



## Articulation on Saxophone

By Dr. Anna Marie Wytko

A general non-musical dictionary description of the word articulation refers to the act or manner of producing a speech sound. The basic definition does not suggest how the tongue is used or that it is used in every case. Numerous studies do emphasize, however, that speech articulation involves word endings as well as beginnings. Word endings can involve the tongue sound – for example, the word “about” – but certainly not all words do so; the word “who” does not use the tongue sound at the end. Additionally, unlike the word “table,” not all words begin with the use of the tongue; again the word “who” may serve as an example. The basic purpose of articulation in speech is to provide clarity. However, clarity does not necessarily involve the use of tongue sounds when speaking. Singers know this all too well. When some think of articulation in saxophone playing, the first word that comes to mind is typically the word “tongue.”

While it is true that the tongue plays a role with regard to saxophone articulation, the nature of that role is not always clear. With regard to articulation, what role can the tongue actually play? In what ways can it help the player produce a sound? Can it really do so? The physical reality is that the tongue cannot be used to vibrate

the reed and subsequently produce a sound. The tongue, when it is in contact with the reed, can only stop vibration, consequently stopping sound. Sound on any reed instrument, including the saxophone, is created by the air causing the reed to vibrate. Air does not stop the reed from vibrating, but rather causes the reed to vibrate. It may be said that we “blow the reed into vibration” and that it is impossible to “tongue the reed into vibration.” Sounds on the saxophone can be created with or without the use of the tongue, but never without air. Even slap-tongue, which can generate a brief suggestion of pitch/tone, is acting upon the static air column already present in the instrument, and by no means keeps the reed or air column vibrating, which is vital in the conventional sense of the term “tone.”

When the tongue is used at the point of beginning a sound, it should be released

from the reed as the player is already blowing. Thus, the word “attack” – as in having “a clean attack,” for example – should be replaced with the word “release.” The tongue should not “attack” the reed, but should “release” the reed and allow the air to vibrate it. Is it ever appropriate to begin sounds on the saxophone without the tongue making contact with the reed? This option is not only

appropriate in some cases, but may be the preferred option. It is suggested that in some cases, rank beginners may be more comfortable producing first tones without the use of the tongue.

Additionally, there are many examples in the saxophone literature that clearly call for producing sounds by blowing air without the use of the tongue. This is analogous to quietly saying – or singing – the word “Ahh,” or, in other words, analogous to a singer beginning a lyric with any open vowel sound as opposed to a hard consonant. An excellent example could be the first note of Movement II of *Concertino da Camera* (pub. Alphonse Leduc) by Jacques Ibert.

Is it appropriate to end tones by placing the tongue on the reed? The answer is maybe, but only for special effect or during faster tonguing. Routinely ending tones with the tongue produces a most unnatural articulation. When one plays a tone on a piano with the most severe staccato possible – especially at louder volumes – there is a natural resonance or ring to the instrument unless one artificially stops the string with the hand or finger (a special technique found in a good deal of literature). When one articulates a word with a hard syllable at the end, such as

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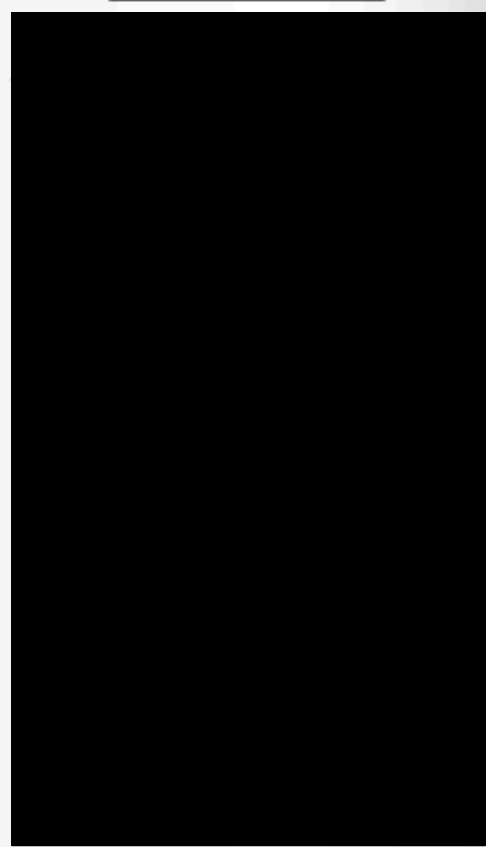
the word "rib," the lips are typically open after the hard "b" sound at the end, again allowing for resonance. This is a natural way of speaking. Stopping this natural resonance by quickly closing the lips produces a highly affected and unnatural way of speaking. Stopping the natural resonance of the saxophone sound by placing the tongue on the reed is not advised except in cases requiring a special articulation effect, or when fast articulation requires that the tongue be quickly placed back on the reed to sound the next note.

One of the most often heard expressions is "tongue with the tip of the tongue!" What exactly does this mean, and what exactly is the tip of the tongue? When asked to do so, will all individuals point to the exact same spot when asked "to point to the tip of your tongue"? Does everyone actually tongue with the tip of the tongue? The above questions can be confusing, since in the absence of fiber optic technology it is not possible to see inside of the mouth in order to definitively answer these

questions. It may be safely said, however, that not every successful player touches the reed with the same part of the tongue.

One might generally view three options in this regard, with various gradations, of course. The option of touching the reed with the literal tip of the tongue may be utilized by some players. This would especially be true of players who demonstrate a relatively long oral cavity and short tongue. A second option, and perhaps the most common method, is to make contact with the reed with the part of the tongue just back from the tip. A third option is an exaggeration of the second option above, and is typically referred to as anchor tonguing. This involves physically anchoring the tip of the tongue on the inside of the lower teeth near or at the gum line. This option requires that the tongue be bent or arched to make contact with the tip of the reed, and may be a comfortable method for those with large tongue muscles and relatively short oral cavities. Since individuals vary greatly physi-

ologically, no single option above is considered the only correct option. These decisions, often made naturally, are influenced by the relative size and shape of the oral cavity and tongue muscle. Most importantly, they are made based upon aural results.



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