

“Steps to Excellence”
A Yamaha Video Clinic
Featuring
Saxophone Artist Eugene Rousseau

Session I: Getting the Tone
Session II: Getting into Other Things
Session III: Getting it Together

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Session I: Getting the Tone

Two Fundamentals in saxophone playing:

1. A round Embouchure
2. Warm Air

Embouchure:

The upper teeth should rest on the mouthpiece. The lower lip should curl over the bottom teeth, providing a cushion for the reed. Keeping the embouchure round provides a good cushion for the reed.

The bite should be just strong enough to allow the reed to vibrate properly. If the bite is too strong the tone will sound pinched and thin. If the bite isn't strong enough, the tone will be unstable.

If too much mouthpiece is in the mouth, the tone will honk. If not enough is in the mouth, the tone will be dull and lifeless.

Always, keep the embouchure round.

The air must be warm. Proper use of the air is very similar to fogging a mirror, or cleaning eyeglasses. In blow this way, the air will last only a few seconds. But, used with the mouthpiece, it can be sustained, and enable the saxophone to sound its best.

Taking a breath for playing differs from the normal breath, because we need more air more quickly. To do this: 1. With the teeth resting on the mouthpiece, breathe through the corners of the mouth. 2. Take the breath as if gasping, very quickly. 3. Breathe deeply.

Pitch refers to the standard to which we tune, ie A=440, so we know the point of placement on the bocal (or neck). Saxophones are designed to play at 72 degrees at 440-442.

Tuning refers to the adjustment of the mouthpiece to the pitch level.

Intonation refers to adjustments made after tuning.

Mouthpiece adjustments can affect tone quality.

Find the correct position on the bocal, and mark this place.

Checking the air and embouchure. The mouthpiece pitch can be changed by an octave, by using cool and warm air. The correct pitch produced by alto saxophones mouthpiece, is concert A above the staff. For tenor, concert G above the staff. For baritone, concert D in the staff. For soprano concert C above the staff.

It is important to play these pitches fortissimo.

Sax and clarinet are much different in the way the air is used. On the saxophone, warm air is used. The clarinet uses cool air. It is not possible to get condensation on a mirror using cool air.

Getting into Other Things

Basic hand position

The hands should be curved as if holding a ball in each.

The left thumb should be positioned at an angle formed when the area below the knuckle of the index finger touches the high D key. This makes it easy to hit the pearl keys, the curved hands allow the player to hit the side keys and lower 'cluster' in the right hand.

The right hand should be positioned by first placing the fingers on the pearl keys. Then place the thumb lightly under the thumb rest.

The weight of the saxophone should be carried by the strap, never by the hands.

The side keys should be played with the side of the index finger.

The third (high E) side key should be played with the fingers pointing toward the pearl keys.

Sitting and standing positions

The basic rule:

1. The weight of the instrument must be on the neckstrap. Always let the saxophone come to you. If the strap is too long, you will be tempted to reach down for the sax. This can tempt you to lift the horn with the hands, increasing tension in the body. The bent neck can also affect tone.

Always adjust the neckstrap, the bocal, and the mouthpiece.

Straight Soprano: not possible to use a neckstrap. The Right thumb holds the weight. The curved neck soprano solves this problem.

The alto: Two correct positions: Held in front or on the right side. When in front, sit well forward and don't rest the instrument on the chair. When on the side, it should be well forward. In standing, the position will vary. The neck strap will be shorter for each saxophone when standing, than when sitting. The right forearm should rest gently against the body. The bow of the saxophone will rest gently against the body.

The tenor saxophone: While seated, it must be held on the right side

The baritone saxophone can be played with a stand or a neckstrap when sitting. This saxophone must come to the player. Use a good neckstrap.

Reed mouthpiece and ligature

Place the reed on the mouthpiece, after the ligature. Reed should be even with the tip and the sides of the mouthpiece. Tighten the ligature screws snugly, not excessively. Medium strength reeds and a medium mouthpiece facing are best for establishing a good foundation.

Check the reed for a good seal on the mouthpiece, by sucking the air out and listening for a pop. If it doesn't seal, it may be warped. Sanding the reed can help reduce the warp.

The reed must also be balanced. Use only the low register. He plays the horn at an angle in the mouth. He adjust the reed around the bark, and just back of the tip.

The saxophone tone is enriched by vibrato.

There are two requirements before beginning vibrato.

First you must have a good tone. This is achieved by a good embouchure, and proper use of the air. Secondly, you must know how to play the chromatic scale over the full range of the saxophone.

Vibrato is created by a regular change intensity (dynamic) of the tone, and a regular but very slight change in pitch.

The vibrato is produced through a combination of lip, jaw, diaphragm, and throat. The pulsation of air (tremelo), the intensity change, and slight change of pitch are achieved by using a "va-va-va" syllable. The movement of the jaw is so small that it usually can't be seen. The change in pitch is below, not above the pitch. Use a metronome to keep the pulsations regular. Practice three or four undulations per beat using a comfortable tempo. A good speed for performance is usually 320 undulations per minute, or four per beat at a tempo of 80.

The vibrato can be more intense, deeper and pronounced when playing loudly. The opposite is true in soft passages. When the tone is extremely soft, no vibrato is used. Vibrato should not be used on every note.

Articulation and Tonguing

The first note is often unclear. Too much tension in the tongue, and too much buildup of air pressure cause distortion of the attack. The air must always move in the direction of the saxophone, but the tongue must move away from the reed. The tongue is the consonant and the air is the vowel. T-aaah. The air and vowel are much more important than the tongue and consonant. Think of this syllable as having a very small 'T,' in fact, many players use a 'D' sound instead.

The tongue should touch the reed at the point that is most natural. Pronounce the syllable Tah or Dah. Then with the saxophone in the mouth, whisper the same syllable. The point of contact between tongue and reed is correct. The tip of the reed will be touched by the tongue, usually slightly back from the tip of the tongue. The tip of the tongue happens only rarely.

Practice alternating 'Ah ' and 'Tah.'

Sometimes articulation is clearer without the tongue.

There are two ways to stop a tone. Stopped with the air or the tongue. If there is time, never stop the air with the tongue. Use the tongue to stop the air when the end of one tone becomes the next, as in a series of rapid staccato notes.

The final note of a phrase is normally stopped with the air, so that the ending is smooth.

Practicing

There is no substitute for practicing. Clearly it is far better to learn good habits instead of unlearning bad ones.

Three steps to good practice habits

1. Practice regularly.
2. Practice intelligently. Set reasonable goals and use variety. Take breaks.
3. Use good practice techniques.

Tone Quality
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Tone Quality

A good warmup will include some playing in the low register. Octave 2:1 exercises.

The low note is more important than the upper one. Don't change the air or embouchure. If the lower notes don't speak the bite is too strong, or the air isn't warm enough.

Proper hand position, embouchure and air can be checked by playing hi D to low G, and hi G# to low C#, hi D to low B.

Keep the air warm and a round solid embouchure.

Check your mouthpiece pitch daily.

Fingers should travel the least distance possible for technique. Keep the fingers in contact with the keys at all times. Work in increasingly smaller subdivisions of the beat, using combinations of notes of either hand. The fingers must always move at the same speed, regardless of the note values, only the frequency changes.

Left hand – when moving from the pearls to the palm keys 1&2 (D&Eb), use the side of the finger in a rocking motion. For high F, the fingers will be out of position when returning to the pearl keys.

The front F key can be opened in either way, rolling or moving the entire finger.

On the low notes, the little finger must slide or glide on the keys. On the B key, the finger must curve. The B to Bb move must slide. C# to Bb requires a diagonal motion.

Chromatic F# should be used with the tip of the ring finger. High F# key is operated this way also.

The move from the low Eb to low C, the finger should glide. Rub the finger on the nose for lubrication.

Hi E requires that the wrist is turned.

The G# key is articulated, the low C#, B, and Bb keys will also operate the G#. This is an advantage in playing G# to these low notes. Makes sure this adjustment is good.

Side Bb is used for chromatic movement. The bis key is best for most other intervals using Bb. Only the rare case is bis used chromatically. When using the right hand Bb, the middle finger gives the best result. The index finger won't provide as good of a tone quality.

Alternate C#.: Middle D fingering with the first 2 fingers in the left hand. Use this technique when moving between D, D#, E, and F, to the C#.

Use the chromatic F# for most chromatic passages. Do not use it when the F# is preceded or followed by a note using the ring finger.

Alternate C: side C should be used when playing B-C-B, of chromatic passages.

Front F: the front F key can be used for rapid skips to hi F, if the note preceding or following the F does not use the index finger of the left hand on the pearl key. If the index finger is already down, use the side of the index finger in a rocking motion for the hi F key.