the best option when playing in an ensemble. Every instrument and player in a group will generally have some minor tuning tendencies, thus adjustments are required.

Pressing keys to raise the pitch (to vent or shorten the air column) or to lower the pitch (to lengthen the air column) can achieve pitch correction on the saxophone. An excellent resource that provides specific fingering adjustments for tuning is Jean-Marie Londeix’s Hello! Mr. Sax. Lip adjustments (the muscles of the lower lip) can sometimes produce similar results: relaxing to drop pitch or adding more support to raise the pitch slightly.

Changing airspeed or extreme dynamic levels can alter pitch, too; thus, as one increases volume, more lip support may be necessary to compensate for pitch drop. Conversely, as one decreases volume, less lip support may be necessary to counteract the tendency of the pitch to drift sharp. Although the desired results of pitch correction can be achieved through this method, one must be careful not to compromise tone quality and timbre.

Last, the oral cavity can subtly affect pitch, but should be an alternative only for advanced players. This technique, known as voicing, involves manipulating the throat from an “AH” shape to more of an “EE” position. Through the pitch adjustments of the lip, throat, or airspeed, it must be noted that it is much easier to lower the pitch appreciably than it is to raise it.

Scales
Scales and scale-related exercises combine tone and technique development. Larry Teal’s The Saxophonist’s Workbook contains numerous tonal and technical exercises, as well as the full range of major, harmonic/melodic minor, and chromatic scales. It is most helpful to memorize the scales and related exercises so one’s full attention can be focused on sound production. That said, one of the best exercises is to practice scales with different tempi using a variety of tonguing patterns, particularly chromatic scales and chromatic loops covering the full range of the instrument.

The chromatic scale is like a “multi-vitamin” you should take every day, or at least with every practice session. A five-minute chromatic workout at the beginning of the practice session can be extremely helpful for several reasons: to foster note connection and give the sensation of playing long tones; to aid the shaping of musical lines; to inculcate muscle memory of the fingers in playing evenly (and co-ordination of fingers and tongue, where applicable); and to work towards a consistent tone colour throughout the ranges of the instrument.

Approaching New Repertoire
There are several resources available to guide the saxophonist in repertoire selection. Among them is Jean-Marie Londeix’s A Comprehensive Guide to the Saxophone Repertoire, which should be available in music libraries. This is a listing of all pertinent solo and ensemble literature written for the saxophone 1844-2003. As the saxophonist explores new solo material, theoretical, historical, and aesthetic inquiries should be a part of learning the music. From a practice standpoint, the music should be approached systematically and slowly, where necessary, with a metronome.

An established system of marking the music is helpful to expedite progress. Trills, turns, grace notes, mordents, and other ornamentation can be initially left out, as long as doing so does not interfere with the rhythms, and then added later. Technical challenges should be isolated and played slowly but evenly. Correcting uneven eighth and/or sixteenth rhythms should be worked through slowly with the incorporation of alternate fingerings, where applicable, that make sense idiomatically.

The player should try to feel the first few notes of fast technical passages acutely under the fingers and blow through, to experience connection in the line and to home muscle memory in the fingers. Practicing problematic sections slurred using other rhythms, such as triplets and double-dotted combinations, can help gain dexterous control. As one progresses, it is also helpful to finger-practice the music using a metronome, both slowly and up to tempo, concentrating on fingering precision with the rhythms and tempi. While doing so, one should “speak” the articulations for co-ordination with the fingers even though air is not blowing through the instrument.

Strive to play true dynamics and produce only forte and fortissimo dynamic levels as control of pitch and tone will allow. Dynamics are not based upon how loudly one can play, but rather how softly one can play, again with control. As dynamics decrease, intensity should increase to maintain pitch and connection through the musical line. Properly connecting piano and pianissimo dynamic levels effectively can be experienced like the sensation of a “screaming whisper,” again involving air control.

Final Thoughts
In conclusion, whatever activities are pursued in the development of tone and technique on the saxophone, focusing on the intended outcomes is central. Since each individual possesses different learning styles and capacities (e.g., visual, aural, and kinesthetic) (Cleveland, 1984), an appropriate practice regimen suggested by the instructor to the student can help significantly in building and maintaining performance success. An excellent teaching technique is the use of verbal imagery, particularly when dealing with the physiological aspects of a performance. For a fast technical passage, the student may focus on an image of a hot arrow projecting through butter to give the mental concept of pushing through with little effort.

To encourage good tone, emulating the voice of a professional singer can be helpful in establishing an auditory concept. A kinesthetic approach to explaining proper air support or phrase shaping might direct the student to experience the sensation of blowing with degrees of coldness or speed. In each of these cases, the idea is to focus the student’s attention on an image, an auditory concept, or physical feeling to aid in tonal and technical development.

I hope that both installments of this article have provided useful information and ideas on saxophone playing to students and band directors alike. Questions
about saxophone playing may be sent to me at the following e-mail address:
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References

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