MCMASTER MUSIC EDUCATION NOTEBOOK

Helpful Hints for Happy Saxophonists

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Producing the tone

1. Set teeth on top of the mouthpiece - You should feel the weight of the head resting firmly on top of the mouthpiece so that the mouthpiece does not move when you tongue.

2. Inhaling - Breath with your top teeth in place on the mouthpiece. Relax the lower jaw a little, just enough to make a space to allow the air to enter. Inhale through the mouth only.

3. Forming the embouchure - See the separate section on embouchure.

4. Placing the tongue on the tip of the reed - The role of the tongue is to stop the reed vibrating which in turn stops the airflow. Only light pressure should be needed if the reed is sufficiently flexible. The tongue contacts the tip of the reed between 0.2-0.4 cm behind the tip of the tongue. This is the same area that touches the roof of the mouth when pronouncing the syllable TAH. The tip of the tongue should be firm in order to achieve the cleanest "t" sound - not flabby as in saying THE or DUH. To achieve the cleanest legato tongue connection (tonguing between two tones) the contact with the reed should be very light and momentary.

5. Bringing the air pressure to the tip of the mouthpiece and releasing the air - these two steps are like singing the syllable TAH. The duration of the AH sound corresponds to the length of the tone being produced. Take care not to move the jaw when removing the tongue from the reed so that the pitch and the tone quality are not changed. The next step is to estimate the speed with which the air is to be delivered in order to produce the desired volume. Always feel that the back of the tongue is kept low in the back of the throat, again as if singing the syllable TAH.

Embouchure

About half of the fleshy part of the lower lip is curled back over the bottom teeth. The lip, with the teeth underneath it, contacts the reed at the point where the mouthpiece starts to curve away from the reed. The top teeth rest on top of the mouthpiece directly above this area. A bit of the weight of the head should be felt to rest on top of the mouthpiece so that it cannot slip forward when tonguing. The corners of the mouth should be pulled in and forward to form a good seal and cause the lower lip muscles to form a cushion. The chin muscles should not be bunched and may be pulled down slightly. Do not stretch the lower lip so tightly over the teeth that they are biting into a thin layer of lip. Remember that the pressure of the lips around the mouthpiece must be even in all directions, like a rubber band.

Breathing and Airflow

When breathing in order to live we inhale slowly using the top part of our lungs causing the chest to expand. We exhale somewhat faster and have a rest until the next inhalation. For playing the inhalation is very quick, the exhalation is variable and often quite long with a shorter rest. Sit or stand up straight. Good posture is important. The breath should fill up the "stomach area" first, expanding all around the waist, then the chest. When exhaling the "stomach area" should collapse first, while the chest remains expanded. You should always try to play on a full breath. Don’t exhaust all you air or it becomes difficult to fill up again. When the air supply dwindles the embouchure tends to tighten, concentration is lost and the tempo increases. Keep the
throat relaxed and open both when blowing and inhaling (as if blowing to fog up a mirror or when whispering "HAH"). Keep your teeth on the mouthpiece and relax your lower jaw when taking a breath.

Instrument Position

The neck strap should be adjusted so that the mouthpiece comes naturally to the mouth. Do not lean forward or strain upward to reach the mouthpiece. The soprano is held straight out in front of the centre of the player. When seated, the bell may rest on the player’s knee for stability. The alto may be held in front of larger players while smaller players may find it easier to hold the instrument on the right side, especially when seated. The tenor is played to the right side when seated and in front and slightly to the right when standing.

The mouthpiece should have only a slight downward angle. The left thumb should always maintain contact with the thumb rest and should swivel to engage the octave key. The neckstrap should support the instrument. The thumb should steady the saxophone and help to orient the fingers of the right hand to the keyboard, especially to the side keys, do not allow too much of the weight of the instrument to rest on the thumb. Let the balls of the fingers, not the tips nor the middle joints, contact the pearls. This allows for the maximum possible finger length to be employed.

Mouthpiece and Reeds

A good quality mouthpiece is critical. A good one can help a poor quality instrument sound better. A bad one will make a good instrument sound bad. The best results can most easily be obtained with a so-called medium facing such as the Selmer C Star. This should be matched with a reed of medium flexibility such as a 2 ½.

A reed should be properly moistened before being played upon. A dry reed will not produce a good seal against the tip rail of the mouthpiece and until the tip has absorbed sufficient saliva it should not be played. If the reed is wrinkled at the tip it is still too dry. The position of the reed on the mouthpiece should be such that the very tip of the reed goes to the very tip of the mouthpiece, but no further, when it closes against the mouthpiece. The reed must cover the opening into the mouthpiece chamber completely.

Mouthpieces should be cleaned regularly. A damp cloth may be pulled through the mouthpiece after the practice session when any deposits on the inside will be soft and easily dislodged. Never use hot water on a hard rubber mouthpiece. Reeds can also be cleaned by gently rubbing them between the fingers while holding them under the tap. Be very careful not to damage the tip. A dirty reed does not respond well.

Ligatures

The purpose of the ligature is to hold the reed in place by applying even pressure to the back of the reed. The standard ligature, having two sides that are bought together by two tightening screws, should be back far enough on the mouthpiece that the two sides do not close against each other. Otherwise you cannot be sure that it is applying pressure against the reed. The ligature should be closed firmly but not to excess. If spaces can be seen between the ligature and the reed, then the ligature probably is not contacting the reed in many places and not providing even support for the reed. Thin strips of felt or rubber glued to the ligature where it contacts the reed will improve the support and also the reed’s response. Quite often problems thought to originate with the reed or mouthpiece can be traced to a ligature that is not doing its job properly.