



Gettin' Around On The Saxophone

BY GUNNAR MOSSBLAD

Connecting Your Ear To The Saxophone

Ear training is often neglected by young saxophonists as well as saxophone teachers. After all, the saxophone is probably one of the easiest instruments for a beginner to start playing. It can be and quite often is, introduced to students as a "button pushing" instrument with little regard for the voicing and ear training necessary to produce an in-tune, centered tone. While students who play brass instruments are being taught to hear the overtone series and intervals so they can apply it to the limited fingers or slide positions available to them, the saxophonists are being taught where their fingers go and which combination of fingers produce different notes. With only a little time and effort a young saxophonist can be playing all over the instrument, by just a push of a button (or so they think), and they can play "faster" than any other instrument in the band. This often leads to saxophonists with underdeveloped aural skills.

THE BENEFITS OF AURAL SKILLS

The benefits of teaching aural skills and relating it to the saxophone from the very beginning is immeasurable. It not only helps the saxophonist play more in tune with themselves and others, it helps produce a better and more focused sound, teaches basic theoretical skills, and builds a connection between their ear and the horn. This connection when fully developed, allows a student to play what they hear in their head or from an outside source. It also allows a saxophonist to pre-hear what they see on a page of music. When developed to the fullest extent this connection almost becomes an involuntary physical response to an aural stimulation. In other words, a pitch is heard and the saxophonist relates the sound to not only a name but to a fingering on the saxophone. Those who have what is generally considered a more natural ear, the ultimate being someone with "perfect" pitch recognition, will of course have an easier time making this connection. However, with consistent practice using the exercises listed below, all but a very few people considered "tone deaf" will develop and or improve the connection to their instrument. At the very least a student will learn to play in tune with a beautiful, focused sound anticipating physical adjustments needed to play the next note intone. A majority of students will develop a connection to the horn that

allows them to not only pre-hear the notes on a page of music, but to play in any key what they hear either in their head or from other stimuli around them.

THE JAZZ AND CLASSICAL AURAL CONNECTION

One might think that this kind of aural connection to the saxophone is mainly critical for jazz saxophonists that improvise (spontaneously compose and perform a viable variation on a theme). However, it is just as vital that the classical saxophonist pre-hear the notes they play on the page so that they can anticipate the physical changes necessary to successfully produce each successive note. This of course will result in a much more musical performance approach with less missed, out of tune, or 'cacked' notes. Consistently incorporating these ear training exercises in a comprehensive practice regime have proven to be quite successful at developing this connection in a rather short period of time.

YOUR VOICE AND SAXOPHONE CONNECTION

While the emphasis of this article stresses the connection to the saxophone, it should be noted that a connection to the instrument is not possible without an equally strong connection to the voice. Ideally all of the exercises can and should be practiced first using the voice. If a student is successful producing the exercises with the voice, it is an indication that they should eventually be successful with the saxophone. However, this does not assure one that the connection will be immediate. A student having difficulty doing the exercises on the saxophone, but can do them with ease using their voice only indicates the mechanical connection to the instrument has not yet be realized. Most likely, with a small amount of time, the connection will be made.

FUNDAMENTAL EXERCISES

The exercises listed below are a few of the fundamental exercises that have been the most successful with my students. The execution of the exercises can be practiced using a number of ways, including:

- With the aid of a piano or other instrument.
- With a pre-recorded audio track of materials.

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- With an ear training software, or better yet, with a friend.

One should listen, sing, and then play the pitch or pitches. Listen carefully to the pitch. Listen for the timbre, range, or anything else that it can be "remembered by." To some this can mean a color or shape. Then sing the pitch, listening carefully and once again trying to remember it.

Finally attempt to play it on the saxophone. If the student is not successful playing the note the first time, find it by making a guess whether the original pitch sounded higher or lower and then play notes in that direction until the note is correctly sounded. Then put a name to it by saying the name as it is sung once more. While hunting for a note, go back to the source to and sound the note as many times as necessary to keep it as the target pitch. It may be helpful to play and sing the original pitch before trying to play it a second or third time. For some students this procedure can be difficult at first. Patience and diligence is vital. It will get easier the more the exercises are practiced, but each new interval may present some additional challenges.

BE YOUR OWN PITCH GENERATOR Melodies Eventually In Any Key

It is also valuable for saxophonists to be their own pitch generator. Singing a pitch or small melodies and then playing them on their instrument very valuable in establishing the connection between the aural and mechanical responses, and reveals what kinds of intervals and melodies to student is hearing. This of course naturally leads to playing longer familiar songs and melodies eventually in any key.

The exercises should progress in a logical manner from one pitch to two, then three, etc., working on smaller intervals at first and then expanding the intervals to include larger intervals and then chords and scales. After each interval is studied, exercises mixing all the intervals that have been studied should be combined into comprehensive exercises.

For example, after one hearing and producing individual notes becomes consistent, add another note. Try a small interval first like a minor second, then do major seconds followed by mixed major and minor seconds. Practice both major and minor intervals as well as diminished and augmented where appropriate. Finally, mix up the intervals and directions.

ASSOCIATE FAMILIAR SONGS WITH INTERVALS

As each interval is studied the student should try to associate familiar songs with each interval. For instance Miles Davis' tune *Solar* might be used to help remember minor and major seconds, just as *Here Comes The Bride* is often associated with a perfect fourth. Depending on one's history, the tunes that may be reminders of specific pitches could be anything from a children's song, to a pop tune, or even a jazz standard. The identifying tune will vary from person to person, and will often be determined simply by remembering a tune that sounds like the interval being studied.

As one begins to associate intervals with songs, it is good to practice singing simple tunes and then playing them on the saxophone in all twelve keys. Tunes, phrases from favorite recordings, and just about any melodic fragment can be used to practice the connection from the ear to the horn.

When executing each new key, it is advisable to go slowly and pre-hear the pitch, perhaps playing the melody slightly out of time and holding a note until one knows the next note that

needs to be played. This will lead to a more positive outcome in the long run than stumbling over several wrong notes until luckily, the correct note is sounded. This concept of pre-hearing the note one plays is very important in the development of a strong connection to the horn, and therefore a student should not rush to the next in order to stay in time. As the connection improves the timing will naturally improve.

Finally, the student should utilize more complex aural stimulation in the form of finished recordings. While listening to the radio or their favorite recording, a student might listen for one individual part in a cut from a recording, and attempt to play a long. At this point the student is only limited by their imagination. Once a student begins using recordings as a source for ear training, the logical outcome is to duplicate and transcribe entire tunes, solos or phrases that sound great to them and move them musically. This transcription and duplication is of course the sincerest form of flattery to the performers, but it also serves to teach everything about the music being studied (jazz or classical) and can be incorporated into in the saxophonists playing, but that is another article published in the June/July 1999 issue of *Jazz Player*, titled *Transcriptions and Duplications, Just How Far Should You Go?*

Below is a synopsis of the recommended exercises in a progression from simple to more complex.

Exercise #1 - SINGLE PITCHES

A. Generated from a pitch source

B. Sung and then played

Exercise #2 - 2-NOTE INTERVALS

- Minor seconds ascending
- Minor seconds descending
- Major seconds ascending
- Major seconds descending
- Major and minor seconds ascending and descending
- Equivalent exercises on Thirds
- Mixed 2nds and 3rds (random direction and tonality)
- Equivalent exercise on fourths
- Mixed seconds, thirds and fourths (random direction and tonality)
- Etc., for other intervals

Exercise #3 - 3 OR MORE NOTE CHORDS

- Major, minor, diminished and augmented triads
- Major, minor, dominant, diminished and augmented 7th chords

Exercise #4 - MELODIC CELLS

- 4-note cells
- 8-note cells
- 2-4 bar phrase

Exercise #5 - SONGS, TRANSCRIPTIONS AND DUPLICATIONS

- Playing simple songs in 12 keys
- Full transcriptions and duplications

TIPS OF THE DAY

Don't underestimate the value of an electronic tuner to check pitches and for tuning.

Download and use a free ear training software that is a random pitch and melody generator online at:
www.iwasdoingallright.com/tools/v2_23/ear_training.aspx

Keep a log or journal of your practice efforts including, frustrations and successes. This is very valuable in analyzing your practice habits. §