



# YAMAHA

## Educator Series

WIND INSTRUMENTS



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*Gregory W. Yasinitzky, DMA, is Professor of Music and Coordinator of Jazz Studies at Washington State University where he teaches applied saxophone. Yasinitzky has performed with Lionel Hampton, Clark Terry, Gary Burton, Tom Harrell, and Louis Bellson and is Principal Saxophonist with the Spokane Symphony. His compositions and saxophone playing can be heard on recordings released by Soul Note, Palo Alto Records, the Musical Heritage Society, Vienna Modern Masters, Arizona University Recordings (America's Millennium Tribute to Adolphe Sax Series), Open Loop Recordings and his own label, Yazz Recordings. Yasinitzky also has a national reputation as a composer with numerous works published by Kendor Music, Warner Brothers, Advance Music (Germany), Hal Leonard, Dorn, Walrus, UNC Jazz Press, Daniel Barry Publications and Hoyt Editions.*

## To Swing or Not to Swing: Advice for Classical Saxophonists

*By Gregory W. Yasinitzky*

We are lucky to live in a time with many excellent classical (concert) saxophonists. With an abundance of beautiful classical works written for saxophone, it is easy for a saxophonist to spend a career playing only classical saxophone. Why should a classical saxophonist learn about jazz?

### **Bisexual**

It is fun to play different styles, and a more versatile saxophonist will have more opportunities for work. Also, many composers associate the saxophone with jazz and expect saxophonists to be able to play in a jazz-influenced style.

Stylistic versatility is also valuable for teachers. In the last few years, many university positions for saxophonists have specified expertise in both classical and jazz performance techniques. Saxophonists who teach in the public schools are likely to direct both concert bands and jazz groups, and it is easier for directors to teach styles which they can play well themselves. So, how does a classical saxophonist go about learning a little jazz?

### **A Different Sound**

The sound, phrasing and rhythmic approaches used when playing classical music and jazz are different from each other. The majority of saxophonists who play both classical music and jazz switch mouthpieces and reeds when they switch styles. Perhaps the most difficult thing to accept is that a truly excellent sound in one style may not be appropriate for another. A saxophonist who wants to master different ways of playing has to be open to different ways of "hearing" saxophone tone.

### **You Are What You Listen To**

When learning any style, a saxophonist must listen regularly to excellent performers. This listening provides an aspiring musician with models for tone quality and helps to communicate the nuances of rhythmic phrasing and expressive inflections. When learning to play jazz, saxophonists should attend as may live concerts as possible, supplemented by regular listening to jazz recordings. Through recordings, it is easy to become familiar with the greatest jazz performers: Charlie Parker, Johnny Hodges, Lee Konitz, Cannonball Adderley, Eric Dolphy, Kenny Garrett, John Coltrane, Sonny Rollins, Stan Getz, Joe Henderson, Michael Brecker and more. However, for a classical saxophonist on a limited budget aspiring to play jazz, it can be daunting to try to select recordings. If you can buy only three CDs, I suggest you start with Miles Davis' "Kind of Blue" (featuring Cannonball and Coltrane), John Coltrane's "Blue Train" and Sonny Rollins' "Saxophone Colossus".

### **Get a Teacher**

You will save yourself a lot of time if you work with a good jazz teacher.



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### Basic Technique

Aspiring jazz performers should learn scales and chords by memory throughout the entire saxophone range. Learn major, melodic minor (practice the ascending version up and down), harmonic-minor, diminished, whole-tone, pentatonic and blues scales. Practice arpeggios of triads and seventh-chords. Develop jazz articulation while mastering these structures. One common method of eighth-note jazz articulation is to tongue upbeats and slur downbeats.

### Jazz Etudes

An easy way for a classical saxophonist to get into jazz is through written music. Ideally, this is done through transcriptions of improvised solos, but many transcriptions are too difficult for classical performers who are just learning to play jazz. A good way to learn some basic figures is by playing simple, straightforward jazz etudes. Strongly recommended are the fine, graded etudes by Lennie Niehaus (Try Publications) and the excellent etudes by Jordon Ruwe (Houston). Jim Snidero (Advance) and Bob Mintzer (WarnerBrothers and more) have also published popular books of etudes.

An important distinction between classical and jazz etudes is the way articulations are indicated. In a classical etude, slurs are to be strictly observed. However, in jazz, slurs are often used to indicate phrasing rather than specific tonguing; and, many etudes have no tonguing indications. Try using the jazz articulation method described earlier (tongue upbeats and slur to downbeats).

A fun way to hone newly acquired jazz skills is by playing duets. I have written collections of duets that are widely played (Warner Brothers, Advance and Dorn), and saxophonists also enjoy the duets of Lennie Niehaus (Try Publications).

### Transcriptions

The best way to get to the essence of jazz is through the improvised solos of the masters. One of the best books of transcriptions is the Omnibook, an impressive collection of Charlie Parker solos (all saxophonists should have a copy of the Eb version of this book). There are many other books with solos by Rollins, Coltrane, Adderley, Gordon, Henderson, Getz and other saxophone titans.

While learning a transcribed solo from a book, you should listen to the recording. After bringing the music up to tempo, try playing the solo along with the recording, incorporating every stylistic nuance. After mastering the transcription, it should be memorized. Transpose the passages that are particularly appealing to you to different keys.

You will learn more if you transcribe the solo yourself. At first, transcribing a solo may appear to be an insurmountable task, but if you work at it a little at a time (a few bars a day), before you know it, your transcription will be complete. Again, it is important to memorize the solo and to transpose melodic patterns to different keys.

### Improvisation

Improvisation is the heart of jazz, but it is an aspect of playing which can be intimidating to classical saxophonists. Still, you should give it a try. Remember, when you are improvising, you can play anything you want and while that thought may be terrifying, it can also be liberating. To get started, I recommend improvising within one scale or key center. After becoming comfortable with one set of notes, try switching between scales or key centers (eight bars in C major followed by eight bars in F major, etc.). Try improvising in major keys, minor keys and against blues progressions. Practice on your own using a metronome to provide the tempo.

Play along recordings can also be helpful. The Jamey Aebersold play along series is best known, and the volume "Maiden Voyage" is popular with less experienced improvisers.

Practicing to improvise, though, is not enough. As soon as you can, you should play jazz in a combo with other musicians.

### Becoming a Versatile Saxophonist

Learning to play jazz will expand your technique and make you more marketable. Besides being a lot of fun, playing jazz will make you a better musician. It will also make you a better classical saxophonist.