**Saxophone Altissimo – playing the high notes**

I was asked recently by one of my customers if I could offer any advice on training and development for playing Altissimo notes? My response was as follows:

I can’t really advocate any special training exercises because most of the pupils I used to teach on a regular basis were not really up to that level. To my way of thinking, inexperienced players, particularly the younger ones, expect to master these notes too soon. Some couldn’t manage top D, E, and F and yet they would ask me how to play altissimo.

It’s important to understand that producing altissimo notes belongs in the realm of advanced playing, not really intermediate and definitely not for beginners. However, intermediate players, if they practice regularly, can cope as they move into the area of advanced playing. That’s purely my personal view.

First off, you must be able to play confidently in the normal higher reaches of the sax, with a good full tone. If you’re pinching in any way, you might have reed and mouthpiece problems. For what it’s worth, I generally use mouthpieces with medium tip openings and Rico Jazz Select or Rico Royal No. 3 reeds. I like the middle ground and have never been comfortable on extreme setups with hard reeds.

I have to admit, some years ago, I used to have problems with altissimo playing, even as a pro player (quite a few do, although most will not admit it). I could play the notes fine when practising but on stage, they wouldn’t speak.

**Stay loose**

The problem was purely a matter of relaxing (and diaphragm support). It wasn’t the horn. It wasn’t my setup. It wasn’t my embouchure. It wasn’t lack of practice.

It was my mental approach. I was frightened of missing these very high notes.

There’s a good saying; face up to your fears and they disappear. That, I think, is very true.

I can say all the usual things – practise harmonics, don’t bite, keep your throat open and so on – but you really must have a relaxed attitude.

In life, if we’re frightened of something, anything, we tense up. We stiffen. It’s the same with altissimo notes. Providing that you have lots of diaphragm support, have sorted out the fingering, and your embouchure is relaxed, if you banish the fear, you’ll eventually hit them, and keep hitting them.

**Hanging notes**

Another tip. Hear these notes in your head, moments before you go for them. Imagine the note is hanging just above your forehead, ready for plucking. They are there, believe me.

As far as practising goes, for altissimo notes diaphragm support is very, very important. You can’t relax if it’s not there. Lack of diaphragm support leads to pinching and tightening up, which inevitably leads to frustration and fear of hitting them. It’s a never ending cycle. So remember, diaphragm support is vital to all high note production. Be very self-aware in this respect.

Once you actually hit these notes, hang on to them and play them as long notes. Play them repeatedly. Be patient, though, because they’ll come and go. But that’s okay, be relaxed about it. If you miss them once in a while, so what?

Playing runs up there isn’t easy. Practise scales and arpeggios up there, slowly to begin with, as you would if you were playing in the lower registers.

And there you have it. I don’t have any formal technical embouchure advice. That varies from individual to individual anyway. I’m speaking from experience. Diaphragm and a relaxed mental attitude was the key for me.

I play quite a lot of altissimo stuff on my CD, Unsafe Sax. Sometime soon I will be breaking it all down into loops and building a practice kit to go with it, which will also include some altissimo advice and fingerings used (that, of course, varies from instrument to instrument). If you buy the CD now, you can just buy the extras when they are available. If you like R&B-style playing, you’ll probably like the album (shameless plug).

To sum up then:

Diaphragm support is critical, Be very self aware in this respect.

Banish your fear of missing those altissimo notes and relax.

Hear the note you want to hit. Imagine that it is hanging just above your head. Then grab it.

Play long altissimo notes, for control.

Play scales and arpeggios in the altissimo register, to master the difficult unfamiliar fingerings.