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Jazz & Classical Saxophone: What's the Difference?

By Thomas Walsh

It's a familiar scene in schools across America: in concert band, the director says, "Saxes, it's too loud; tone it down!" or, in jazz band it's, "Saxes, I can't hear you!" or "Saxes, that's just not swinging!"

The saxophone is a wonderfully versatile instrument, often identified with jazz and popular music, yet capable of great beauty and grace as an instrument of classical music. However, this versatility can lead to problems: the jazz-oriented player may come across as too raucous in the concert band or orchestra; likewise, the classically-oriented player may sound stiff in the jazz ensemble. To better handle these situations, saxophonists need to be well-acquainted with the issues of performing in these styles.

First, it is important to note that one major difference between the jazz and classical traditions is in the way articulations are notated. Most classical music is notated meticulously and performers are expected to reproduce exactly the articulations printed on the page. Notated jazz, on the other hand, often features a string of eighth notes under a long slur or with no markings whatsoever. In this case, the performer is expected not to reproduce what is on the page, but to supply stylistically appropriate articulations. Is it any wonder that jazz players performing classical music often ignore notated articulations and classical players performing jazz often sound "square" because they tongue every eighth note?

The most critical step in developing an understanding of the differences between classical and jazz saxophone is listening to master performers in each idiom (attending live performances is best, but recordings are invaluable as well). Through careful listening, we discover that differences in style result from differences in the use of fundamental elements such as tone color, vibrato, articulation, and other inflections (accents, scoops, glissandi, ghost notes, etc.). Considering these elements of style, what differences do you hear from one idiom to another? What similarities?

What emerges from attentive listening is a sense of what constitutes authentic performance practice in each style. Traditionally, classical saxophonists strive for refinement – a pure tone without buzziness or distortion, a quick vibrato, very light articulation, and tapered phrase endings. Compared with classical saxophonists, jazz saxophonists tend to display less refinement – a tone with a certain amount of brightness or buzz, a slower vibrato, and more percussive articulation.

Two crucial stylistic differences are found in the way accents and staccato are created. In classical performance, accent is often created by using an increase in airspeed, not a heavy attack, to lend a sense of weight to a note. This can be enhanced with a quicker or wider vibrato. Jazz performers often create accents by stinging the note, using very percussive articulation coupled with an explosive burst of air. Vibrato may be used after the initial attack, perhaps half way through the



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duration of the note. In jazz, staccato notes, or short, accented notes, are usually stopped with the tongue as in saying “dot”; a succession of short notes should be played with continuous air pressure, stopping each note with the tongue, but continuing to blow through the spaces in order to create a sense of forward motion. Rapid staccato notes in the classical style are likewise cut-off with the tongue; however, in a slow or medium tempo, staccato notes are released by tapering the airstream as in saying, “dah.”

It is also common that classical and jazz saxophonists tend to choose different types of mouthpieces and reeds. In general, classical players favor more resistant mouthpiece/reed combinations than jazz players. Since the mouthpiece and reed can help or hinder the saxophonist, the player should choose equipment that helps him or her produce the tone he or she desires. While I do advocate using different mouthpiece/reed set-ups for classical and jazz playing, the player must realize that the most noticeable differences in style come from articulation, vibrato, and other inflections.

Although it sometimes seems as if jazz and classical saxophone are two different instruments (and at times it is helpful to think of it that way), we must recognize that there are many similarities as well. In short, the basic techniques of ear training, tone production, vibrato, articulation, and technical facility, are the same regardless of stylistic preferences, as are the critical ensemble skills of balance, blend, and intonation. Every saxophonist must develop the ability to play with a beautiful, energized tone by using his or her air effectively (in other words – practice long tones!). Likewise, being able to produce an evenly measured vibrato and a light articulation are essential skills. Developing technical facility is a matter of developing the rhythm of your fingers through practicing scales, arpeggios, patterns, etc. Scales should be practiced all slurred in straight eighth notes (no swing rhythm, please!) to develop rhythmic, synchronized finger movements. And, all musicians should engage in ear training every day by listening to great musicians and by playing things by ear.

Before closing, I must point out two jazz techniques that are often misused – subtone and scoops. The low register of the saxophone (especially tenor saxophone) presents a challenge for all saxophonists, and many young jazz-oriented players constantly play subtone (an old-style, “foo-foo” sound) in the lower register, dropping the jaw to get the low notes to speak. Scooping notes, likewise, often becomes a habit for young jazz-oriented players, sometimes to the point that the player cannot begin a note without scooping into the desired pitch. It is important for all saxophonists to be able to play with a focused, reedy tone in the low register and to be able to start notes without scooping. Both of these are accomplished by playing with a firm embouchure while blowing warm air with an “oh” feeling in the oral cavity. The embouchure and oral cavity should be in position before the saxophonist begins to blow so the note will be focused right from the start.

To summarize, learning to play different styles is a matter of study and practice. Study each style to internalize its sound and discover its elements. Practice the physical skills needed to produce those elements. As always, it is best to get together with a teacher or mentor who can demonstrate and explain these concepts. When it comes time to perform, use your ears and make music!

Recommended Listening:

Classical Saxophone: Eugene Rousseau, Otis Murphy, Kenneth Tse, Thomas Walsh (CDs by these artists on the RIAX label are available through prowinds.com)

Jazz Saxophone: Smithsonian Collection of Classic Jazz; Count Basie – The Complete Atomic Basie; Charlie Parker, Cannonball Adderley, Sonny Stitt, Johnny Hodges, Lester Young, Coleman Hawkins, Ben Webster, Dexter Gordon, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Joe Henderson, Wayne Shorter, Michael Brecker, and many more.