

Saxophone “House Keeping”

by
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There are certain things we usually do on a daily basis. These might include sleeping, bathing, eating, and brushing our teeth. Similarly, there are items that must be attended to daily in playing the saxophone. These are not the once-in-a-while items, such as cleaning your mouthpiece or polishing your instrument; these are things that should be done daily to allow you to play at your best. I call this saxophone “house keeping.”

The six items that make up my “house keeping” list are:

- Selecting a good reed
- Placing the mouthpiece at the proper position on the neck
- Setting the embouchure before playing
- Clearing moisture from mouthpiece before playing
- Clearing moisture from octave vents as needed
- Checking for stuck keys before playing

While there may be several other aspects that need to be addressed, these are the crucial ones for me. Below is a brief description of each item.

Selecting a Reed

This seems blatantly obvious, but is amazing how many saxophonists overlook this elementary step. Without a good reed, you cannot play at your best. It is crucial that you have an organized method of selection, preparation, and rotation of reeds to assure that you always have a good reed. (Sources for this process are *The Art of Saxophone Playing* by Larry Teal and *The Reed Guide* by George Kirck.) *Reed rotation* is especially important. The reed that played well yesterday may not be the best reed today, due to temperature and humidity changes. Always have at least four reeds prepared, so you can select the one that plays best that day, in that room, at that time.

Mouthpiece Placement

All saxophonists should mark a line in ink on the neck cork to indicate where the mouthpiece should be positioned to play in tune. Colder temperatures may require the mouthpiece to be pushed farther inward, while warmer temperatures may require it to be pulled out slightly. Always assemble the saxophone with the mouthpiece at this premarked line and many intonation problems will be corrected *before* they occur. This also greatly speeds up the tuning process, since you will only have to move the mouthpiece slightly for minor corrections.

Setting the Embouchure

This is fundamental aspect that should be very obvious. Many players, however, don't really have the embouchure set before the initial attack; they set the mouth muscles *as they blow*. (My definition of *Set* is having the embouchure muscles firm, just like when actually producing a sound.) This habit may not be a problem for advanced saxophonists, who can make the final adjustment quickly, but younger players should be taught to set *before* blowing. This is especially essential for

soft dynamic attacks, and for attacks of the highest and lowest notes of the saxophone. Merely setting the embouchure before the initial attack can eliminate many errors.

Clearing Moisture from Mouthpiece

Nothing is more annoying than a “spitty” sound. Saxophonists should form the habit of clearing any excess moisture for the mouthpiece before playing. This is critical when the weather is wet, since a high humidity content will increase the presence of moisture in the mouthpiece. On those “wet” days, clear the mouthpiece after every long rest to assure the cleanest sound possible.

Setting the embouchure before initial attacks is another way to avoid a “spitty” tone. Think about how you can “fog” a mirror with your breath. You start with your mouth in an open circle and slowly breathe hot, slow air onto the mirror. This hot air condenses on the colder mirror and the mirror becomes “steamed.” Starting a tone with an unset embouchure and a slow air stream does much the same thing. Moisture condenses on the inside of the mouthpiece and your “spitty” sound is right back. By starting the tone with a set embouchure and a faster, colder air stream, you can keep your tone purer and cleaner.

Clearing Moisture from Octave Vents

The modern saxophone has an automatic octave key mechanism. When the notes from middle D to G# are played, the first octave vent is opened. (Finger middle D and wiggle the octave key to see where that first octave vent is located.) The second octave vent, located on the neck, is activated for the notes above G#. Both normal playing and high humidity conditions can lead to excess moisture finding its way into these very small openings. When they become clogged with moisture, the instrument may sound an octave lower than fingered or create an annoying multiphonic. To avoid this problem, always blow the moisture out of these vents before a performance and as needed during it.

To clear the first octave vent, finger an upper G, hold the saxophone horizontal to the floor with the right side facing upward, and roll the instrument toward you as if holding a flute. Position your lips as close to the first octave vent as possible and blow *very hard*. If this does not correct the problem, you may need to use a pipe cleaner to clear moisture or dirt from the vent. Bend the pipe cleaner into an “L” shape, with the bottom line of the “L” being about a 1/2 inch long. Remove the neck and position the pipe cleaner into the top of the instrument until it is lined up with the first octave vent tube (this is a short tube protruding into the bore about four inches down). Put a finger inside the instrument and gently push the pipe cleaner into this tube. (Be sure to open the first octave vent key, so the wire of the pipe cleaner does not pierce the pad.) Blow air into the vent as before and the problem should be solved.

Checking for Stuck Keys

How many times have you begun to play, only to realize that your G# or low C# keys are stuck? This problem can be remedied by *always* playing a chromatic scale from low Bb to high F# before performing. This simple test will alert you to stuck or sluggish keys *before* you play and allow you to fix the problem before errors occur. This is also a good test to be sure no springs have come unhooked.

Be sure to take care of these “house keeping” duties daily and you’ll benefit from the results.