**Saxophone Trouble: Shooter for Beginners:**

**Shrieks, Squeaks and Leaks**

**Pupil:**

I'm having trouble producing a sound from my saxophone. It squeaks a lot and is such hard work to blow!

**Teacher:**

Make sure that you are not using too hard a reed. Most beginners start on strength one or one and a half and move up to two soon after. Have a look at the reed. Is the tip damaged? Beginners often brush the reed against their clothing whilst visually checking their fingering. Result - a damaged, and often un-playable reed.

Tip. Always check your fingering in front of a mirror. Apart from easily seeing where your fingers are, you will learn to place them correctly by touch.

**Pupil:**

I have taken great care not to damage the tip of the reed. The instrument is still hard to blow. It sounds stuffy!

**Teacher:**

Is the reed tip in line with the top of the mouthpiece? If you can see a gap - the sax will probably be difficult to blow. Conversely, if the reed is too high, and hides the edge of the mouthpiece, the result will be much the same and the reed will soon be broken.

**Pupil:**

I moved the reed up a little. What a difference! All of a sudden I can produce clear notes. But it still squeaks every now and then. Why is that?

**Teacher:**

Have another look in that mirror. Are you accidently opening any keys on either side of the instrument. This will cause a leak and result in squeals and shrieks! Check too, that you do not have too much of the mouthpiece in your mouth. This results in lack of control. Your tongue should be able to touch the tip of the reed with ease. Experiment with different positions.

**The Octave Key**

**Pupil:**

I can play tunes using the notes B, A and G just fine now. However, getting from these notes to D - using the octave key - and back again is proving difficult. I can't do it quickly enough.

**Teacher:**

Most likely, it's all down to your thumb!

Without blowing, practise the fingering from C to D. Very slowly, roll your thumb onto the octave key and back again. This should be done smoothly and with the minimum of movement.

The rule of thumb here is (pardon the pun) - NEVER LIFT YOUR THUMB from the thumb plate to the octave key. When you feel comfortable with this movement, return to blowing the sax. Keep things slow at first and gradually speed things up when the movement feels comfortable.

**Breath Control**

**Pupil:**

I'm having trouble breathing in the right places. I find myself having to take breath in the middle of a phrase and thereby spoiling the music.

**Teacher:**

It is important to breathe deeply, below your rib cage. Use your diaphragm (the muscles between your chest and abdomen) to push the air stream into the saxophone. Rather like a bellows. Practice long notes. See how long you can make a note last. When you can play longer notes try breaking them up with your tongue, but don't stop blowing. Think of the music as a line, not as separate notes.

This is a long note \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Now break the line with the tip of your tongue:

dah, dah, dah, etc.\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_

**Pitch Control**

**Pupil:**

When I play these long notes the sound wavers in pitch. Kind of buzzy too.

**Teacher:**

Good - you are listening carefully to the sound that you are producing and analyzing it. This is the way to a good tone.

Draw your mouth round the mouthpiece and use the muscles at the corners of your mouth to prevent any air escaping and to firm up the sound. DO NOT BITE. On the contrary, keep your lower lip relaxed.

**Low Note Troubles**

**Pupil:**

Sometimes the lower notes below G - F, E, and D are difficult to produce, often sounding higher rather than lower.

**Teacher:**

Check the pads on your saxophone to ensure they are seating properly and that no air is escaping. If they are OK then the trouble is most likely your embouchure.

Relax your lower jaw and lip as you descend to these notes. Again, make sure you are using your diaphragm. The lower you play, the more holes you are closing, and that means more air to fill the saxophone. Avoid honking.

**Staccato Tonguing**

**Pupil:**

I just can't get the hang of staccato tonguing. The notes are unclear and not short enough.

**Teacher:**

Make sure that you bring your tongue back to the reed to stop the note. Up to now you have tongued notes as dah, dah, dah, etc. For staccato tonguing pronounce daht, daht, daht. As before, play a long note and proceed to chop the imaginary line with short notes. Start slowly and increase the speed gradually, as you get used to it.

Some people find staccato tonguing very easy. Others take longer to master it. Practice slowly and evenly. You'll get there.

**Piching The Higher Notes**

**Pupil:**

I'm playing flat on the notes above high G. It gets worse the higher I try to go. Sometimes these notes will not sound at all.

**Teacher:**

Relax! It is a very common mistake to tense up for these notes. This results in a restriction of your breathing. Remember your diaphragm. Relax and use it to support the air stream. Because the notes sound flat, you may be biting the reed to compensate. This will not help. Relax your your lower lip and jaw. It is amazing how the relaxation of your jaw and face muscles will help you play these notes.

Hearing the note mentally, just before you play it also helps. Practice octaves. Play a reasonably long note, say the lower G. Stop, and keep the pitch in your mind. Now play the higher G with the octave key pressed. Imagine that note hanging just above your forehead, just waiting to come out. It's a singers trick, but works on saxophone too. After all, you are singing - through your saxophone. You are in control. The more you practise this, the more your subconscious mind will compensate and adjust your embouchure.

**Reading Music**

**Pupil:**

I am learning to read the music as I learn to play. I can recognize the notes but just can't read it quick enough.

**Teacher:**

Train yourself to look ahead. This is easier than you think. Whilst playing one note, look ahead to the next one. This becomes a habit after a while and you will soon be reading several notes ahead.

**Pupil:**

I play the right notes, but the tune doesn't sound quite right. It's OK with the play along accompaniment, but when I play alone it goes wrong.

**Teacher:**

If you are playing the correct notes, then it must be the rhythm. Always ascertain the time signature and count yourself in before you play. Develop this mental habit. Keep counting as you play, particularly when playing the longer notes. Do not be tempted to cut them short. Professional musicians do this all the time.

How does an orchestra sight read unfamiliar pieces and play them note perfect - first time?

They count!

Put down the sax and clap the rhythm of the difficult passages. Learn to recognize rhythmic patterns, rather than individual notes. You will find that these patterns repeat themselves frequently. Music is made up of repetition and variation.