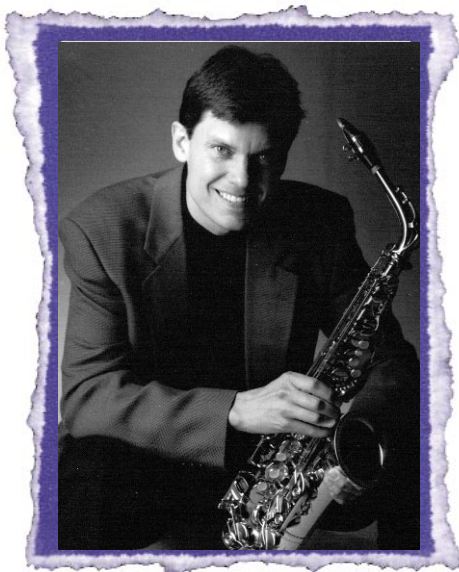




YAMAHA

Educator Series

WIND INSTRUMENTS



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Saxophone Altissimo

By Michael Hester

"Squeaks played by young saxophonists are simply valid notes that they did not have the control to avoid."

Several very useful books and articles have been written on beginning a journey into the saxophone's fourth register (notes beyond 'F' above the staff). Each writing explores the uppermost range of the instrument from a slightly different perspective. In few other saxophone techniques is perspective and personal concept more of an issue than in the study of altissimo. Students often show an enthusiasm for learning high notes after hearing them played for the first time. Enthusiasm is, however, frequently replaced with frustration not long after these students begin to experiment with altissimo fingerings and/or harmonic exercises. Until this initial moment of failure, all of the notes that were needed to play the saxophone could be looked up on a fingering chart and played (fingering = note). Without a proper background in oral cavity (area inside the mouth) flexibility, production of the highest notes will be, in many cases, difficult or impossible. Students often assume that if one knows the "trick," one should also be able to teach the trick to others. It is occasionally difficult to accept that there are no tricks, and that reaching altissimo notes will require the development of new ways to feel, hear and understand playing the saxophone.

The successful performance of a "normal," two-and-one-half octave range implies that there is already some oral cavity involvement. If one is able to play the high F or F# and is not biting the lip to do so, the tongue position is already controlling the oral cavity shape. One must keep in mind that the instrument begins in the human body and if the embouchure is clamping down on the reed, nearly all flexibility within the mouth will become virtually ineffective. Before any success is possible in the altissimo register, one must first develop an oral cavity that is flexible in the normal range. The embouchure should remain completely still when playing the entire range of the saxophone. Rather than biting, raise the tongue (as if to say the syllable "ee") when playing the upper notes (palm keys); instead of dropping the jaw or loosening the corner muscles of the mouth, lower the tongue ("law") when playing notes below the staff (be sure the saxophone is in good repair especially for the low notes). A flexible oral cavity makes it possible for one embouchure to exist for the entire range of the instrument, and success in the altissimo register depends upon this oral cavity/embouchure relationship.

Firsthand Perspective

As a young saxophonist, I often felt that playing altissimo notes was something that was uniquely difficult for me. I am presenting my own perspective with the hope that it will help others struggling with the extended range. Efforts do pay off, if those efforts are well placed.

For many years I had performed saxophone compositions that incorporated notes of the fourth register, but I had not developed a real understanding of how to play these notes consistently. Since one tends to fear what one does not understand, I began to draw away from wonderful pieces of music simply because they exploited a range in which I was not completely comfortable.



Michael Hester

I essentially stopped playing compositions that incorporated the notes above 'F#,' though I lost none of my will to continue searching for answers. During this period, I began to incorporate an exercise into my warm-up, which I had heard a friend demonstrate. This exercise involved playing notes and bending them down a considerable distance, sounding something like a police siren. The ability to make sound effects was not necessarily compelling to me, but my friend's success in the altissimo register was. I began with C# above the staff and tried to bend it down as far as possible without changing fingerings or moving my embouchure or jaw. As I experimented with various tongue positions, I gradually noticed an increase in the distance pitches were able to bend down before they "broke."

When attempting to bend notes down, flatten the tongue as if to say the syllable "law." Try not to move the jaw or embouchure, and allow the throat to remain relaxed. We are better able to control the tongue's shape when creating the necessary oral cavity positions, as opposed to trying to involve the throat. Attempting to open and close the throat usually just creates tension and a restricted airway.

Once I had achieved some success with the C#, I gradually moved up by half steps, being certain to accomplish the same degree of pitch bending success with each subsequent note.

This exercise occupied between five and ten percent of a daily practice routine. I continued my dedication to the pitch bending for months, when one day I accidentally played an altissimo note. I attempted to repeat the same note and it again came out beautifully. I was particularly surprised with how little effort it took to produce an altissimo note! I then tried the harmonic series using the lowest 'Bb' as a fundamental and for the first time in my life achieved at least three octaves of partials.

"Pitch bending," as described here, does not exactly imitate the oral cavity positions needed to produce altissimo notes. The exercise does, however, develop the awareness and flexibility necessary for eventual success in the range above F#. One needs to understand that biting the reed through the lip is not only painful, but is also detrimental to the reed's vibration. If one expects to develop a consistent tone throughout the entire range of the saxophone, one will need to allow the reed to vibrate in all registers. Biting the reed through the lip to achieve altissimo notes essentially dampens the vibration of the thicker portion of the reed. The result is a thin and unreliable squeal, rather than a beautifully controlled harmonic.

Each individual must approach high note study from a perspective that makes the most sense to him or her. All saxophonists are capable of success in the altissimo range, but, as in any discipline, the degree of success depends upon the amount of dedication.

It is unfortunate that saxophonists are not faced with oral cavity flexibility early in their musical development. Performers on brass instruments and the flute deal with this from day one, and think nothing of producing harmonics from fundamentals. Squeaks played by young saxophonists are simply valid notes that they did not have the control to avoid. It would be very easy for a teacher to place a "wall" between the student and future attempts at the highest notes by treating such an event as a terrible mistake. (In most cases it is a mistake, but a teacher's reaction can have long lasting positive or negative repercussions.) It is best to explain that a squeak is a real note, demonstrate it for him or her and then ask the student to try and produce that note again. If the embouchure and equipment are working well and the note is again possible, an introduction to other fingerings and even altissimo scales could be in order. Always feed the ability of the student one is teaching.

From Michael Hester's method book, *Saxophone Master Classes* published by Smooth Stone Productions.

Selected listing of altissimo method books:

Top-Tones for the Saxophone (1941, 1977) by Sigurd Rascher

Studies in High Harmonics (1946) by Ted Nash

Beginning Studies in the Altissimo Register (1971) by Rosemary Lang

Saxophone High Tones (1978) by Eugene Rousseau

Saxophone Altissimo: High Note Development for the Contemporary Player (1992, 1998) by Robert Luckey

Voicing (1992) by Donald Sinta and Denise Dabney