

Tone Production by Sumner Truax

In order to produce a rich, pure tone on the saxophone there are several key components of which one must be aware. This article will address these components and discuss various strategies for having your students achieve them.

- Flat Chin
- Ooh shaped embouchure
- Tongue in “E”
- Breathing!

Flat Chin

The chin must be flat in order to achieve optimum control over the entire range of the instrument. A bunched chin will typically result in a pinched, unfocused sound, which will be difficult to control particularly in the extreme ranges of the instrument.

There are several ways to get the student to produce a flat chin. When doing this, the teacher should focus primarily on the visual and kinesthetic modalities. Have a mirror!

After demonstrating what a flat chin looks like, the teacher should provide the student with a kinesthetic action that will naturally produce a flat chin. One example is a “whistle embouchure.” Having the student whistle will automatically produce a flat chin. Look at it in the mirror, feel what your chin is doing, what muscles are you flexing etc...

Another way to produce a flat chin would be to have the student suck their thumb with the top teeth on the pad and the lower lip curling over their bottom teeth slightly. Most likely, this will be what the student naturally does, but you might need to point it out to them. Do this over and over again, setting the embouchure, and then *inhaling* the thumb into the mouth. Once the student can do that successfully multiple times, simply substitute the mouthpiece for the thumb.

• *Be sure to have the student “inhale” the mouthpiece into the mouth so that they can instantly exhale and produce a tone without having to break embouchure to acquire air.*

Having an “Oooh” shaped embouchure

It’s also very important that students maintain a relaxed lower jaw, avoiding biting to produce a seal. Biting will typically result in a pinched sound that is sharp in pitch. Obviously, there will be pressure that must be added from the lower jaw, but the real pressure should come from the corners. This will allow students to develop endurance, and to free up the lower jaw for vibrato. Encourage students to feel the muscles they use when they suck their thumb or whistle and use those same muscles when playing the saxophone.

One way to check if a student is biting is by having them play a concert A on the mouthpiece.* Once the student can play an A consistently, have them bend the pitch down to a G# and back to an A, then to G natural, F# etc... This forces the students to activate both their tongue and embouchure muscles. A similar exercise can also be done on a middle register D, which again, forces the student to use their embouchure muscles.

* There are various schools of thought regarding mouthpiece pitches. Ideally, the goal is to have as much flexibility as possible (around a Major 6th) ‘A’ seems to be a good middle ground, and relatively easy for students to produce. The pitches for soprano, tenor and baritone mouthpieces are as follows:

Sop: C
Ten: G
Bari: D

Tongue in “EE” position:

Another important part of producing a focused tone on the saxophone is to have the tongue arched very high in the mouth. Once the student can produce a flat chin, can “inhale” the mouthpiece and produce a tone successfully, alter the inhalation. Have them inhale the mouthpiece while keeping their tongue arched high. Again, be sure to provide a physical action for them to do this. For example, you might ask them to hiss like a cat, or say the word “key” and feel the position of their tongue before inhaling.

An additional technique for getting the tongue in the right position is to have the student bend over at a 90 degree angle. Oftentimes during this activity, the teacher will need to hold the students saxophone up, or have it resting on a chair to avoid undue stress to the hand. Having the head at this angle naturally relaxes the tongue and puts it toward the roof of the mouth into an “EE” position.

A flat tongue will typically produce a very spread, bright, and unfocused tone. This is extremely audible on middle register E, G, G# and in the palm key register where students might also crack due to poor tongue placement.

Breathing

Unlike the previous three components, breathing can be both conceptual and skill-based. Breathing is a topic on which a book could be (and many have!) been written. There are numerous schools of thought and techniques related to breathing. Of the many articles I have read on the subject, none have been better than Arnold Jacobs’ book entitled *Song and Wind* (<http://tiny.cc/q2iijw>). Mr. Jacobs, former tubist of the Chicago Symphony, was a master pedagogue and breathing technician. His book clearly articulates his theory, and research behind of breathing. I highly recommend that any serious teacher or student purchase this book as it is an invaluable resource both pedagogically and musically.

Instead of fitting an entire book on the theories of how to breathe into one article, I will simply say what I tell all of my students: the saxophone is a *wind* instrument. In order to play it, it requires *wind*. Not simply air, but *moving*, air. The breath of the player, quite literally, brings the sound into existence. If the breath is weak, the sound will be weak, and if the breath is forced, the sound will be forced. The breath and the sound are virtually one and the same. This is a simple aspect, but an important one.

The ideal airstream for saxophone is one that is easy to produce. Most often, this can be interpreted in the form of a sigh. Fortunately for teachers, students (especially teenagers) have mastered the sigh! The only thing they have to do is sigh *into* the saxophone! In my teaching, I have found this to be a very effective way for teaching students to breathe.

Another crucial aspect of tone production is demonstration. The student needs to know what a good tone sounds like! Demonstrate a good tone, mark the features of a good tone, and have the student imitate. Passing the sound back and forth between the student and teacher and striving for a matched timbre is a good way to encourage imitation. Playing recordings of saxophonists and doing this activity can also be beneficial. Again, first the student must know what the tone *should* sound like, then they must have the skills necessary to produce it.

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