

MASTER LESSON ON MUCZYNSKI'S SONATA

by
Steven Mauk

Robert Muczynski's Opus 29, the *Sonata for Alto Saxophone and Piano*, has become a standard work in the saxophone repertoire. Written in 1970 for Trent Kynaston, this eight-minute piece is filled with all of the excitement, passion, and drama of many works twice its length. The *Sonata* is published by G. Schirmer and is priced around six dollars, positively a steal compared to most foreign publications. The following comments may prove helpful in preparing this work.

TEMPO

Muczynski clearly marks the first movement quarter note = 52. This tempo remains largely unchanged until the last 8 bars, where he requests the original tempo, but with a little less motion. This makes sense when we consider his additional markings, *p sempre*, *senza espress.*, and "always softly, without expression." The 5/8 meter, which begins at measure 31, maintains the tempo, but is best performed at eighth note = 104. The only true tempo change occurs in bars 44-51, where an *agitato*, balance by an eventual *ritardando*, presses the movement toward its conclusion.

The second movement is marked quarter note = 144-150. Due to the energetic nature of the movement and the technical demands of both parts, I recommend quarter note = 138-144 for most performers. With the meter change from 2/4 to 6/8 in bar 155, the movement picks up momentum. The sudden shift from duple to triple subdivision adds excitement and musicians must be careful to add no increase in tempo to this challenging end section.

STYLE

Muczynski marks movement one with *Andante maestoso*, indicating a moderate and majestic tempo. Some performers choose to play it in a rather free and rhapsodic manner, which seems to trivialize its majesty and nobility. With the exception of the climactic measures 25-29, I prefer a strict metric interpretation. This approach also helps to align the rhythmic interplay between the saxophone and piano parts. The use of the terms *broadly* and *espressivo* in the saxophone part and *molto legato*, *sostenuto*, *espressivo*, and frequent pedal markings in the piano part indicate the composer's desire for long lines with suspended sound.

Just as Muczynski drastically alters tempo between movement, he also alters the style. The broad and stately nature of the first movement is quickly replaced by a *marcato* and accented spirit in the second. He alternates this with slurred and *legato* areas for contrast, as in the sections starting with measure 32, 91, and 114. The frequent and often sudden dynamic changes, as well as the numerous accents, must be accurately followed to help convey the movement's raw energy.

Articulation plays a key role in the stylistic performance of this work and Muczynski's specific markings should be strictly followed in both parts. The frequent use of tenuto markings and slurs in the *Andante* give this movement a sense of expansiveness. The accents and staccatos of movement two's initial theme gives the *Allegro energico* its vitality. Take time to learn the articulations properly at first to avoid having to relearn them later.

RHYTHMS

Rhythmic variety and complexity are major elements of Muczynski's *Sonata*. The alignment of similar and contrasting rhythmic figures is crucial to a successful ensemble performance. A review of specific rhythmic areas may be useful.

Movement one's first rhythmic challenge is the accurate performance of the dotted-eighth-and-sixteenth figures. Due to the slow tempo and the articulations, many performers accent the sixteenth notes, thereby transforming the figure into a triplet. Subdividing and placing the metric accent properly on the dotted-eighth will help to eliminate this common error.

The saxophonist should be careful with the fermata in bar 9. It is over a dotted-eighth note, so don't hold it too long. Also take care that the thirty-second-note patterns in the saxophone part are not rushed or the player will arrive on the downbeats early.

Most saxophonists are concerned with the altissimo passages in measures 25-28. The biggest problems I observe, however, are in rushing this section, especially the sixteenth-note triplets and the run to high A. Practice it with a metronome, set at the eighth-note subdivision, to keep the passage rhythmically accurate. This advice will also help with the accuracy of measures 44-46. Saxophonists tend to hold the high B one beat too short in measure 46 and get ahead of the piano.

The pianist has specific rhythms to observe as well. The left-hand pattern in bar 29 is tricky and often misplayed. Measures 48-51 are particularly crucial and must be performed rhythmically and dynamically correct to allow the energy to drain from this exciting section. Many pianists rush through this passage without counting and the quiet recapitulation of bar 52 is improperly prepared.

The second movement presents additional rhythmic challenges for both instruments. The pianist must play the pick-up note into bar 3, and other similar measures, with accuracy and a strong accent. This propels the motion forward in this opening section. Although not a rhythmic element, the *fp* indicated in measure 18 must be strictly observed by both musicians. The saxophonist should play the grace notes in bars 22 and 24 as close to the beat as possible. Many play them like sixteenth notes, causing the figures to lose their intended crispness.

The articulation of the B section, beginning in measure 33, poses problems for the some saxophonists. When similar figures are found later, as in bar 132, they are marked staccato (merely a copying error in my opinion). I suggest the saxophonist listen to the pianist play this rhythm in measures 37 and 132 and imitate that style. I think of a French horn playing staccato, which is a bit broader than a saxophone, to help create the proper bounce and length. Use this style whenever the pattern occurs.

The rhythmic figures in bars 60-67 create a dialogue between the two parts. Both players should keep the pulse very accurate to allow this rhythmic “jigsaw puzzle” to fit together. The pianist must be sure to follow the dynamic indications beginning in measure 99, so that this next section to grow from *p*. Similarly, the pianist must observe the accents in bar 113, which set up a 6/8 feel, and the accompanying sudden *decrescendo* to prepare the style change beginning in measure 114.

The last, big section of movement two starts in bar 155. Both players must drop the dynamic level after the initial downbeat and gradually crescendo toward measure 163. (Note that the saxophonist need not overplay the accents in this eight-bar section. The piano plays only on these accented notes and its addition will create an adequate ensemble accent.) Pianists often struggle with the rhythm and technique of measures 180-184, so be sure adequate practice time is allowed to master these bars. Take care that the unison rhythm in measure 184 is correct. The tendency is to move off the fourth rhythm too soon, creating a continuation of the syncopation. It’s best to just think of the last eighth note as a pick-up beat to bar 185.

ALTISSIMO

I particularly like to teach this piece to students who have just gotten over the altissimo “hump.” That is to say, those who have finally gotten the problematic notes of altissimo G, G#, and A to speak consistently. Since this sonata has numerous problems dealing with these specific notes, it can be used initially as an altissimo etude. Players may want to wait until they have mastered this range before actually programming this delightful piece.

The biggest problems I observe in students preparing this piece are lack of confidence in the altissimo range and rushing. I suggest students do much finger practice, without playing, to be sure the technique of the altissimo passages are clean and smooth. Once the rhythms and fingerings become fluid, the student can then start playing the passages. Otherwise, the lower lip may be sacrificed in the process, greatly reducing playing time due to injury. Here are a few suggestions that may help the reader through the altissimo challenges.

In movement one, use air attacks, rather than the tongue, for articulating the upper notes in measures 25 and 26. This will allow the tongue to maintain the necessary altissimo setting, which should prove more success in getting these difficult notes to speak consistently. The top A in bar 28 frequently comes out as a multiphonic. Use the “long” A (like middle D with the first finger of the left hand up) or a similarly secure altissimo A fingering to be sure it speaks confidently. The altissimo Ab’s in bar 43 are really sensitive and often crack or just don’t speak. Use the most stable fingering you have for Ab, even if it means a more difficult fingering pattern. I find most people can refine fingering patterns much better than oral cavity settings, especially if they are new to this range.

Movement two has the most altissimo problems. Players should set the embouchure and oral cavity at least a beat ahead for the altissimo G in bar 66 to minimize the chance of missing it on the attack. Substitute a rest for that eighth note on the downbeat of measure 80; this give more time to prepare for the tricky palm-fingering passage that follows. In bars 85-88, raise the right wrist and touch high E key at all times to minimize excess hand motion.

As I stated earlier, probably the biggest problem with the altissimo comes from rushing. That is consistently the case in measures 108-110. Work this out carefully with a metronome to be sure the last five notes are in proper tempo. The same suggestion would apply to the last three measures of the movement. This is usually rushed, thus creating technical errors and an unconvincing ending.

Attacking the altissimo G after the rests in bars 47 and 142 is often a problem. Do not breathe during this rest! The altissimo G’s in measures 45 and 140 are well prepared with a scalar run and usually come out fine. These successful G settings can be easily “remembered” if the tendency to breathe is eliminated. There is plenty of time to breathe after these passage.

The altissimo G to A figures in bars 173 and 185 are particularly troublesome. This is due to the “flip-flop” nature of these two fingerings when encountered side-by-side. There is no easy way around this passage, so the player should spend sufficient practice time (without playing at first) to master the awkwardness of these fingerings. As always, don’t rush!

I think Muczynski’s *Sonata* is one of the gems of the saxophone repertoire. It is as entertaining for the audience as it is challenging for the performers. I assign this work to almost every college student I teach and nearly every one falls in love with it. Hopefully, these suggestions may make the initial learning of the piece easier for those just discovering this fine composition.