

Bad Habits Checklist

by
Steven Mauk

Most musicians are conscientious and work hard to do all of the things they should in the practice room. During a lesson or performance, however, things seem to frequently get in the way. Often these obstacles are the result to *bad habits*. These are the unplanned things that we do which keep us from performing at our highest level. Take a few minutes now to go through this *bad habit checklist* to see if any of these are part of your performance problems.

- 1) *The Body Metronome*— This is the unnecessary pulsing of the body to keep time with the beat. While a gentle toe pat may be a good way to keep a constant pulse, many other body motions are more harmful than helpful. Two of the most common examples are the “chicken elbow,” which flaps up and down, or the “rocking torso,” where the entire upper body moves to the beat. These large muscle motions take too much time, look rather foolish, and slow down the small muscle motions of the fingers. Eliminating these unnecessary pulsations often fix many technical passages. Use a mirror to observe yourself and to help rid you of these awkward motions.
- 2) *Excessive Breaths* — In most upper-level music, a rest does not mean, “take a breath;” it merely serves as a compositional silence. *Do not breathe at every rest!* Those players who breathe excessively often end up with breathing problems, have trouble conveying the phrasing of a piece, and have difficulties with initial attacks after short rests. Establishing a breathing plan should be as important as playing correct notes and rhythms. A haphazard and unplanned approach to breathing usually leads to errors.
- 3) *The “Last Second Set”* — It is very important to be set before an initial attack. This means (in order of event): fingering the note, taking a breath, setting the embouchure muscles, placing the tongue on the reed, preparing the air, and, most importantly, setting the *mind* for the attack. Many players merely take a huge breath, leave their mouths open, and then set all of the many elements a millisecond before the expected note. The results are often disastrous. Merely working on the proper set approach can eliminate hours of practice time and result in more consistent attacks.
- 4) *Random and Unnecessary Body Motion* — Good musicians often move with the music; their body motions are a visual representation of the sound of the music. For instance, an aggressive section may have large, angular motions, while a tranquil one may be performed standing still. Many players, however, often move in a confusing and illogical manner, which has nothing to do with the music being heard. Such motions confuse the audience members and can lead to technical

problems for the performer. Use a mirror or a video camera to observe your motions to be sure that they are appropriate and useful in conveying the music. Also be aware of any funny “ticks” or habits you have before beginning to play. These might include always adjusting the neckstrap, an odd head jerk, or some other habitual motion that you always do before beginning to play.

- 5) *Extra Noises* — Performers must be careful to eliminate extra noises from their presentations. These noises include loud breaths (especially through the saxophone), noisily clearing saliva from the mouthpiece during silences, loud key pops, an audible vocal sound before attacks, or a loud “tsk” sound just before setting for an attack. All of these extraneous sounds are heard by the audience and become part of the piece. Most of these noises can be easily eliminated, once the player knows he/she is doing them.
- 6) *Not Looking Ahead* — Due to hours of dedicated practicing, much of the music we perform is practically memorized. Often, however, performers try to stare at each note as they play. In a sense, they are trying to read notes that they already know. Let the ear lead the fingers through familiar territory and keep the eyes looking forward as you play.
- 7) *Excessive Finger Motion* — Saxophonists who move their fingers much more than necessary are often very tense and struggle to get pieces worked up to the expected tempos. Keeping the fingers touching the keys, especially on the upstrokes, is necessary for a quick and facile technical control. Daily mirror work is essential to improving this important element of technique.
- 8) *Lifted Shoulders* — Since the left hand is higher than the right when playing the saxophone, many saxophonists have a severely raised left shoulder. Some even move the shoulders up and down as a way of being more expressive. Of course, all this extra motion merely leads to extra tension, muscle aches, and even severe neck, arm, and hand pain. The player with a natural-looking set of shoulders is often the one who is most relaxed and best able to perform the music with ease.
- 9) *Odd Facial Expressions* — Some players choose to “choreograph” their facial expressions to fit the music, much like a vocalist. Most saxophonists, however, try to remain relaxed and rather expressionless when performing, and avoid any odd facial expressions. These might include widely-opened eyes, puffed cheeks, raised or moving eyebrows, frowns or scowls, or constantly furrowed brows. Look into the mirror to decide how you want to look when performing and check yourself frequently during practice sessions.

Playing the saxophone is a difficult feat. Work to eliminate your bad habits to make it a more relaxed and successful endeavor.