The Flexible Saxophonist:

A Setup Guide for Teachers and Players to Thrive in Any Style

About Me

Lecturer of Classical Saxophone at Sonoma State University

Education

- Doctor of Musical Arts (D.M.A.) - USC Thornton School of Music
- Master of Music - UT Austin Butler School of Music
- Bachelor of Music - UT Austin Butler School of Music

Major Teachers

- Harvey Pittel - Acclaimed soloist; longtime Professor of Saxophone at UT Austin
- James Rotter - Los Angeles Philharmonic saxophonist; longtime saxophone teacher at USC

My teaching is part of the Joe Allard pedagogical lineage through Harvey Pittel. My terminology may differ from Allard's, but the underlying principles remain rooted in that tradition.

Active concerto soloist, chamber musician, recording artist (Azure Sky Records), and clinician

Endorsing artist with Eastman Winds and Key Leaves

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Saxophone Basics

The saxophone is a highly flexible instrument, which has allowed it to thrive in numerous genres of music all over the world.

The saxophone borrows from many instrument groups:

- Precise articulation of the reeds
- Big, full sound of the brass
- Virtuosity of the strings
    - Adolphe Sax explicitly conceived the saxophone as an instrument that could approach the character of the strings while possessing greater power and intensity
    - *"I sought a means of remedying this by creating an instrument which, through the character of its voice, could approach the string instruments, but which could possess greater strength and intensity than the latter." — Adolphe Sax, 1846 saxophone patent (English translation)*

Many of the saxophone's challenges come from its acoustical design

- Its conical bore, tone-hole layout, mouthpiece, and octave vents create inherent differences in resonance, intonation, and tone color across the range
- Players often compensate for these differences with embouchure choices and equipment. Those choices can help, but they can also trade one advantage for another and reduce flexibility

This pedagogical approach gives players the ability to get their desired tone and style, without restricting the flexibility of the instrument.

Brief History

This approach draws heavily on the teaching of clarinetist and saxophonist Joe Allard

- Allard taught clarinet and saxophone at Juilliard
- Performed professionally as a clarinetist and saxophonist, including with NBC ensembles
- Highly sought-after teacher of both instruments; his students and advisees included some of the most influential jazz and classical saxophonists of the modern era
    - Notable Jazz Saxophonists
        - Michael Brecker
        - Stan Getz
        - Dave Liebman
    - Notable Classical Saxophonists
        - Harvey Pittel
        - Kenneth Radnofsky
        - Roger Greenberg

Pedagogical Lineage: Joe Allard → Harvey Pittel → Andrew Harrison

Embouchure

The embouchure involves the muscles around the mouth. How we use its different components has a tremendous effect on reed vibration and, therefore, sound.

- Bottom lip
    - Covering your teeth. How much?
        - Position 1 - Little lip over the teeth
            - Pros: Subtone-oriented sound, emphasizes lower partials, blends easily, easy low register
            - Cons: Softer sound, less responsive high register, harder to project
        - ★ Position 2 - “Trace the Line”
            - Trace the line at the border between the skin of your chin and the pink part of your lower lip. Put that line on top of your bottom teeth
            - Neutral position: Allows for soft and loud dynamics and a balance of high and low partials. Low notes are harder than in Position 1, but high notes are much easier
        - Position 3 - All the way in
            - Amplifies high partials. Very bright and penetrating. The reed vibrates very freely, so the sound can become spread. Useful for extremely loud and/or high playing
    - Jaw pressure
        - More bite pressure
            - Pushes the reed closer to the tip of the mouthpiece. Smaller/softer sound, but a more even tonal scale. Easier high notes, harder low notes
        - ★ Less jaw pressure
            - Allows more reed vibration. Bigger/louder sound. Easier low notes, tougher high notes. Less even scale
- Sides of mouth
    - Push in, rubber band seal around the mouthpiece
        - Less side-to-side vibration of the reed.
        - Darker tone, smaller sound, even tonal scale
    - ★ Pulled back toward jaw hinge, relaxed not tight

        - More side to side reed vibration
        - Bigger sound, well rounded tone, less even tonal scale
- Top lip
    - **NOTHING! DON'T USE IT!**
        - Active downward pressure can recruit unnecessary facial and throat tension

Lots of trade-offs come with decisions about the embouchure. What if I want it all?

Tone Imagination & Voicing

Tone Imagination - The Sound in Our Heads

- In order to have a great sound on the saxophone, you must have a clear vision of that sound in your head
    - Comes from listening to great players on your instrument
    - The imagined sound then guides flexible adjustments in the vocal tract

Voicing - Using the shape of the tongue and vocal tract to influence response, pitch, and tone

- Much like singing! We don't consciously calculate every muscular adjustment; voicing can work the same way on saxophone

Developing tone imagination and voicing will give you the ability to use the embouchure with the most flexibility, while maintaining even tone and pitch through the range of the instrument

Developing Voicing Using Overtones

Overtones are frequencies above the fundamental that help make up a complex tone. On saxophone, we can isolate upper partials by fingering a low fundamental and using voicing to produce higher members of its harmonic series

- Much like brass players, we can use overtone exercises to inform our voicing and, therefore, our pitch, response, and tone
- **The register key BREAKS the saxophone**
    - Activating the octave vent changes which resonances the instrument favors and can change pitch, response, and tone color
    - Overtone work lets us practice producing upper-register resonances without relying on the octave mechanism to do all of the work

Step 1

Learn to play notes without the octave key, using voicing.

- Learn to play your middle D-G without activating the octave
- Then play the same written notes with the octave key and match the tone, air, and voicing you used earlier
    - This trains your vocal tract to find those resonant positions rather than relying on the octave mechanism alone

Step 2

Matching Overtones

- Using low note fingerings (C#, C, B, Bb), play overtones above the fundamentals, then match the fingered pitch using the same air, throat setting, and tone

- The goal is to do this all the way to high F. As the exercise develops, players become less dependent on the octave key to create upper-register voicing and can substitute more resonant, intentional voicings for the instrument's default response.

Developing voicing allows for more comprehensive control of tuning, tone, and response, while also expanding the available range of dynamics and color.

No matter what style you play in, this system supports it. Tone imagination should lead; embouchure and equipment are tools that should serve the sound you imagine rather than dictate it.

Recommended Artists for Developing Tone Imagination

- Jazz - Michael Brecker, Branford Marsalis, Stan Getz, Eric Marienthal
- Classical - Harvey Pittel, Dan Goble, Andrew Harrison, Jeremy Justeson

My Setup

Saxophone - Eastman EAS852 52nd Street or EAS850 Rue Saint-Georges
Mouthpiece - Vandoren Profile AP3
Ligature - Vandoren Optimum
Reeds - Vandoren Traditional

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