

# An Integrated Approach to Playing the Saxophone

by Stephen Duke  
[www.steveduke.net](http://www.steveduke.net)

The Twentieth Century is an extraordinarily rich time in music history, and as American saxophonists we are caught between two traditions – Classical and jazz. One has its foundations in the evolution of European culture and dominates traditional conservatory teaching. Its common practice matured long before the saxophone became "the new kid on the block". The other tradition evolved from the streets of our black community and became a uniquely American art form – a music that the saxophone and its players are so strongly identified with creating that the music, artist and instrument are inseparable. The Jazz/Classical dichotomy creates a unique problem for university saxophone classes while at the same time it presents a tremendous opportunity. Saxophone teachers and their students are sitting front row center in what has become a significant controversy within the educational community.

This article's focus is on the relationship between the technique and style of these traditions and suggests an integrated approach to performing that can be applied in a universal manner. Learning to play both jazz and Classical styles requires a multi-level investigation. To isolate one element of performance is like talking about how to jog but limiting the discussion to the function of the feet. Challenges that confront saxophonists in learning both musics involve among other factors improvisational skills, habitual technique, aural perception and psychological barriers.

Although Jazz is largely improvisational, it is important to differentiate improvisation from interpretation. Improvisation incorporates compositional techniques and is not limited to a particular style. In traditional Western European music, for example, Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and Liszt, were well known for their improvisations. Interestingly, Classical music has nearly lost the art of improvisation in the 20th century and Jazz pedagogy has become almost exclusively theoretical. The private studio teacher can play a crucial role in filling these voids.

The phrase, Classical music or style, refers to styles based on traditional Western European music which include Baroque, Classical, Romantic and Early 20th Century. The term, jazz, refers to styles of jazz music, including Dixieland, Blues, Swing, Bebop, Funk, Rock, etc. While there are reasons for distinctions within Classical and jazz music, the fundamental techniques used in Jazz styles are basically the same, and the fundamental techniques used throughout Classical styles are basically the same. However, the differences between jazz and Classical techniques are considerable.

A performer oriented towards Classical or jazz music can develop habits of technique that reflect a bias in style. Learning to play unfamiliar and fundamentally different styles is complicated by compulsive motor skills. Generally, the longer a musician plays in one style the more habitual her or his technique is.

An example is how accents are produced. It may never occur to a Classically oriented player, who has initiated changes in air speed from the abdominal, chest or throat areas, that in jazz music the tongue touches the reed on ghosted notes and releases the reed for louder notes, and that the jaw moves backward on soft notes and forward on louder notes. The same is almost always true for jazz-oriented players who are learning Classical style. Unnecessary back and forth movement in the jaw at beginnings of notes are common with many Jazz-oriented players who are learning Classical style. The sound produced frequently has an air sound before the tone and the initial sliver of tone is unfocused. If asked if the air

sound before the tone is perceived (and usually before the intended placement of the note) the answer is usually, "No." In addition, the student may find it difficult to stop the parasitic jaw movement even when she or he watches herself or himself in a mirror.

In learning both jazz and Classical styles, it is important to develop clear image, aural perception and sensation of producing the sound. The relation between these factors often confuses the player who has developed the ability to discern sounds but hasn't experienced the sensations associated with producing them. A Classically-oriented player, for example, may perceive the difference between jazz and Classical accents and may even hear that they are not executing Jazz style, but still cannot produce a jazz accent because they are not aware of the sensation associated with producing a jazz accent and compulsively apply inappropriate technique. Interestingly, when Classically-oriented players use Classical technique to play Jazz style their unconvincing interpretation is generally viewed as poor conception and when a Jazz-oriented player uses jazz technique in interpreting Classical style it is usually thought to be a technical deficiency. In either case, what is seemingly "good" technique in one style may be "bad" technique in another. When a player is learning to play both Classical and jazz styles, the need for a more flexible technique increases because sound possibilities are expanded.

Appropriate technique is determined by a performer's intention; can we produce the sound we attempt. To avoid bias in style, I view the sound of the instrument from its "prime numbers"; pitch, timbre, rhythm and loudness. "Good" technique consists of these four elements played with flexibility, ease, spontaneity and aesthetic quality.

One of the main differences between jazz and Classical styles is the role that silence plays in performance. In concert and recital halls the behavior of the audience is understood to be quiet. Many performers evaluate the quality of their own performance by listening to the intensity of the audience's silence. In playing jazz, silence is an element of the musical composition/ improvisation, but the audience may not be silent. In clubs, listeners smoke, drink and even eat during performance, and if an individual is moved she or he will immediately say so.

The intensity of the silence is affected by the sound of the endings of notes and the sound of the beginnings of notes. These slivers of sound are determined by the differences in technique used to initiate change in air speed. In Classical style the change initiates from the throat, chest and abdominal areas. In Jazz style, particularly in Be-bop and later, the change in the air stream is initiated by the damping of the reed by the tongue and jaw, and the muscles in the chest and abdominal areas react to the change of resistance. I call the use of the tongue and jaw to initiate changes in air speed "peripheral" air control.

One exercise that helps develop a feeling for resistance in the air stream used in Jazz style is to insert a rag or towel into the bell of the saxophone. The rag should be large enough to fit firmly into the bell. Position the rag so that the end reaches somewhere between the low B and low E $\flat$  tone holes. Play a chromatic scale from second line G up to top line G and back to second line G. Notice a significant change in timbre and dynamics at the C $\sharp$ -D register break. The object of the exercise is to play with an even timbre and volume by increasing the speed and pressure of the air stream. The timbre and volume change will depend on how far the rag is pushed into the horn and how tightly it fits into the bell. After a few minutes of trying to balance the sound pull the rag out of the horn and play loudly.

To simulate the air steam used in Classical style, take a large breath of air, open your throat and mouth wide while holding the air in. With the throat and mouth open, let out a small amount of warm air from your mouth and then slowly draw it back in. The lungs will remain full of air during this process. The thorax or rib cage will expand upward and outward and the abdomen expands downward and outward.

Most of the problems that Jazz-oriented players experience in learning Classical style are caused by the use of the jaw, tongue and embouchure (peripherals) to initiate changes in the air speed. Likewise, nearly all the problems that Classically-oriented players have in learning Jazz style are caused by initiating changes in the air speed from the glottis, chest muscles, diaphragm, or abdominal muscles. Listed below are some of the common sounds that players unintentionally produce when playing an unfamiliar style.

### **Jazz to Classically Difficulties:**

- Unresponsive articulations
- Accents and changes in the air stream are lethargic
- Reed vibration is constricted
- Extreme softs with clear tone are unresponsive
- Vibrato is lethargic
- Overall pitch is sharp
- Inflexible register changes
- Sub-tone at extreme softs
- Sub-tone in low register
- Too much air in tone at soft dynamics
- No subtle change in dynamics
- Abrupt phrase endings and note endings
- Uneven timbre
- Inappropriate timbre
- Noise between notes
- Pitch sharp in high register
- Air precedes tongued articulations
- Unfocused tone at beginnings of tongued articulations
- Articulation too heavy
- Tone does not with only the breath
- Tone clips out when slurring over the register break
- Breaks in air stream

### **Classical to Jazz Difficulties:**

- Exaggerated swing feel on eighths
- Over-ghosting
- Over-accenting
- No sub-tone
- Too many articulated notes
- Vibrato too fast
- Endings of phrases always taper
- Too many changes in loudness within a phrase

### **The Embouchure**

The embouchure can play an important role in jazz and Classical styles. The degree to which the embouchure controls the tone varies from player to player. Some view the function of the embouchure as a means to keep the air from leaking out around the mouthpiece whereas others feel the embouchure plays a more active role in controlling the sound. In Classical playing, I view the embouchure as being minimally active in controlling the tone and emphasize the coordination of the abdomen, thorax, and throat.

Regardless of orientation, embouchures vary greatly, from anchoring the tongue under the lips to playing with a double-lip. Larry Teal's description of the embouchure in The Art of Saxophone Playing serves as a good reference.

Place the teeth on the top of the mouthpiece approximately ½ inch down from the tip; cover the lower teeth with a cushion of lower lip; seal the lips around the mouthpiece by pushing the corners of the mouth inward towards the center of the mouthpiece; avoid biting, avoid puffing the cheeks and let the chin be relaxed. (See the The Art of Saxophone Playing, p. 37-44 )

Many Jazz players use what is commonly referred to as a "flat lip" embouchure. It is basically the same as the embouchure described above, except that the jaw drops down, the bottom lip rolls out slightly and the chin is bunched and drawn upward toward the reed. The lip is more mushy and has more surface contact with the reed. Although generally considered as "incorrect" in Classical teaching, this embouchure produces tones idiomatic to Jazz style, such as playing with a sub-tone in the low register.

### **The Jaw in Jazz Style**

One way the jaw is used in jazz to make changes in dynamics and timbre is to ghost and to accent notes. To produce a softer and darker (or ghosted) sound, the jaw is pulled back so that it slides towards the tip of the reed. This movement functions as a damper on the reed by restricting reed vibrations, reducing the volume of air moving through the mouthpiece, and changing the shape of the oral cavity. To produce a louder and brighter sound the jaw is pushed forward and slides down and away from the tip of the reed. This allows the reed to vibrate more freely and allows more air to move through the mouthpiece. The oral cavity will also produce a brighter sounding tone in this position. Note that the technique of moving the jaw back and forth to change dynamics and timbre should not be confused with the up and down movement used in producing a jaw vibrato.

Notated below is how jaw accents would be applied in playing the Jazz tune "Night Train." The notes that are enclosed in parentheses are ghosted.

### **The Tongue in Jazz Style**

Like the jaw, the tongue can ghost a note by slightly touching the reed; this partially restricts the reed's vibrations and the amount of air moving through the mouthpiece. For prominent-sounding notes the tongue does not touch the reed, so as to allow it to vibrate freely. The tongue restricts the reed in varying degrees; the more tongue touches the reed the more the note is ghosted. Some players prefer touching the reed more to one side.

Play the tune "Night Train" again and substitute slightly touching the reed with the tongue for the backward movement of the jaw. Note that using the tongue to produce ghosted notes instead of using the jaw may alter the sound and therefore the interpretation. Both the tongue and jaw may be used simultaneously to accent and ghost notes. The degree that each is used depends on the individual's interpretation.

### **In Creating a Clear Concept**

Creating a clear concept of style by listening to and copying other performers is crucial. I have found that learning "by rote" is very effective but, unfortunately, it has not been fully utilized in academia. Not only do we tend to read too much in Classical performing but Jazz pedagogy has left out a predominant way that jazz artists learned - developing aural memory by mimicking. Memorizing Classical repertoire or copying improvised Jazz solos without notating helps keep the "eyes" from interfering with the "ears".

An efficient way to begin to familiarize oneself with the details of style is simply to observe what is happening in the sound, and then relate the analysis to the elements of tone and the sensations associated with making that sound. The tongue, jaw, fingers, embouchure, etc., manipulate timbre, pitch, rhythm and loudness to form articulations, accents, endings of notes, glissandos, fall-offs, ghosted notes, vibrato, time variation, etc. The goal, eventually, is to be able to relate the imagined sound or listening experience to somatic sensations without using cognitive analysis. For example, in analyzing how a player bends a pitch in Jazz style, the following questions may be asked:

(rhythm)	Exactly when does the pitchbend start?
(pitch)	Does the pitchbend briefly start on a lower note?
(pitch, rhythm)	At what rate does the pitch rise?
(pitch, rhythm)	What is the exact pitch at the beginning of the pitchbend?
(pitch, rhythm)	What is the exact pitch at the end of the pitchbend?
(pitch, rhythm)	When does the bending of the note end?
(loudness, rhythm)	Is there a change in loudness from the beginning to the end of the pitchbend?
(sensation)	What does the jaw do to produce the pitchbend?
(sensation)	Are the fingers used to help pitchbend the note?

Experimenting with ways of how to play new styles more objectively is valuable. It may be helpful to visualize a graph of the sounds heard in non-metered or real time. I have noticed that students are aware of sounds they make at some moments and are not aware at other moments. For example, they may hear when a tone begins but will not hear air noise before that point. By analyzing sound in real time we focus our attention to moments that we may not habitually listen to.

Another way to learn the technique of an unfamiliar style is to think of it as an extended technique, meaning that it is not yet elementary to everyday performance. Once the technique matures and becomes integrated it will be available without making a conscious effort.

Finally, a person's motives for learning another style affects the learning experience. Classical players frequently want to learn jazz because they want to become more marketable. Jazz players frequently want to learn Classical music because they want to work on their "chops". Both jazz and Classical music are art forms, and being such demand commitment. Classically-oriented musicians rarely view learning Classical music as mere exercise, and jazz-oriented musicians are rarely motivated to learn Jazz solely for monetary gain. In short, learning music in order to "use" it leaves out a basic value: music, the performing art. I feel that learning both musics in good faith will develop a dynamic understanding of controlling the instrument that will contribute to the performer's artistic maturation.

Much of the content of this article is based on or inspired by my experience as a performer and teacher, as well as study and years of collaboration with James Riggs, James Ogilvy and Donald Sinta. Research on how change in air speed is initiated in a flute vibrato by Jochen Gartner and investigations concerning learning, awareness and movement by Moshe Feldenkrais and Milton Erickson, among others, have also influenced my perspective. Listed on the following page are selected readings that I feel are pertinent to the understanding of learning and performing.

Feldenkrais, Moshe. *Body and Mature Behavior*. New York, New York: International Universities Press, Inc., 1949.

*Awareness Through Movement*. New York, New York: Harper & Row, Publisher, Inc., 1977.

*The Elusive Obvious*. Cupertino, California: Meta Publications, 1981.

Gartner Jochen. *The Vibrato*. Regensburg, West Germany: Gustav Bosse Verlag, 1981.

Zero, Jeffery K. *A Teaching Seminar with Milton H. Erickson.* New York, New York: Brunner/Mazel, Inc., 1980.

Stephen Duke is an Assistant Professor of Music at Northern Illinois University where he teaches saxophone and chamber music. Mr. Duke received a Bachelor of Music and Master of Music from North Texas State University, and is presently studying Feldenkrais Method. He has recorded a set of improvisations based on Thelonious Monk's music with pianist Joseph Pinzarrone entitled "Composer, Thelonious Monk", and is completing a book of exercises for developing saxophone technique.