

FOUR STEPS TO MUSICAL MATURITY

by
Steven Mauk

I frequently hear young saxophonists, who are extremely gifted. They have wonderful tones, clean and even technique, and a fine sense of rhythm. Yet if I were to hear them without seeing them, I would still know that they were youngsters. What elements are missing from student performances as compared with those by older and more mature musicians?

Listed below are what I have labeled the “Four Steps to Musical Maturity.” By adding these items, young saxophonists can sound advanced beyond their years.

VIBRATO

The single most important element necessary for musical maturity is vibrato. Nothing says “young player” more than a constantly straight tone. While the use of vibrato is not advisable in every circumstance, its absence emphasizes a player's immaturity.

Saxophonists must practice a daily vibrato routine to gain muscular control. I favor a measured approach at first, such as four vibratos per quarter note at 72. Eventually this must yield to a non-countable, though even vibrato undulation. By playing scales and simple melodies with a measured and uniform number of vibratos, students can develop the muscles needed to produce a polished vibrato.

The next step requires learning how to vary the vibrato. (I prefer leaving the speed rather constant — at approximately five vibratos per quarter note at 60 — and varying the width or amplitude of the vibrato.) Using vibrato all of the time would be as wrong as never using it. It should be avoided much of the time in concert band section playing, but should be used frequently in solos. Vibrato should vary according to range, dynamics, and style. A general rule is to use a wider vibrato when playing in the low register and a narrower one when playing high notes. Use a wider vibrato for loud dynamics and a narrower one (or none at all) when playing softly. Consider a normal vibrato speed for a Baroque transcription, but a quicker one for a standard work from the French repertoire.

Many young saxophonists are not aware of these subtleties, but most can quickly apply them once the options are presented. Vibrato mastery is the quickest way to add musical maturity.

BREATHING

The proper control of the air stream is an essential part of producing a good tone. Although many students have an adequate understanding of the inhale-and-exhale process, they don't use logical breathing plans in their music making.

It is important to know *when* and *where* to breathe. Many students merely breathe when they need to, which can create awkward holes and add extra rests to the music. I often demonstrate this concept for students with an example such as this. “I'm planning to go. To town. Today do you want. To come?” If the punctuation marks are placed accurately, the sentences make much more sense. This same concept is true for musical phrasing. Phrases must be “punctuated” or shaped accurately, and breathing plays a critical part in proper phrasing.

The first step toward good phrasing is breathing in sensible places. Students must analyze their music to locate the musical phrases and must mark their breaths accordingly. (Of course, they must then follow these breath marks consistently.) It is equally important to breathe fully, so that the players do not run out of air in the middle of phrases. Both musical and physical demands must be considered in guiding breathing decisions.

Logical and well-planned breathing quickly leads to phrasing maturity. Some common breathing spots are found at:

1. *Phrase endings* — Breathe at the end of a musical “sentence;” the place where the musical flow comes to a stop.
2. *Rests* — Look for rests in the music and use them as breathing spots. (Be careful, however, to avoid breathing at every rest or the phrasing can become “choppy.”)
3. *Long notes* — Cheat a bit on the length of a long or tied note to allow for a breath.

NOTE RELEASES

Once players determine where to breathe, they must decide how the last note will be shaped. Most young saxophonists just cut off the end of the note, leaving an unprepared silence in the musical line. Mature players always shape this note release in accordance with the musical style.

A typical note release will sound the same way that a *decrescendo* marking looks. The note will taper in dynamics to a final point of sound. If done well, there is no stopping of the sound; it will just disappear. While this type of note release would not be appropriate for some marches or jazz selections, it is the style of release used in most classical music. Teaching this tapered note release is easy, but students must remember to use it. Adding this predictable and graceful fade at the end of a phrase or before a breath is an important part of playing in a mature manner.

STYLE

The final step to musical maturity is appropriate stylistic interpretation. For example, the first movement of Paul Creston's *Sonata* is an aggressive and energetic work. It requires the use of a full dynamic range, accents, and much dramatic flair. In contrast, Eugene Bozza's *Aria* is a gentle and sedate piece, which should be rendered in the style of Johann Sebastian Bach. Although both pieces use similar dynamic ranges, a *forte* dynamic in the Bozza must be less than one in the Creston. Creston's composition is somewhat brusque and even raw at times, while Bozza's must always maintain an air of grace and elegance.

Young saxophonists must be taught the full range of musical styles through the study of various etudes, solos, and ensemble pieces. The teacher may need to give some historical background to help the students understand the stylistic differences and, when possible, demonstrate them. As students progress, they will gain more experience in musical styles and be able to apply them independently. The lack of stylistic differences is a common, musical error among most young saxophonists.

The addition of these four steps will not guarantee maturity in young players. Once students are made aware of these elements, however, they can begin to employ them on their own. Only then can students begin their journey toward greater musical maturity.