

Teaching Score Preparation

by
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A major portion of any conductor's time is spent in score preparation. He or she must learn the score by sight and, if possible, by studying recordings. Essential cueing spots are located, key centers and major structural sections are identified, and a plan of how to shape the music is determined. Without these few basic preparations, the conductor cannot convey the composer's work effectively.

Saxophonists, especially students, often fail to prepare their music in a similar manner. Most players lock themselves in a practice room and just play the music repeatedly. This is useful for learning the technical aspects of a piece (notes, rhythms, articulations), but does not address the more musical aspects. By adding a few important steps in the preparation process, saxophonists can achieve a more rewarding and artistic approach to any piece.

Essential Elements

Several items must be addressed in preparing a piece for a lesson or a rehearsal. More academic than technical in nature, these items are often completely ignored by many players. The essential elements are listed in the ideal order in which they should be addressed.

1. Historical/biographical information
2. Terminology
3. Style
4. Formal structure
5. Phrase structure/breathing
6. Musical expression

Historical/Biographical Information

Biographical information about the composer, dedications, premiere date, and influences on the composer's style are a few of the items that should be researched. Some of these facts may be available on the printed score (not the saxophone part, but the *score*), although many players fail to even look at it. While older publications do not list much information, newer ones often include items such as date of composition (often in parentheses below the title), date of publication (at the bottom of the first page), dedication (for whom the piece was written), composer's biographical information (often on the back of the cover page or back of the score), and composer's birth/death dates (usually below the composer's name on the first page of the score). These items add valuable information about the piece and help the performer place the work in a historical perspective.

When information is not supplied on the score, the Internet becomes a quick way to locate this data. Saxophonists can use a favorite *search engine* and merely type in the information to be researched. A recent *Internet* search of the name “Paul Creston” yielded 75 pages of information, far too many to be helpful. The search was focused more carefully with “Paul Creston + saxophone + Sonata” and 55 pages were found. Adding “+ history” reduced the number to 22 pages, where more specific information is found about the composer and this specific piece. Of course, it is always best to begin with a respected and reputable site, rather than believing just anything posted on the Web. College and university students, who have access to the online or a hardcopy version of the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* may wish to start with this respected source. Other sites to consider for information about contemporary composers are located at:

Sigma Alpha Iota - <http://www.sai-national.org/phil/composers/composer.html>
Music publisher’s websites - for example, G. Schirmer at <http://www.schirmer.com/>
Wikipedia - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page
Montreal WSC site - <http://www153.pair.com/bensav/Compositeurs/Compllist.html>

Terminology

A saxophonist who has not looked up every unfamiliar term in a work should not attend the lesson or rehearsal. Composers place terms in their music to help the musician understand the style, mood, or tempo of the section. Ignoring these terms will be detrimental to the performance, since the musician is ignorant about the composer’s wishes.

Every musician should own a music dictionary. Young students may only need an inexpensive, pocket edition, available at any music shop or bookstore. College and professional musicians should purchase a professional dictionary, such as the *New Harvard Dictionary of Music*. Before practicing a piece, the player should look up every unfamiliar term and pencil the English definition lightly above it. Some terms are not musical in nature, but descriptive. Purchasing a set of paperback language dictionaries will provide the musician with access to many different languages and allow them to translate most basic phrases. (The most useful dictionaries for saxophonists are English/French, English/Italian, and English/German.) An option is the free Internet program called *Babel Fish* translator (<http://babelfish.altavista.com/translate.dyn>). A block of text is typed into the dialogue box and then translated from the appropriate language into English. Sometimes the translations are a bit unusual, but the basic meaning of the foreign words can be understood.

Style

A composer often presents the style of a particular piece through the use of musical terms, piece or movement titles, articulation markings, and tempo indications. A composition entitled *ELEGIE* marked in a *Grave* tempo indicates a specific style. (An

Elegy is a composition written in memory of someone who has died; a *Grave* tempo is quite slow.) When these terms are used together, the performer knows that the style of the piece is slow and mournful. In contrast, an *Allegro* tempo marking, *staccato* and accented articulation markings, and the descriptive phrase *With Energy*, indicates an entirely different style.

Style can also apply to the period of music performed. The lightness and fluidity of Ibert's chamber concerto, *Concertino da Camera*, should not be performed with the power and energy of Ingolf Dahl's *Concerto*. A Bach flute transcription needs a more limited dynamic range and smaller tonal focus than does Creston's *Sonata*. The ability to identify musical styles and to make informed stylistic decisions is a crucial part of score preparation.

Formal Structure

Many younger players do not possess the knowledge needed to evaluate the formal structure of a piece of music. Identifying a *rondo* versus a *sonata allegro* form, and analyzing key centers may not be possible for every student. The teacher may need to save this step for the private lesson and impart as much information as the student can understand. Advanced students (high school and college level) and professionals should evaluate this information as part of their score preparation. In fact, many students know more than they think they do.

A few questions and hints can help direct even the youngest students in identifying formal structures. Students may not know the formal names of these structures, but locating them is very important to building a better understanding of the composition.

1. **What does the title of the piece or movement tell you about the structure?** (Use books or the Internet to research titles like *Minuet and Trio* and *Partita*.)
2. **Where are the major sections?** (Are there sections with different material? Do earlier sections repeat later in the piece? Are there double bar lines? Are there tempo changes?)
3. **What and where are the key centers?** (Is there a key signature? If so, what major or minor key does this indicate? What are the starting and ending notes of each section? Are these notes part of a major or minor chord related to the key signature? Can you play or sing the tonic or primary note of this section? Does the key center change? If so, where?)

Phrase Structure/Breathing

This is one of the easiest and most often-overlooked aspects of score preparation. Even the youngest students can usually identify the beginning and ends of a musical idea. Some students may call a "sub-phrase" a "phrase," but at least they can identify the starting and ending spots. With this knowledge, saxophonist can be more thoughtful in where to place breath marks.

It is important to realize that a breath and a phrase may not always occur at the same place. Simple music will often have rests at the end of a phrase, so there is time for the player to breathe. Advanced music may not be so obvious and many rests occur in a work merely to impart silence, not as an indication of a phrase end.

One of the most common faults of many students is breathing at every rest. This can make the music sound very choppy, lead to attack errors (due to resetting the embouchure frequently), and impart an unplanned sound to the phrase shaping. By identifying the phrases early in the preparation of a piece, the player can then mark breathing spots to help convey the music most effectively.

Musical Expression

Once the above items are addressed, the saxophonists must then decide on the musical expression needed to shape the music effectively. Although composers are usually clear about basic dynamic levels, they often leave the more subtle dynamic changes to the discretion of the performers. (A famous exception to this is Glazounov's *Concerto*, in which the composer has added numerous crescendo/diminuendo markings to help the performer accurately interpret his compositional intentions.) To make a piece of music more expressive, the performer must add subtle dynamic changes to give the music his/her own personal shaping. An appropriate term for these changes is *expressive dynamics*, since they do not really change the overall dynamic of a section, but merely add a rise or fall to the musical lines.

Asking a few simple questions may help the saxophonist determine what expressive dynamics they wish to add. "Should this musical line grow or fade toward its ending? Should this held notes get louder or softer to help shape the musical idea? Should the line crescendo or diminuendo before the breath mark? Where is the peak of the phrase, the point toward which all the music is leading? Will the use of vibrato add to or distract from the musical line?" Once these and other similar questions are resolved, the musician must then mark the music with a pencil to indicate these decisions. The choices may change later or even be challenged by the teacher, so do not mark these items in ink!

Without careful and thoughtful score preparation, a performer cannot fully discover the complexity of a piece of music. By preparing the score for every new piece early in the learning process, saxophonists can achieve a much higher level of musicianship and artistry.