

Articulation on the Saxophone by Sumner Truax

Articulation on the saxophone, or any reed instrument for that matter, is similar to basic tone production in that it can be broken down into two parts: a concept and a skill. This article will first deal with legato articulation and address strategies and techniques that can be used to demonstrate a clear concept for the student as well as ways to help the student achieve the skills necessary to produce the concept. Secondly, the article will address initial attack and discuss ways and techniques to develop that concept and skill. Finally, I will then talk about staccato articulation, and its similarities and dissimilarities to legato articulation.

Legato Articulation – *The Concept*

The legato articulation is, in many ways, the “default” articulation for classical saxophone technique. This is when the sound is simply interrupted by the tongue. In this process, the tongue is inaudible, only the sound is interrupted.

Listen to the following example of legato articulation and notice the subtle interruption of the sound. (See example 1 <http://www.sumnertruax.com/audio-examples.html>)

Compare that with this recording of a more percussive tongue sound (quasi-slap). (See example 2 <http://www.sumnertruax.com/audio-examples.html>)

It’s also helpful to “pass the sound” between teacher and student. Ask the student to listen to your articulation and then try and match it. “I’ll play four beats, you play four beats” etc...

Legato Articulation – *The Skill*

Once you are confident the student has a strong concept of articulation (e.g. they can identify when they are doing it incorrectly), move on to the skills that are required to produce correct articulation.

The key physical components involved in producing the articulation are:

- Air
- Controlling tongue pressure on the reed
- Controlling tongue speed
- Mastery of tongue placement – also addressed in the article on [tone production](#)

The first two components (and possibly the fourth) can usually be accomplished using one simple, but wonderful exercise: toneless wind. Toneless wind involves the student forming an embouchure (ideally a correct one) that is so loose that although air is flowing through the instrument, no sound is being produced. This allows the teacher and the student to focus entirely on the quality of the airstream, and in terms of articulation, the sound the tongue is (or isn’t) making when it comes into contact with the reed.

Here is an example of what toneless wind *should* sound like when done correctly. Notice that the air creates a “woosh” sound, and that the tongue is nearly (almost entirely in this recording) inaudible. (See example 3 <http://www.sumnertruax.com/audio-examples.html>)

Here is an example of what toneless wind should not sound like. In this demonstration the tongue is contacting the reed with a great amount of force. This could mean one of two things: (1) the student’s tongue is incorrectly positioned on the reed, or (2) the student’s tongue is not relaxed and they are using more muscle than they have to. More than likely it is a combination of both. (See example 4 <http://www.sumnertruax.com/audio-examples.html>)

Tongue Speed

This can be a difficult task for young students. One way to maintain an even tongue speed is to have the student speak with the metronome. They can use any number of syllables for this. I would recommend “tee” or “dee” because of the high tongue placement in those vowels. After the student can successfully do this in time with a metronome, have them move on to toneless wind articulation. Perhaps trying it at a 90 degree angle to relax the tongue.

Mastery of Tongue Placement

Mastering the placement of the tongue can be difficult for some students due to the obvious fact that they can't see exactly what they are doing. Having a mirror can be very helpful in this process. There are various schools of thought on this topic and ultimately, whatever position allows your tongue to move the quickest with no effect on intonation or sound is the correct position. This might change from student to student depending on their oral anatomy. Bending at a 90 degree angle and articulating can oftentimes help the student feel where the correct placement should be. This is not a cure-all, but it does help get them in the ballpark of having a high, relaxed tongue.

For most students, the top of the tongue should contact the reed at the tip. This will allow the tongue to remain in the “i” (as in ‘tree’) position, while having a very small range of motion, allowing it to move more rapidly. It can be revealing to articulate repeatedly in the upper register to see if tongue placement is accurate. If the tongue is not placed correctly, or is moving too much, the student will either crack, or have drastic pitch changes when articulating.

Initial Attack – The Concept

As any saxophonist knows, initial attacks can be difficult, especially in the low register, and especially on low B and D. Having a firm grasp of the concept of an initial attack is critical in being able to enter with no percussive sound in the low register. Initial attack should be taught *after* the student has mastered, or is at least proficient in, legato articulation. This is important because an initial attack is simply a more complex version of legato articulation.

With the initial attack, it is crucial that the student understands that the tongue *does not* start the note. Just as in legato articulation, the tongue remains light and relaxed on the reed. Obviously the tongue plays an important role in this process, but instead of the hammer, it functions more like the damper on a piano. A good way to visualize this is to imagine the string of a piano being the sound, the hammer being the air, and the damper releasing off the string being the tongue. The tongue simply *removes* itself from the reed in order to let the *air* create the vibration. This is key, as many students will strike the reed with the tongue in an effort to jumpstart the air.

Initial Attack – The Skill

There are physical aspects that need to be prepared in order to successfully execute an initial attack. They are:

- Fingers**—must be on the keys
- Embouchure**—must be fully set
- Tongue**—must be touching the reed (lightly as in legato articulation)
- Air**—must be released to start the sound

This forms a great acronym, FETA!

F: Some of these are self-explanatory. The fingers must be on the keys so that the sound comes out. A more advanced technique involving popping keys in order to move the air through the horn more rapidly is sometimes used, but it's important to master the basics before using shortcuts!

E: The embouchure must be fully set on the mouthpiece before the attack. Encourage students to breathe through the sides of their lips so that they don't break the bottom chin.

T: The tongue must be touching the reed like a legato articulation. The tongue must remain on the reed throughout the entire process, right up to the point of release when the sound begins. This is important to ensure that the student is not striking the reed with the tongue, but instead, simply releasing the tongue from the reed.

A: The student should exhale as soon as they are finished inhaling. Holding air inside the lungs can cause tension in the abdominal muscles, which can in turn, tense the tongue. Conducting the student's inhale and exhale is a good way to combat this. Asking them to inhale and immediately exhale in one breath can do wonders for their initial attack.

Staccato Articulation – The Concept

Staccato articulation is more difficult than legato articulation because there are more physical factors at work. Instead of simply touching the tongue lightly against the reed, the student now has many more things to be aware of. The length of the note is determined by how long the reed is vibrating, which is determined by how long the tongue is not in contact with the reed. Therefore, if the note needs to be short, the tongue has to return to the reed to stop the vibration. This return, of course, also stops the air from flowing through the instrument. I have found it best to think of staccato articulation as a series of initial attacks. This concept works well for slower tempos.

Staccato Articulation – The Skill

Staccato articulation requires a very similar set of skills to legato articulation and initial attack in terms of the role of the tongue. In all of these techniques, the tongue must be light, and have a small range of motion.

One technique that can help students is to try four legato articulations followed by four staccato articulations. In this way, students can focus on keeping the motion and pressure of the tongue the same during both types of articulation. The tendency will be for the tongue to tense when doing staccato articulation. Instead, it should stay relaxed and light, similar to legato tonguing.

As always, please email me with questions or comments related to this article, especially if you have particular techniques you have found useful for you or your students. I would love to hear from you!

sumner@sumnertruax.com

www.sumnertruax.com

© Sumner Truax 2012

Soon to come will be an article on developing rapid single articulation and multiple (double/triple) articulation.