

A Guide to Doubling On Clarinet and Saxophone

By Bret Pimentel

Woodwind doubling is a valuable pursuit that creates new opportunities for woodwind players. For players interested in doubling, pairing the clarinet and the saxophone makes sense because the instruments have a close relationship and several ready-made doubling opportunities exist.

Learning a Second Instrument

Although clarinet playing and saxophone playing have some common ideas and approaches, they are separate instruments with distinct traditions and should be approached as such. Some prospective doublers may worry that adding a second instrument will be detrimental to playing the first and may even have been warned away from doubling by a well-meaning teacher. There is no reason to be concerned that one embouchure will be ruined by learning another, or that learning a new set of fingerings will cause an old set to be forgotten. The lips, tongue, and

fingers are more than able to carry out more than one task.

The greatest technical difficulty in switching between instruments is simply getting into the correct mindset for each one. A clarinet-like embouchure produces a poor sound on the saxophone, and a saxophone-like approach to fingerings will be less effective on the clarinet. However, if these techniques have been thoroughly and correctly practiced, a musician can easily switch between the two.

The best way to learn a second instrument is under the advice of a private teacher. A clarinetist who has spent years studying the instrument cannot expect to master the saxophone in a matter of weeks or months without instruction. When beginning study of a second instrument, establish a regular practice routine supported by weekly lessons, and work gradually from the most basic materials to the more difficult. It is crucial to be a beginner on each instrument. There are no shortcuts. Some fundamental concepts may be carried over in a theoretical way, but they will still require practice to apply them to the new instrument.

In any case, the aspiring doubler's greatest advantages in learning another instrument have little to do with superficial similarities in technique, but much to do with general experience as a student and musician. An accomplished musician studying a second instrument will already understand the value of methodical daily practice, development of a strong tone through years of listening, and the use of technique as a means to expression.

The only genuine harm caused by playing a second instrument is in spreading resources too thinly, because practice time must be divided between instruments. However, with patience a doubler dedicated to the craft can, in the long term, play as well as the best saxophonists and the best clarinetists.

Equipment

Obtain the best possible instrument and accessories. A common misstep is to seek out equipment labeled for doublers. A clarinet mouthpiece advertised this way will likely have some saxophone-like characteristics in an effort to make the mouthpiece work better with a saxophone-like approach to playing. This may seem like a tempting shortcut, but it breeds laziness in learning a true clarinet embouchure and inhibits development of genuine clarinet technique.

Other equipment may be marketed to doublers due to purported qualities like easy response or effortless intonation seem to imply that purchase guarantees success without additional effort. In short, the best clarinet mouthpiece for doublers is ultimately just the best clarinet mouthpiece.

Another common mistake is ill-informed equipment choices. While clarinets from one instrument maker might be embraced by fine clarinetists, this is no guarantee that saxophones from the same maker are equally well regarded. This applies to mouthpieces and other accessories, as well as pedagogical materials and repertoire. The best approach is to seek the advice of a qualified private teacher before making purchases.



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Voicing

Proper voicing technique, or tongue position, is often overlooked, but it is fundamental to response, intonation, and tone. Because voicing happens inside the body, it cannot be easily observed, but it can be understood in terms of some common activities. We use the mechanisms of voicing to produce different vowel sounds when we speak, to produce different pitches when whistling, or to blow air of different temperatures. Proper voicing of each instrument should generally be stable and require little change while playing; only the smallest adjustments are made to adjust pitch of individual notes or to ease some transitions between registers.

Incorrect voicing is one of the biggest obstacles for clarinetists learning to play the saxophone and vice versa. The clarinet's voicing is extremely high, and most other wind instruments (flutes, double reeds, brasses) use a voicing that is quite low. Saxophones require a voicing target somewhere in between. Saxophone voicing is sometimes described as being similar to an *oo* or *er* vowel, but the best way to establish the correct voicing is to find the correct mouthpiece pitch. When a note is played on the mouthpiece alone, the following concert pitches should sound for soprano, alto, tenor, and baritone saxophones:



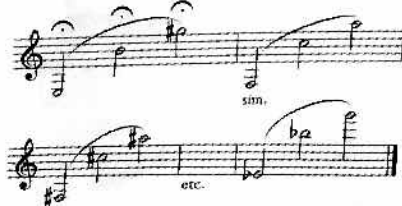
Warm air lowers the mouthpiece pitch, and cooler air raises it. This may take some practice; just a few minutes per day over several weeks is recommended to avoid straining. The pitch should not be adjusted by opening or closing the jaw or tightening or loosening the embouchure, as these actions make both tone and response worse.

For saxophonists playing the clarinet, voicing problems often result in an unstable pitch tending toward flatness, a rubby and uncharacteristic tone, and poor response in the upper registers. The clarinet's voicing should be as high as comfortably possible, as though attempting to blow



photo by Kirby Fong

fast-moving, ice-cold air. This exercise may help saxophonists learning to play the clarinet:



All three notes in each grouping should respond readily, clearly, and reasonably in tune. If the higher notes are difficult or significantly flat,

the voicing is likely too low. Note that the voicing should be high for the entire exercise, not just for the high notes.

Embouchure

The clarinet and the saxophone embouchures are formed with the muscles of the lips around the mouthpiece and reed; any pressure exerted should come from these precise muscles, rather than from the jaw. The lips form a seal around the mouthpiece and reed that is just barely airtight, preventing air leaks but also allowing the reed to vibrate.