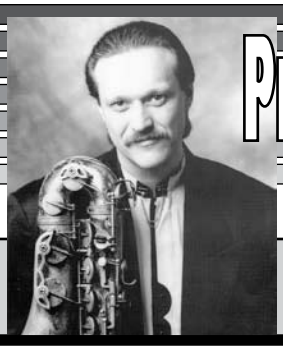


Practicing The Extremeties Of The Saxophone

BY GUNNAR MOSSBLAD

One of the difficult things about playing the saxophone is the extremities of the instrument; both low and high. In addition to the fingerings being more unusual, the playing in the extreme range of the instrument is usually a turning point for the melody. Although technical exercises and scales used to develop speed and accuracy quite often go to the extreme ranges of the instrument, the average saxophonist spends significantly less time playing in the extreme ranges as compared to the main stack of the instrument. It is therefore important to isolate and devote extra practice time to those extreme areas of the instrument.

Although extreme range would normally include the altissimo register, for the purposes of this article I have limited the examples and exercises to those notes in the main part of the horn, commonly referred to as the right and left hand "spatula keys," the left hand "palm keys," and the right hand "side keys." This is includes the low Eb, Db, C, B, and Bb, the side C, Bb, E and F# keys, and the high D, Eb, and F keys. It should also me noted that the fundamental principles for practicing these fingering combinations can be applied to include any awkward fingering combination anywhere on the horn.

FINGERING COMBINATIONS
Simple To Complex

There are three categories of fingering combinations. The first category, "single motion fingering," are simple physical motions involving a limited amount of finger movement and usually in only one direction. Playing from a high C# to a palm key D is a single motion fingering. The left hand (or index finger) is moved in only one direction to depress or release the D palm key. Other examples of single motion fingerings are high Db to Eb or low C to D (see Example 1).

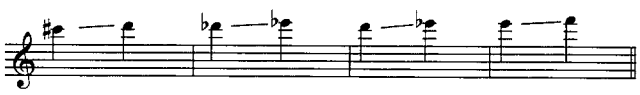
"Double motion fingerings" involve two or more physical movements. Fingerings in this category include motion in both hands, moving in similar directions. Fingering from High D to a high E is a double motion fingering. Both the right and left hands must move in a similar direction to depress two different keys. Similarly low D to C# is a double motion fingering. The right hand depresses the low C key and the left hand depresses the C# key. Other examples include low D to Bb, D to B, and high D to F or Eb to F (see Example 2).

"Complex motion fingerings" require the execu-

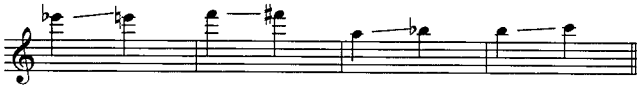
Example 1

SINGLE MOTION

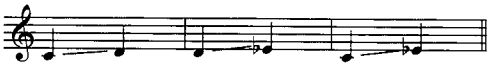
A) Fingering Combinations for the Left Hand *Palm Keys*



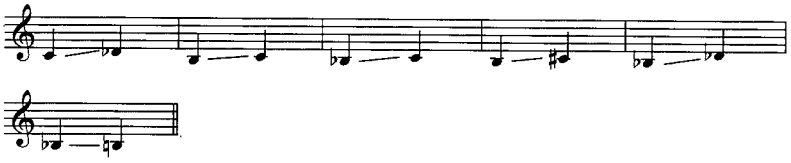
B) Fingering Combinations for the Right Hand *Side Keys*



C) Fingering Combinations for the Right Hand *Spatula Keys*



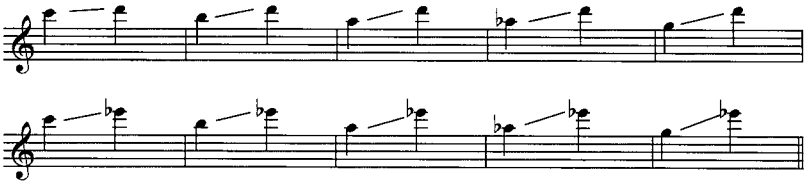
D) Fingering Combinations for the Left Hand *Spatula Keys*



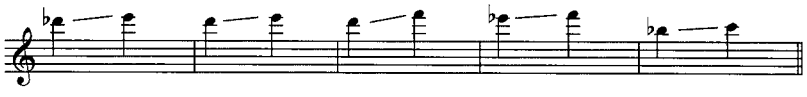
Example 2

DOUBLE MOTION

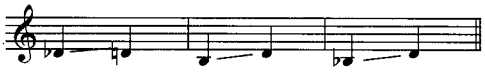
A) Fingering Combinations for the Left Hand *Palm Keys*



B) Fingering Combinations for the Left Hand *Palm Keys* with the Right Hand *Side Keys*



C) Fingering Combinations for the the Left and Right Hand *Spatula Keys in combination*



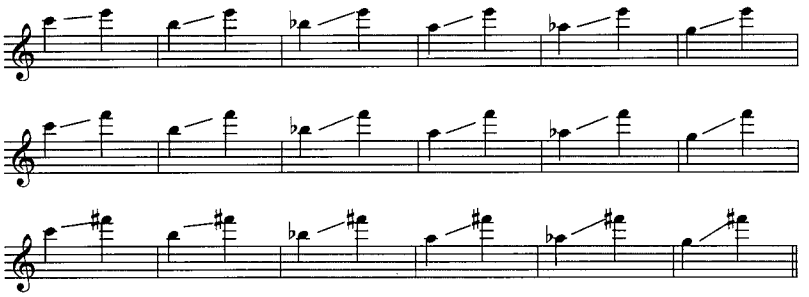
tion of several physical movements in the same hand or opposing movements in the right and left hands to execute a fingering. These fingerings include high C to D and C or Eb. Both of these fingerings use a single hand moving in opposite directions. The second finger lifts and releases the A key, while the palm or base of the first finger depresses the palm key D. C to E or C to F involve complex motion is both hands. The left hand moves as described above, while the right hand depresses the high E key (see Example 3).

An appropriate and timely brain signal must be sent to the muscles for each movement. The simpler the movement, the easier the fingering combination should be. The more complex the motion is, the more difficult the execution will be at first.

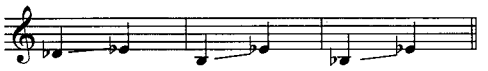
Example 3

COMPLEX MOTION

A) Fingering Combinations for the Left Hand *Palm Keys* with the Right Hand *Side Keys*



B) Fingering Combinations for the the Left and Right Hand *Spatula Keys in combination*

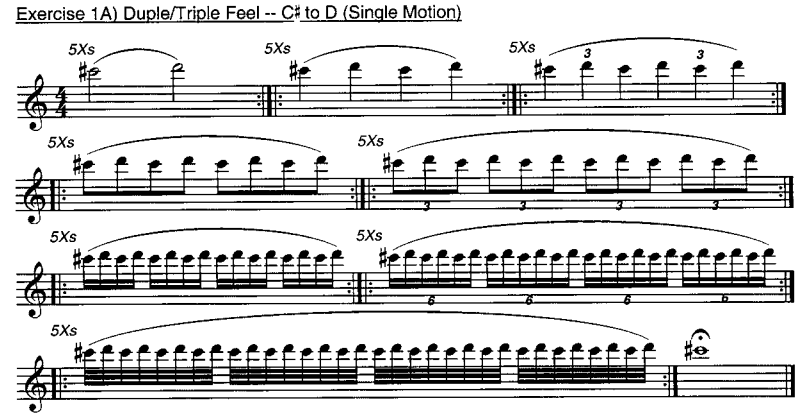


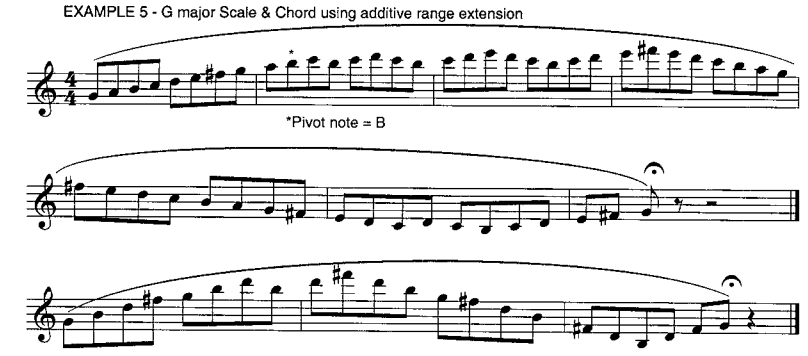
HOW TO PRACTICE

Starting with the simple motion fingerings, an effective practice routine emphasizing repetition of the fingering from slow to fast, will, over a rather short period of time, produce dramatic results. Different rhythmic combinations insure that both positive and negative muscle motions and a variety of metric feels are practiced. Each combination should be practiced in duple/triple meter, odd meter, and unmetered to build endurance, speed, and rhythmic feel. Example 4 shows the entire routine for playing from a high C# to high D. This exercise can be applied to any finger combination.

To start, a metronome should be set to a speed that allows the fastest part of the exercise can be comfortably and accurately executed at least five times. Once a proper speed is determined, the exercise for each fingering combination should be executed five to six times, advancing the metronome ONE (that is right only 1!) metronomic mark each time through the exercise. Each day the speed should be slowly increased. If on Day 1, the exercises are successfully completed at mm=40, 42, 44, 46, & 48. The following day it should be played at mm=42, 44, 46, 48, & 50, etc. Should you have a digital metronome the exercises can be moved up even more gradually (mm=40, 41, 42, etc.,); all the better. The idea is to go slow enough on the first day to make the exercise perfect and easy to execute, so that several weeks later the exercise will still be easy, but you will be going much faster. Remember, if you want to play fast, practice slow!

Example 4





EXERCISE REMINDERS

Other keys to the success of these exercises include practicing each note combination from the lower note to the upper as well as the upper to the lower note. The muscular activity and brain signal sent to the muscles is different depressing a key than it is lifting the same key. Since articulations hide inaccurate fingering, the exercises should always be slurred. It is very important to express the metric feel of the rhythms, and always practice each exercise until it is accurate and comfortable

to execute. Extract and practice difficult fingering combinations by themselves, but if all the combinations are to be practiced, they should be executed from the simple to more complex physical motions.

INCOPORATING THE EXTREMITIES ON SCALE AND CHORD EXERCISES

Making a few adjustments to traditional scale and chord exercises will achieve more practice time in the extremities of the instrument. For instance, instead of practicing a scale or chord straight up to the top of the horn and then to the bottom and returning to the tonic, try playing the scale or chord using a "range additive method." Start the scale or chord on the tonic and go up the scale to a note in the main stack just before the palm keys (usually the tonic, third or fifth of the home key), and use that note as pivot note to extend the range one note at a time. Play from that note up one note and back down, then up two notes and back down, then three notes and down, etc., until reaching the extreme range of that scale or chord. The lower register range is played using the same technique. Example 5 shows the G major scale and tonic chord written out using the additive range method.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, with a little patience, the extremities of the saxophone can be just as comfortable, fluid and proficient as the main stack. In fact, this exercise can be applied to any difficult fingering with just as positive results, and the exercise can be applied to three, four or more note finger combinations, and of course is ideal for the development of the altissimo. Good Luck. §