

Preparing for the Private Lesson

by
Steven Mauk

It always amazes me that some students really don't know how to prepare for a private lesson. While some saxophonists come into the studio with the assigned material well polished, others can barely get through even part of the music. The problem may be that some students don't know how to practice effectively. For those people, I recommend my article, "Teaching Students How to Practice," which appeared in a previous issue of *The Saxophone Journal*. For others, however, it is a matter of knowing how to prepare both physically and mentally for the private lesson. All students may find help in these suggestions.

- **Come prepared.** This seems like the most obvious thing in the world, but many students miss this obvious step. Even in college lessons I still hear the statement, "I didn't get to that this week." To avoid this situation, be sure to practice parts of the entire assignment at every practice session. This will require discipline and good clock management to be sure one aspect of the assignment doesn't take up all of your time. And, of course, don't come to the lesson with a bad reed. To put it simply, there is just no excuse. Plan ahead, so you can play with your best tone and eliminate response problems.
- **Treat your lesson like a performance.** This simply means to play through your errors; don't stop at every wrong note. This makes your lesson a better mental challenge and prepares you for the final performance, when stopping is unacceptable. Although initial work on a piece or etude will require you to practice sections one at a time, the final preparation should include performances of the entire selection. Of course, there may be times in a lesson when your teacher stops you to make suggestions and/or corrections. You should not presume that the teacher will stop you, however, and should continue playing with even greater focus and attention after an error. (Here is a suggestion to teachers. Allow students to perform for you. Avoid frequent stops and starts, since this can make them very frustrated and sometimes means you never even get to the end of the piece! Once the entire work has been performed, you can then decide which aspects need the most attention and limit your comments to those areas.)
- **Learn from previous mistakes.** Remember what aspects your teacher worked on the most in the previous lessons and focus on those points when practicing. It doesn't take long to figure out the teacher's "pet peeves," so direct your practice time toward mastering those elements in need of attention (such as wrong notes, tone, rhythm, vibrato, or technique). Also, pay attention to things that cause your teacher to get upset with you and avoid these in the future. Such things could be coming unprepared, arriving late or without all of your materials, playing on a bad reed or with a leaking instrument, or arguing with the teacher.

- **Stay relaxed to do your best.** Easier said than done, you're probably thinking. Larry Teal once told me in a lesson, "There's no reason to be nervous, if you're prepared." Being well prepared for a lesson will certainly help make you more relaxed, since you will be more confident. Other contributors to lesson anxiety are fear of failure, fear of disappointing your teacher, and basic performance nervousness. Some of these are a part of performing and each player must deal with them in his or her own way. Be sure to tell your teacher if you feel nervous about lessons. The teacher, who usually has years of experience, may be able to offer some suggestions to get you more relaxed. Telling the teacher that you are uncomfortable in lessons may also allow him or her to alter the very behavior that makes you nervous.

In addition to these four basic points, here are some tips to help you be more prepared for the lesson. Play your assignment for a friend or family member prior to the lesson. This informal performance will allow you to get some of the anxieties out of your system and help you learn how to cope with them before you meet with your teacher. Many times the visual distractions of the teacher and the studio can be the major contributors to nervousness. Practice fundamental exercises, like vibrato and scales, with your eyes shut. Visualize your practice room while in the teacher's studio and try to feel at home in a comfortable environment. Record your assignment before the lesson and critique it yourself. You can find many mistakes this way and fix them before you ever see the teacher.

Remember that the teacher is a friend, who wants you to succeed. Preparing properly can help you gain greater confidence and become more success in the lesson.