

Basic Tonal Concepts for the Saxophone

by Michael Tracy, University of Louisville

Long Tones

Daily practice of and warming-up with long tones can greatly aid every aspect of saxophone performance. As with overtones, results may take longer than you wish. Over time the results will be dramatic and relate directly to your effort. Focused practice which is steady and repeated will accomplish a great deal - improving tone, intonation, endurance, concentration, dynamics, and control. It is never too late to begin.

There are countless ways to practice long tones. *Example 1* is one type of long tone practice. By practicing this exercise everyday your sound and control will definitely improve. The main objective is to enhance tone and dynamic range by focusing the air stream. It is best to begin this exercise with a tone in the middle range, not testing the extremes until one can control the middle register. *Example 2* is just like *Example 1* but on another pitch.

A focused air stream will help develop a concentrated center (core) to the sound. This centered sound will be the foundation for all playing, regardless of style. It will give greater definition, clarity and resonance to the tone. The timbre will also be refined. If done properly, intonation will improve because there will be a reliable base to work from when adjusting to pitch. Dynamic range will widen because the extremes can now be controlled. The steps to follow are:

1. Relax, concentrate on a small object in the room (ex. door knob, light switch, electric wall plate, etc.)
2. Take a deep breath from the diaphragm
3. While blowing through the instrument, think of focusing the air stream at the object and only sitting that object (ex. like a flashlight, laser beam, stream of water, etc.)
4. Attack with a *sfz* (sforzando - a sudden strong accent followed by an immediate piano)
5. Now crescendo (gradually) to as loud as possible all the while keeping a pleasant tone (do not force or crack the tone)
6. Hold at this level for a moment then decrescendo (gradually) to as soft as possible without compromising the tone
7. Repeat, also try other pitches



When doing this exercise remember to keep your tone steady, be careful of intonation, make the quality of the sound consistent from beginning to end, and strive to make the dynamic changes as even and controlled as possible.

Another excellent long tone exercise makes use of octaves. *Examples 3, 4, and 5* outline this exercise.

1. First play a pitch in the lower register
2. Hold for four, eight, twelve, etc. beats
3. Without stopping or taking a breath, play the octave above
4. Hold for an equal amount of time
5. Without stopping or taking a breath, play the original tone
6. Repeat

Strive to begin on low Bb and ascend chromatically while continuing to execute this octave exercise (*Example 3*). Try reversing this process by beginning on the upper tone, then play the lower octave (*Example 4*). It can also be extended to incorporate all octaves (*Example 5*).

Example 3: A musical staff in 4/4 time starting with a double bar line. It contains eight measures of music. The notes are: Bb2 (half), Bb3 (quarter), Bb3 (quarter), Bb3 (quarter), Bb3 (quarter), Bb3 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter). The notes Bb3 and Bb4 are marked with a 'p' dynamic.

Example 4: A musical staff in 4/4 time starting with a double bar line. It contains eight measures of music. The notes are: Bb4 (half), Bb4 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), Bb4 (quarter), Bb3 (quarter), Bb3 (quarter). The notes Bb4 and Bb3 are marked with a 'p' dynamic.

Example 5: A musical staff in 4/4 time starting with a double bar line. It contains eight measures of music. The notes are: Bb2 (half), Bb2 (quarter), Bb2 (quarter), Bb2 (quarter), Bb2 (quarter), Bb2 (quarter), Bb2 (quarter), Bb2 (quarter). The notes Bb2 and Bb2 are marked with a 'p' dynamic.

Once again when executing this exercise keep your tone steady, be careful of intonation, make the quality of the sound consistent from beginning to end, and strive to incorporate dynamics once the basic concept is controlled.