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Educator Series

WIND INSTRUMENTS



Audrey Cupples

In praise of Yamaha Artist, Audrey Cupples, Dale Underwood says: "With her CD, Sunshine and Tears, Audrey Cupples has shown stunning musicianship and belongs in the league of top saxophone performers." Audrey earned her bachelor's degree and Performer's Certificate from the Eastman School of Music, her master's degree from the University of Maryland, and is currently working on her doctorate at the University of Maryland. She has presented master classes and clinics at various universities including Eastman School of Music, Northwestern, Loyola, All-Eastern, Mid-Western, and the Saxophone Symposium. She is the baritone saxophonist with the East Coast Saxophone Quartet, who in 1995 released their first album, Americana Suite. Ms. Cupples has been a member of "The President's Own" United States Marine Band since 1988 and has been teaching saxophone at the College of Southern Maryland since 1996.

Teaching Saxophone Vibrato: Misconceptions About Saxophone Vibrato

By Audrey Cupples

There are those who subscribe to the idea that students should start using vibrato within the first year of studying the saxophone. My experience has taught me that rushing into vibrato can seriously delay the development of a centered sound, good pitch, and steady breath control. Use of vibrato too early will often hide problems in these areas and therefore inhibit their development and growth.

Another misconception is that vibrato should be used all the time and in every style of music. Playing in a variety of ensembles has taught me to vary the width and speed of my vibrato. For example, when playing a march in a concert band, I would use little to no vibrato because that is the traditional style for military music. A romantic aria would use quite a bit of vibrato to "warm it up" and would probably vary in speed and width depending on the intensity of the phrase being played. Modern music often uses no vibrato and can sound very "cold." Other times vibrato might be added as an effect rather than for musical reasons. Jazz vibrato is often used to add color or texture.

Prerequisites to Learning Vibrato

Long tones are very important in a saxophonist's everyday warm-up routine. Long tones help to develop a centered sound, good intonation, and deep, steady breath control, which are the prerequisites to learning vibrato. When practicing long tones, set the metronome to quarter note equals 60. Have your student start on third line B-flat and hold for 2 beats, then slur down a half step to A and hold for 6 beats. Rest for 2 beats, inhaling deeply, and start on B-flat again. Hold that for 2 beats. Slur down a whole step to A-flat for 6 beats. Rest for 2, etc. Continue widening the interval by half step, always returning to B-flat, until you've reached an octave. Do this same exercise (start on the same third line B-flat) and work upward past the octave. This exercise forces one to work on the development of a centered tone over the full range of the saxophone. Of course, during this exercise, the student must concentrate on the attack of each note, making sure each note speaks without delay and without a sudden blast of sound. "DAH" seems to work best for the correct saxophone tonguing sound. The throat should be open and the embouchure should be round. Have the student think "AH" in their throat and "OH" with their lips. The tone should be without a "spitty" sound, without an airy quality, and without any wavering from an unsteady embouchure and/or incorrect breath support. Each time the student slurs from one note to the next, they should be aware of their fingers moving perfectly together, without a "blip" between notes. Also, the slur should be smooth, whether it's a second or an octave, and the notes should be the same dynamic and quality. This exercise should be done with a tuner. The student will develop a good sense of intonation by listening to the intervals and will learn to overcome the various "quirks" of their instrument. As the student gets better and develops a larger lung capacity, the length of each note may be broadened.



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How to Teach Vibrato

Once a student has developed a consistent centered sound, deep breath support, and overall good intonation, he/she is ready to learn vibrato. Saxophonists use jaw vibrato. Start with as little coaching as possible and ask the student to say "WAH WAH WAH." Demonstrate so that they have an idea what it should sound like, then have them try it. Some pick it up easily and others have to be told to exaggerate the movement because they feel as though they are making a big gesture when in reality the result is barely audible.

Once they understand the concept of the "WAH WAH" movement they can start vibrato exercises to develop control of the speed and width. Again, set the metronome for quarter note equals 60 and have them start on a note in the middle range of the saxophone. Play 4 beats of quarter note "WAHS", 4 beats of eighth note "WAHS," 4 beats of triplet "WAHS," 4 beats of sixteenth note "WAHS," 4 beats of triplet "WAHS," 4 beats of eighth note "WAHS," and 4 beats of quarter note "WAHS." Make sure they keep the vibrato rhythmically even, the width equidistant, and the "waves" smooth. Have the student choose notes throughout the range of the saxophone to practice, and later, when they're more proficient, have them use the long tones exercise as a vibrato exercise, too.

The next step is to incorporate what they've learned into a musical piece. Select something slow and uncomplicated, such as a slow Ferling Etude, and tell the student to put a certain number (your decision based on the piece) "WAHS" into each beat of the longer notes (could be quarter, half, and whole notes). Guide them as to whether they are playing with enough width in their vibrato. Eventually they will be able to add the vibrato without having to keep it even and rhythmic.

Finally, listening to other saxophonists is of great value to the developing saxophonist. Saxophone is a diverse instrument and there are a large variety of styles to be enjoyed. Give your students a list of well-known/fine saxophonists, and if possible, lend out CD's for them to study. Some good role models include Donald Sinta, Jean-Marie Londeix, Benny Carter, Charlie Parker, Chris Vadala, and Paul Winter to name a few. Tell them to listen to other musicians, such as trumpeter Wynton Marsalis, trombonist Harry Watters, violinist Itzak Perlman, or vocalist Billie Holiday. Point out the way each performer incorporates vibrato into their particular style of music by way of building intensity, emphasizing phrases, adding texture and color, or adding warmth. Vibrato is an important and exciting part of expressing oneself through the saxophone, so encourage your students to experiment and find their individual style.