Greg Banaszak

A Private Lesson With
Saxophonist Robert Black

Grammy Award Winning Saxophonist Robert Black

In this column, saxophonist Robert Black will be discussing the orchestral aspects of saxophone as well as altissimo. Bob's talent and hard work ethic has allowed him to have a rich and rewarding career from saxophonist with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and the Chicago Pro Musica Orchestra (for which he received a Grammy Award for a recorded performance of William Walton's "Facade") to owner of the Saxophone Shop in Evanston, IL, for more than twenty years. He also attended law school and became a practicing attorney over three years ago. Mr. Black's devotion and determination is to be really admired and respected. Robert recently returned from touring Japan with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

ORCHESTRAL SAXOPHONE

Well, first of all, the most important factor is practicing on a daily basis. The older you get, the harder it is to find practice time, so you really need to make it part of your daily regime. In regard to playing inside a wind section of an orchestra, you have to get used to the freedom you feel. You simply have to play and listen to the piece and understand how various orchestras phrase, understand the orchestra's rhythmic feel, and understand how your part fits into everything that is taking place. Make sure your soloistic style does not over-ride the orchestral style that's around you. I think the best training a saxophonist can do to prepare them for orchestral saxophone is try to get as much experience playing the works that integrate saxophone with as many orchestras as you can. Contact your surrounding local orchestras and let the personnel manager know you're available. Nothing can replace just plain experience. You ultimately want your playing within a wind section of an orchestra to be more instinctive as to how the orchestra you're playing with feels. Over the years, more and more pieces that integrate saxophone are being programmed, but there are still a large number of concert saxophonists that don't have any real experience playing with an orchestra.

When you first play with an orchestra, it's difficult to know and understand the proper balance; who you should listen to throughout various sections of playing your part; and exact tuning, as well as understanding the tuning tendencies of the other wind instruments within the section. When you're featured as a soloist, the biggest concern is having a good conductor. If the conductor understands the piece you're playing and is listening to you well, he or she will mold the orchestra to your playing and interpretation. When you're within the section, you really have to follow the conductor and not vise-versa as in a soloist position. I've had the pleasure to work under the baton of Solti, Slatkin, Boulez, Tilson Thomas, and Zinman, among others. Those experiences are invaluable to me because I learned so much from each conductor.

There are two types of conductors. The first type are the conductors that have a very clear, easily followed beat. Then you have the group of conductors that have a beat pattern that is almost non-existent. Actually, I should say there are three types of conductors, the third being a combination of the first two I just described. Saxophonists have to attend orchestra concerts and really make a study of the conductor's movements throughout the concert. You have to be able to understand what the conductor wants from you and deliver it. Watching a conductor from behind, of course, is not like playing with him or her, as we all know.

The best way to strengthen your ability to play within an orchestra is to participate in quartet playing, focusing both your ears and your eyes so that you blend together as an ensemble. You will learn about being flexible and how your individual part fits into the whole piece.

If you have some interest or talent in doubling, I've known musicians that really work up their doubles to an orchestral level which allows them to take auditions and pursue another career. Playing in a concert band or wind symphony is helpful, but doesn't really compare to receiving the experience of playing with strings. String instruments speak differently than winds do, and it's been my perception that you have to really be ready to interact with them.

Every saxophonist should be functioning strongly on all the members of the saxophone family. You could get a call to play a baritone sax part in Gerswin's *American In Paris*. We all should study each and accept all their personal difficulties, such as the low C sharp on tenor sax in *Romeo and Juliet* or the middle D flat in *Pictures At An Exhibition*. I've found that it takes a while to find a horn that suits you and really compliments your playing. I was never too happy with my tenor until I picked up a Selmer Super Action 80 Series II; it really played great and made me feel good. We all should thank Bruce Ronkin for all of his work in compiling two *Orchestral Saxophone Except* Books. They both cover pretty much everything except for a premiere of a new piece that requires a saxophone.

ALTISSIMO

One of the main reasons my altissimo is so developed is that I simply began working on it properly in seventh or eighth grade. I was working out of Sigurd Rascher's *Top Tones* book as well as Robert Lucky's book a little later. I was able to hear the higher pitches I wanted. When I finally got each note to speak freely, I went to a piano and really tried to center the pitch and focus on solid intonation. Sound concept is another important aspect. It doesn't really matter if you can play in the altissimo register, but not be musical. I suggest listening to a lot of violinists and orchestras in general.

First, work in having a great sound on your front E and front F at all dynamic levels. Then begin to rise chromatically to F sharp, G and G sharp. This group of notes is the hardest to control. Finally, one of the most important aspects of the altissimo register is to simply relax. §