

THE SAXOPHONE SECTION OF A JAZZ ENSEMBLE

Compiled by Vince Corozine

Lead Alto

- The lead alto player sets the tone quality (vibrato vs. no vibrato), pitch, and style for the entire section.
- He must be consistent in the way he plays each piece.
- The use of wide vibrato (Marshall Royal with the Count Basie band and Johnny Hodges with the Duke Ellington band has lost favor in recent years. (Except when one is playing a chart in that style). A straighter tone for the Saxes is more difficult to keep in tune, but works best for contemporary arrangements.
- The sax sections (like the strings in an orchestra) have the most to carry. The busiest parts are usually given to the Saxes.
- Most saxophonists today, begin a tone with no vibrato and then add a bit of vibrato as the tone is held out.

Section Saxes (Alto, 2 Tenors and Bari)

- The inner-voice players should be able to sing (from memory) the lead alto part and follow his lead regarding accents, phrasing, vibrato and general style of playing.
- Contemporary scores (written by Thad Jones, Bill Holman, Bob Florence, Toshiko Akiyoshi, and so on) use lots of major and minor second “crunch” intervals in the inner parts. Many of these arrangers place the third, seventh or the ninth of the chord (rather than the root) and this can give an unusual sound and blend to the sax section. This means that intonation and a keen ear must be present to be able to handle these dissonances.
- Mouthpieces should be compatible. Rod rubber seems best for section playing. Metal mouthpieces have a tendency to be shrill, sharp in pitch, and offer too much projection to be used in a section.
- The Bari sax usually doubles the lead alto and his pitch and phrasing must be “right on” with the lead alto.
- The second alto must project enough to reinforce the lead part.
- Remember that lower notes have more projection than upper notes and the dynamics should be altered accordingly...
- The inner parts should project a full and dark sound under the lead alto.

- The Bari sax can sometimes double the bass trombone in ensemble passages and must “lock” into his pitch.

General Principles

- When the Saxes are playing in parallel thirds, both notes should be of equal volume. When Saxes are playing in octaves, the lower octave should dominate slightly.
- Unisons are never played with vibrato, unless otherwise specified.
- In playing “classical” style saxophone, the vibrato begins immediately and remains throughout the length of the note. In jazz, the note begins with no vibrato and a little vibrato is added as the note is held
- The saxophone one of the easiest instruments to play and often is the instrument that is most often played out of tune. Tune to a strobe before and during every rehearsal to ensure that the length of your - horn is correct. Playing in tune is a life-long endeavor.
- Fast articulation (tonguing) is slower as compared to the brass instruments, and therefore certain passages must be modified to “coordinate” with the brass figures.
- The sax stands must be low enough to allow the saxes to project.
- Saxes should be downstage as far as possible.
- Use a bit of vibrato on open chords and on long notes.
- Suggested seating Tenor I, Alto 2, Alto I, Tenor 2, and Bari. The jazz soloist (Tenor I should be seated near the rhythm section).
- When playing keep your bells up.
- Stand for “soli” sections.