

## **Alto Saxophone**

### **First Day of Class**

#### **Assembling the Instrument**

1. Students take instrument cases to another area of the room and set their cases flat on a table(s). If no table is available, students should put cases on the floor and sit or kneel beside his/her instrument.
2. The case must be opened with the handle below the opening.
3. Remove one reed from the reed case and let it soak in the mouth.
4. Pick up the neck and hold with the left hand grasping at the bend in the neck with the left thumb on the octave key.
5. Put the mouthpiece on the neck with a firm twisting motion making sure to continue to hold the neck in the bend with the octave key depressed with the left thumb to avoid damage. The mouthpiece should cover at least half of the cork. The opening of the mouthpiece is aligned with the brace of the neck.

*Note: If at all possible the teacher should grease the students' corks prior to the first lesson. This will save time and lessen the possibility of damaging the instrument.*

6. Take the ligature from the case and slip the large end of the ligature over the mouthpiece with the ligature screws on the right side of the mouthpiece. Pull the ligature down so that it is slightly below the scribe line on the mouthpiece. Do not tighten the screws at this time.
7. Remove the reed from the mouth and slip the thick portion of the reed under the ligature. Slide the reed down and align the reed so it is straight and even with the top edge of the mouthpiece. If the reed is pressed gently against the mouthpiece only a very slight rim is visible (finger nail width). Make sure the ligature is low enough so that it is below the carved portion of the reed.
8. Now tighten the ligature screws until they are snug. Be sure students do not over tighten them. The instructor must check each reed & ligature before proceeding.
9. Replace the mouthpiece cover.

*Note: Depending on the amount of time allotted for the lesson, the teacher may want take the students to their seats at this point and spend the remainder of the lesson*

*working on embouchure formation and tone production on the neck and mouthpiece alone. Assembling the entire instrument, hand position, and playing on the entire instrument would take place at a subsequent lesson.*

10. Set the neck and mouthpiece down gently inside the case.
11. The neck strap is placed over the student's head so the hook is in the front and the neck pad is resting on the student's neck.
12. With the right hand pick up the saxophone by gripping the bell (this avoids damaging keys) and attach the ring on the back side of the saxophone to the neck strap. Keep the instrument from moving by holding it steady with one hand.
13. Remove the neck plug and loosen the neck screw.
14. Pick up the neck and mouthpiece and attach the neck to the saxophone being sure to align the connecting lever on the saxophone with the brace on the neck.
15. Gently tighten the neck screw to hold the neck in place.
16. The teacher needs to check each saxophone at this time.
17. Students now walk to their seats with the saxophone attached to the neck strap and both hands gently supporting the instrument.
18. Remind the students to be patient and not to play. They will be very excited at this point and it is easy for them to lose control.

## **Producing a Sound**

1. Remove the neck & mouthpiece from the instrument, detach the saxophone from the neck strap and gently set the body of the instrument on the floor next to the student.
2. Students slide out to the edge of the chair, sit up tall, and put their feet flat on the floor. Shoulders are relaxed, head is straight and facing forward.
3. Ask students to stretch the bottom lip slightly over the bottom teeth as if saying the sound "voo". Approximately half of the red of the lip should cover the bottom teeth.
4. The chin must be down and flat. This is not a natural position and some students will need help with the concept.
5. Next, students take their right thumb (nail side down) and insert about one half inch into their mouth, pushing the fleshy part up against the top teeth. The mouth should then close around the thumb without collapsing the chin. The mouth should be shaped as if saying "oh" This is the basic embouchure.

6. The teacher now individually takes each mouthpiece with the neck attached and places the mouthpiece into the student's mouth with the neck angled just slightly below parallel. Be sure the mouthpiece is against the top teeth with a small amount of the red of the lip over the bottom teeth and the chin down. The head is neither up nor down but looking straight ahead. Do not let go of the neck. Ask the student to close his/her mouth around the mouthpiece.
7. As the teacher holds on to the neck and pushes it gently up against the top teeth, the student blows fast air through the mouthpiece. A rather high pitch should sound (approximately an Ab). If there is no sound ask the student to pull her/his chin down and away from the mouthpiece, keeping the chin stretched (the teacher may need to pull the chin down with the index finger of the right hand).
8. Once the student can get the correct sound, the student tries the same procedure without the teacher's help.
9. After each student has completed this procedure, the entire group sustains the pitch for 4 counts with the teacher maintaining an audible beat. Be sure to take time to help students who are having difficulty. Make sure that a steady pulse is maintained.

### **Holding the Instrument/Finger Exercises**

1. Students now reassemble the neck to the body of the instrument (with the mouthpiece and mouthpiece cover in place) and reattach the neck strap.
2. Students again slide out to the edge of the chair, sit up tall, and put their feet flat on the floor. Shoulders are relaxed, head is straight and facing forward.
3. Students hold the saxophone in front of their body making light contact with the lower lip.
4. The teacher now helps each student adjust the neck strap so that the weight of the instrument is on the student's neck, not on the hands or resting on the chair.

*Note: If the student is small and the right wrist is cramped, it will be necessary for the student to hold the saxophone off to the right side. In this case the mouthpiece will probably need to be turned slightly to keep the student from playing with the head tilted.*

5. Remember that as with all instruments the student should think of bringing the saxophone to him/her not the him/her to the saxophone.
6. Place the right hand thumb under the thumb rest, at the point where the skin and the finger nail meet.
7. Place the left hand thumb on the thumb rest at a 2 o'clock angle with the corner of the left thumb extending just beyond the thumb rest to overlap the octave key..
8. Students place the first three fingers of the left hand and the first three fingers of the right hand on the appropriate keys. Hands must be curved in a natural C position (no claws) and fingers are relatively flat. Fingers should not be leaning against side keys. The left pinky hovers above the G# key and the right pinky hovers above the Eb key.
9. Check each student to be sure the hand position is correct. Make sure the "little" fingers are not tucked under the saxophone.
10. With the saxophone supported by the neck strap and the mouthpiece to the left of the mouth, students lift all 6 fingers and the left thumb slightly off the keys. Then in rhythm, with the teacher counting out loud, students replace fingers one at a time ---Thumb 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, pinky (on the Eb key), pinky (on the G# key)---. Do this exercise very slowly many times. Insist that students stay together as the fingers are called off.
11. Check students carefully to make sure that hand and finger position is correct. Students can and should watch their fingers while doing this exercise in order to see as well as "feel" the correct position

### **Producing a Sound on the Instrument**

1. Individually place the mouthpiece with the horn attached in each student's mouth, adjust the mouthpiece and neck strap as needed. The mouthpiece should enter the mouth with a very slight downward angle.
2. With the left thumb on the thumb rest, the left index finger depressing the B key and the right thumb under the thumb rest with right hand fingers placed as noted above, have each student individually blow into the instrument in the same manner as she/he did on the neck and mouthpiece alone. If everything is correct, the pitch produced will be a B (Concert D).
3. Repeat this procedure with each student. Check to be sure that chin is down and flat, the mouthpiece is up against the top teeth and the head is straight and facing forward.

4. It is possible to tell if the mouthpiece is secure against the top teeth by trying to gently wiggle the mouthpiece while the student is playing. If the mouthpiece wiggles the mouthpiece is not secure. If the whole head moves, the mouthpiece is secure.
5. Always remind the student to push up against the top teeth. Pushing down will close off the reed and cause the student to squeak or get no sound at all.
6. Once the student can get the correct pitch, the student tries the same procedure without the teacher's help.
7. After each student has completed this procedure, the entire group sustains the Concert D for 4 counts with the teacher maintaining an audible beat. Be sure to take time to help students who are having difficulty. Make sure that a steady pulse is maintained.
8. Constant and consistent reinforcement of these fundamentals at each class session will be necessary if students are to develop proper playing fundamentals.

### **Disassembling the Instrument**

1. When the lesson has ended the students replace the mouthpiece cover and return quietly to their instrument cases.
2. The students remove the reed and return it to the reed case. The neck screw is then loosened and the neck is removed from the body of the saxophone.
3. After taking off the neck both the mouthpiece and the neck are placed carefully back into the case.
4. The body of the saxophone is removed from the neck strap, the end cap is replaced and the saxophone and neck strap are gently placed into the case.
5. To avoid bending keys, the student should be careful to grasp the saxophone by the bell only.
6. The cases can now be closed and latched. Do not allow students to put music or books in the case, as anything extra in the case will damage the instrument.

*Note: Do not worry about swabbing out the instrument at this time. The focus of the first few lessons should be on correct playing habits. Swabbing can be dealt with at a later lesson.*

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### **Extra Considerations**

Start all students on the same type and strength of reed (LaVoz medium soft works well for beginners). This not only helps young students have consistency in their playing but also helps the teacher in diagnosing and solving performance problems.

Do not be too quick to move students to a harder reed. Although a harder reed will help the sound, using a harder reed too soon will cause the chin to collapse. Students should play on a medium soft reed until the chin is firm and not in danger of collapsing. This can take two to three years in some cases.

Make sure students have 4 good reeds at all times. Students should rotate these reeds each day and when not in use keep them stored in a plastic or metal reed case. Insist that students keep these reeds on their music stands during each and every band class. This way students can change reeds during class if one seems to be wearing out or if one becomes cracked.

Encourage beginning students to purchase a good high quality mouthpiece before starting the saxophone. Not only will it produce a better sound than a stock mouthpiece but will also make the instrument respond easier, thus increasing the likelihood of success in the early stages.