Sinta on Sax

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Ultimately you must be your own best teacher. You must set your goals very high, and be very discriminating. Listening to yourself and finding objectionable qualities, and making the effort to fix these.

Using a mirror and a recording device on a regular basis are excellent ways to do this.

The Beginning Saxophone Player (Concept, Rhythm, and Breathing)

Typically 4^{th} – 6^{th} grade, they probably have had a small amount of musical instruction. They are small and the instrument is big and clumsy. After a small amount of instruction we have them playing with a disastrous sound.

First we must provide the child with the tools to make rapid progress. It is to your advantage to play some saxophone music for the student. Give them the opportunity to hear how the saxophone sounds.

Before the child plays they need to have a concept of the sound in their mind. By allowing them to listen to the saxophone first, they get a tonal conception. At this point show them that the saxophone is a long cone, bigger than trumpet, flute, or clarinet, and takes a great deal of air.

If you want the student to read music, they should learn to do this before they have the instrument, perhaps a couple of weeks.

With a concept and some basic rhythm skills, they can then work on the physical demands of the saxophone.

The Strap

Frequently, beginners have strap that doesn't adjust properly.

Breathing

What we want to avoid in the beginner is a distorted concept of inhalation. For some reason, when we have beginners play the saxophone, they begin to breath unnaturally from the chest. The shoulders and chest cavity raise up. "Tarzan-like.'

In the beginning, we should encourage them to inflate the lungs fully. The problem is that our rib cage is inflexible.

There are two ways to help inflate the lungs. First, try to draw the lungs down. This is done with the diaphragm, and the muscles that pull the diaphragm down, compressing the intestines. Thus, better expansion down helps decrease the air pressure in the lungs. This is the way you breathe when sleeping, it is the unconscious, relaxed breath. The abdomen extends outward on inhalation. When laughing the abdomen moves in and out. Don't draw the abdomen in on inhalation. Think about how liquid fills a cup: from bottom to top.

We must be preoccupied with inhaling fully.

Don't 'huff.'

Embouchure

This is a terribly important area of saxophone playing.

Saxophonists do use various types of embouchures. Looking at the embouchure of others is very helpful. Some teachers find it easier to begin the student, by using only the mouthpiece on the neck. This reduces the number of elements the students has to deal with.

First, the students must place the teeth on top of the mouthpiece. Don't let them use a double lip embouchure like a bassoon. Many don't like the vibration on their teeth. In that case, put a patch on the mouthpiece.

The lower teeth are covered by the red portion of the bottom lip. The degree varies from player to player, depending on the amount of red portion of their bottom lip.

Hanging on the top teeth, and using as little firmness on the bottom as possible, then tuck the corners of the mouth inward. Think of the embouchure as a rubber band around the mouthpiece. A tight embouchure can be very abusive on the bottom lip. Another visual is the drawstring on a laundry bag. We want to gather the lips around the mouthpiece. This is called a muscle wheel. It is the Larry Teal approach.

Avoid putting the mouthpiece in and 'smiling.'

Most people prefer the round embouchure, because it is much prettier to listen to. The other thing is that it will allow you to play longer, because you aren't abusing the lower lip.

Avoid putting too little mouthpiece in the mouth. Depending upon the concept of sound you are after, this amount will vary.

Another thing to avoid is rolling out the bottom lip. It is too extreme.

The chin is quite flat, not bunched upwards. This is a tough problem to change, so take care that younger kids don't do this.

Frequently, if the student uses the smile style embouchure, take a short length of hose, and squeeze it while you are doing other things. It is important in gaining the strength needed to cushion with the bottom lip, and getting the pressure off of the reed.

Try to eliminate pressure from the bottom (Jaw). We have to use this bottom for vibrato and plying 'cool.'

Encourage your students not to 'puff' their cheeks. Sinta puffs his cheeks!

Producing Sound – Attack

Form the embouchure and keep the concept of sound in your mind.

In producing a sound, first, reject inn advance an ugly tone. Don't make noises you can't use in musical situations. Make beautiful sounds only.

Inhale through the nose, put the tongue in place, blow the air against the tongue, and then release. This is similar to wadding up a spit ball and practice jettisoning this ball. This allows you to transfer this skill to the saxophone. You are building up pressure and releasing it.

Tonguing on the saxophone is not attacking, it is releasing.

The tongue is a valve. Put it against the reed, build up some air pressure and release the tongue. This allows the reed to vibrate as the air enters the mouthpiece.

The students should practice tonguing on the neck. Set the embouchure, breath through the nose, and practice tonguing. Keep the tongue close to the reed, touch the reed gently, don't blow too much air,, and practice sustaining for 15 seconds. If you can do this, assemble the neck to the horn. Practice Morse code.

Don't move the jaw with the tongue motion.

Usually the first note to learn is the middle C on the horn.

Pitch and Intonation

You can play the horn in or out of tune. Even the best horns are out of tune. No wind instrument is made with perfect intonation. You must work on proper intonation every day. Take care that you don't learn to play out of tune, as you can learn to hear out of

tune as well. All students can hear when a note is out of tune. Most students should get with a tuner or a piano, and try to play in tune with them.

You can change the pitch on saxophone in two ways, changing the jaw pressure, or moving the mouthpiece. I suggest tuning on concert Bb and concert Eb. Then, put a mark on the mouthpiece. As you mature, you'll need to work with a machine, to learn how to play every note in tune.

The major problem note is the middle D (with the 8va key). This is where saxophonists get in trouble. These notes are sharp.

After finding the right position for the mouthpiece on the neck, then jaw can be used to adjust the pitch. That is your responsibility.

Don't use the dial on a tuner to have the eyes tell use when you're in tune. Your ears must be the judge. You can't learn pitch through the eyes.

A small portable keyboard is inexpensive. Put a piece of paper in the key so that it will sustain a major chord. Then, practice playing all the notes with a chord sustained in the background. Practice playing unisons, and then octaves. Then play the perfect fifths.

The jaw and the tongue must drop down for middle D.

***Don gets down with the groovy beat. What a cool and neato dude. These intonation exercises are totally cool man. I wish I had a suit that was as cool as his.

Saxophone players need the flexibility to manipulate pitch; don't worry about scooping.

Children who practice with harmonic information do better.

Vibrato

A jiggle or quiver in the sound, vibrato is a very important addition to a saxophone player's early skills.

***Sinta turns his head from left to right, and raises his eyebrows while playing expressively, especially when he is playing 'jazz.'

The vibrato is a pitch change. This is accomplished by moving the lower jaw. In slow motion you can see the jaw moving. Practice this without the horn, chewing the lower lip. This is a skill that takes a while to develop. When a student wants to learn this technique, this is probably the time to introduce them to vibrato.

Some players play a very fast vibrato, some very slow. The Marcel Mule vibrato is very fast and unique.

Vibrato influences come from singers, wind players, AND ALSO VOCALISTS (they are different the singers.). They can show us how to use vibrato in a stylistic way.

You should use a jaw vibrato. Use a metronome over a period of months. Avoid a jaw motion that moves forward and back. The jaw should move up and down, like chewing.

Ultimately the forward/back motion won't be fast enough.

The metronome is a great friend; a wonderful pet. It is hard on the ego.

Use 4 jaw undulations per tick on the metronome. Quarter note equals 60/minute. Avoid unevenness of jaw motion. Eventually the vibrato will sound nice, at first you will sound objectionable. Vibrato will add to the beauty of your playing. James Galway uses a rapid vibrato. You should have the ability to play vibrato at any speed and any width. Use vibrato as seasoning. The vibrato should change, and not be too predictable. Watch a violin player apply a vibrato. This will influence what you do in the practice room.

In a dramatic section, add more vibrato, as in the second movement of the Creston Sonata. 4 undulations at quartet note equals 100.

Buy records of the great players to help develop your concepts; your growth will be accelerated by listening.

Dynamics

The saxophone is very much like the human voice in respect to dynamics. It is capable of playing louder than any other woodwind instrument. Try to add dynamics to the performance of music. One of the prerequisites for a successful performance is that you interest your audience in your playing. Dynamics are very important for this.

Great opera singers have power and projection. Playing loud requires that you use air/fuel at a very rapid rate. There are very few times in a performers life when ….

Work on dynamic extremes. PP – FF - Work on both little by little.

Vibrato and dynamics will make your practice much more interesting.

Technique

Technique is the ability to play rapidly. The fastest way to an even technique is with the metronome, especially with scale practice. Put scale into your daily routine.

The palm keys and the little fingers are the major technical problem areas in our playing.

Develop all of your scales through the full register of the saxophone. Then use the metronome to scrutinize your playing. Make the scale difficult. Address the difficult and it will become less so.

The low notes also a problem; these keys are difficult to push down. Develop a callous of the tip of the little finger. It sounds awful down there also. Spend time in the lower register.

***Sinta consistently plays crookedly into the mouthpiece!

Add articulation exercises to your scale practice.

***Sinta left hand fingers stay very curved in the palm keys, the right hand not so much. He does puff his cheeks a bit.

Keep a diary of how fast you can go on scales. There may not be a limit. Going fast requires that you listen carefully. Enjoy the challenge

Tonguing/Articulation

At all times you must continue to work on the speed of your single tonguing. "Ta ta ta ta ta ta ta ." Don't cop out and slur. Most of us need to develop speed. Tonguing will improve when thinking about sound. Don't let the tone change with tongue speed. One way. Placing ink on the reed, then tongue and the black mark will transfer to the tongue.

***Sinta originally used three different positions of his tongue. He uses the back of the tongue. That is where the ink marked appeared way back, perhaps an inch and a half from the tip.

Ping Pong Ball. This is an approach to increasing the tonguing speed. With the tongue as a valve, try to imitate a bouncing ping pong ball, as it speeds up .you should also.

Amore rapid way of tonguing is to double tongue. Many think this is a gimmick. Flute players do this, so can sax players. When need to develop articulation rates comparable to flute, violin, cello, and trumpet. This is simply a skill that takes advantage of the tongue motion. Tah-Kah. Work without the saxophone at first. Say these syllables as fast as you can. It is surprisingly easy. Practice with the neck-piece first. Quarter note at 208 is fairly quick.

Putting double tongue with scales is the tough part.

The double tonguing he does is amazing. Watching him, I notice that in the low register he bunches his chin, and in the upper register he points his chin muscles. He bites more in the lower register I think.

Al Galladoro was a great player that could double-tongue masterfully.

In time the saxophone will take its place with the great instruments of all time. Double tonguing will be an accepted technique on the saxophone when this happens.

Range

When Adloph Sax conceived the instrument, he conceived of the altissimo range, even though this is greater than the keyed notes on the instrument. The altissimo is beyond the normal range, and Sax envisioned that the sax would play to the C above the high, palm key F. Jimmy Dorsey played higher, and so did Sigurd Rascher. We owe Rascher a great debt. The new horns have a high F# key. The music we now must play is written at least an octave higher than the normal range. Playing in the altissimo register is frustrating for many.

A fingering is unnecessary. You don't need a strong embouchure. Just trust that the coaxing of the altissimo is due in large part to positive attitude. Learn to be in touch with the inside of the mouth. This will influence the change of the resonating size of the inside of the mouth. Early on, practice overtones on low Bb.

Make a game out of this. The mind sets up the mouth shape through kinesthetic. Learn how to short-circuit the kinesthetic memory. Take the mouthpiece off. Make a roll of newspaper sheet and blow the mouthpiece into it. Dr. Authur Bonade did this originally; Sigurd Rascher also had a sax with no keys. Try to blow with the normal embouchure, and moving the tongue, change the overtones. Immediately move to the saxophone. Have an idea of the pitch that you want to play. An understanding of the overtone series is very important. The tongue position is what brings in these overtones. Over time the mind will be in control of the tongue. Don't ignore the squeaks, as they are overtones also. In about a month you should be able to play bugle calls. Notice in the mirror, the motion of the throat; this is a voicing skill.

Closing Remarks

All of these remarks will apply to all of the saxophones. A few basic changes in embouchure might be necessary.