



WHAT TO DO WITH ALL THOSE SAXOPHONES? USING SMALL ENSEMBLES TO EDUCATE THE ABUNDANCE OF YOUNG SAXOPHONISTS IN PUBLIC SCHOOL

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A recent conversation at the end of the 2014-15 school year with a middle school band colleague revealed some startling news: he had 30 incoming saxophonists joining his 6th grade band the following year. Across the state of New Jersey the saxophone is one of the most popular starting instruments in elementary school, giving many other directors at all grade levels a similar problem: what to do with all those saxophones?

When I was in 4th grade, I knew right away which instrument I wanted to play. Despite my director pushing me to be a clarinet player, I chose the saxophone. There are many theories explaining why young students seem so drawn to the instrument, but certainly the prominence of the saxophone in Jazz and pop culture, in addition to the unique sound quality each student can attain quickly leads students to choose the instrument. In addition, I've always said that the saxophone is one of the easiest instruments to produce any sound (good or bad), and that early accessibility gives the instrument staying power. Many educators wonder how they can not only deal with a huge influx of saxophonists, but how they can develop them into strong and sensitive musicians, well-versed in a multitude of musical styles and performance techniques. The answer is chamber music.

As a performer, I have always felt that my chamber music experiences are the most valuable not only from a performance standpoint, but also pedagogically. As an undergraduate at The College of New Jersey, I participated in both a saxophone quartet and saxophone quintet. Sub-

sequently, during my masters in saxophone performance at Manhattan School of Music, I continued to perform in a quartet, but also performed chamber music with violin, viola, cello, voice, and more. While completing my doctoral studies at Rutgers University, I had the exciting opportunity to work with Paul Cohen in a saxophone ensemble setting, a group which consisted of soprano through contrabass saxophone! These academic experiences heavily influenced my educational outlook as a saxophonist and led me to establish a saxophone ensemble program at French Woods for the Performing Arts in Hancock, NY. A few years later in 2010 I accepted the position of Saxophone Ensemble and Saxophone Choir director at Youth Orchestra of Central Jersey (yocj.org), a program located in West Windsor-Plainsboro, NJ for students in 6-12th grade that now supports over 30 saxophonists a year.

The idea behind saxophone ensembles is not a new phenomenon. Adolphe Sax, the inventor of the saxophone, was a strong proponent of creating and supporting families of like instruments. The saxophone patent from 1846 illustrates and describes a complete family of saxophones. Two years earlier in 1844, the first saxophone ensemble piece, *Sextuor*, was composed by Sax's good friend, Georges Kastner. Throughout the nineteenth century, there was a small but steady flow of works for saxophone ensembles. Jérôme Savari wrote a sextet, septet, and octet in the 1860s and American composer Caryl Florio wrote a quartet in 1876, along with other quartet and quintet works by composers like Jean-Baptiste

Singelée, Emile Jonas, and Louis Mayeur. The twentieth century saw an explosion of works for saxophone quartet by the likes of Alexander Glazunov, Philip Glass, and Eugene Bozza, among others. Building upon this success, the great saxophonist Sigurd Rascher worked hard to revive the idea and concept of the large saxophone ensemble in the mid-20th century. As a result, many colleges and universities such as the Eastman School of Music, Boston University, University of Miami, University of Southern Mississippi, and Rutgers University have thriving saxophone ensemble programs today. The growth of these ensembles has led to the collaboration and creation of a vast number of high quality works for all skill levels and in all musical styles in the last 50-60 years. With some careful planning, these works can be used to augment a band program in middle school or high school, provide an outlet for the vast number of saxophonists in that program, and help those saxophonists grow into mature and worldly musicians.

The first aspect to consider as a director is the instrumentation available. Many middle schools and high schools will have a plethora of alto saxophone players, a fair number of tenor players, and a few baritone players. Depending on student interest in the ensemble, doubling will be necessary and in many cases, is encouraged. If no soprano saxophone is available, a good setup to start with is four altos, two tenors, and one baritone (AAAATTB). This same configuration could acoustically handle 2-3 more altos if necessary, although any additional higher voices would necessitate

adding an additional baritone or tenor to balance. A program that owns a soprano saxophone can add a soprano onto this configuration, creating a well-balanced group: SAAAATTB. One soprano player can typically be supported unless the group gets larger than 13 or 14 total players; after that, a second player could be added if possible.

To create a rich and balanced sound with good tuning, the two most important keys to success with a large group of saxophone players are mouthpiece and reed choice. While purchasing a better saxophone certainly improves intonation, ergonomics, and shadings of tone quality, a high quality mouthpiece with an appropriate reed choice will give a young player far more immediate and tangible results. This can also be an affordable option for students as opposed to purchasing a brand new instrument. While there are many schools of thought on mouthpiece choice within the saxophone community, for classical music (orchestral, band, chamber, and solo), there are several recommended mouthpieces: *Vandoren Optimimum AL3*, *Caravan Large Chamber*, *Selmer C**, and *Rousseau NC4* (models listed are for alto saxophone; tenor and baritone saxophone models may have slightly different names). The *Vandoren* model is perhaps the most balanced sound for a young student. The *Caravan* tends towards a darker tone quality and the *Selmer* and *Rousseau* produce a brighter tone quality. Younger students will do well pairing these mouthpieces with *Vandoren Traditional 2½* reeds. As they progress, moving up to a strength 3 reed is important. As a director, find the mouthpiece you feel works best and over time encourage your students to all purchase the same or similar mouthpiece. This will quickly give your saxophone section a uniform and controlled sound. The next step is to choose repertoire for the ensemble.

Smaller ensembles (especially those without a soprano) should consider starting with saxophone quartet works and doubling parts when necessary. Several quality starting quartets for an AATB ensemble include the separately written *Nocturne*, *Serenade*, and *Scherzo* by Frank Erickson, which can be performed by themselves or as a three movement suite (one may need to consult a local collegiate library for this work). Additionally, the "Adagio" from *Adagio and Scherzo* by John Worley is appropriate for a younger

ensemble and can be performed with an AATB or SATB scoring, published by Ethos Music (ethospublications.com). Quartet works appropriate for a talented middle school or early high school ensemble could include the *Suite* by Lawson Lunde (SATB or AATB), *Foursome Quartet* by Everett Gates (AATB), or the *Quartet* by Richard Lane (SATB). All are published by To the Fore Publishers (totheforepublishers.com). Additionally, the *Three Folk Dances* by Bela Bartok (arr. Gordon) work well as an early AATB transcription, published by Southern Music Company. AATB ensembles that are more advanced would be musically and technically challenged by exploring Henry Cowell's *Sailor's Hornpipe*, a delightful and tonal work reminiscent of English folksong, published by Peermusic Classical. Walter Hartley's *Quartettino* (AATB) provides a more modern-sounding piece that could still function well with a less advanced ensemble and is published by Ethos Music. Smaller high school-level ensembles would benefit greatly from exploring more ad-

vanced saxophone quartets by Glazunov, Florio, Bozza, and Singelee, among others. Directors could transcribe the soprano part into an alternate alto saxophone part if need be for groups with no soprano player. A larger list of additional AATB quartets ranging from holiday favorites and classical transcriptions, to newer original works can be found and ordered at Dorn Publications: (dornpub.com/ken/saxaatb.html).

As the saxophone ensemble starts to grow, finding high quality works becomes easier for the director. Three SAATB works by Percy Grainger: *Irish Tune from County Derry*, *Shepherd's Hey*, and *Spoon River* (all published by To the Fore Publishers) provide the players with charming folk melodies and lush textures. Other high quality original and arranged works include *Intrada* by Ron Caravan for SAATTB with a baritone II substitute for the bass saxophone part, *Concertino* by Brian Israel for SAATTB (optional bass), *Portals* by Carl Anton Wirth for SAATTB (optional bass), and *Dance Suite* by John Dowland for SAATB (arr. Worley),

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all published by Ethos Music. An interesting historical nineteenth century work to consider is Louis Mayeur's *Prelude* for SAATB (pub. Henry Lemoine). A larger work without bass saxophone is William Schmidt's *Four Early American Spirituals* for SAAATTB (pub. Western International Music). As the size of the ensemble expands, directors may want to consider taking saxophone ensemble pieces that include bass, and transcribing the bass part for a second (or third baritone player). Excellent high school level works include *One-Step* by John Phillip Sousa (SAATTBBs), *A Lincolnshire Whimsy* by Clarence Barber (SSAATTBBs) or the historical work that started it all, *Sextuor* (SSAATBBs). There are also a wealth of transcriptions and arrangements of orchestral, organ, and piano works for all sizes of sax ensembles, including ambitious scorings with soprano and bass saxophone, percussion, and more.

The listing of above works is not meant to be exhaustive of the wealth of pieces that exist for saxophone ensembles of all sizes, but rather a starting point for those new to the idea of creating a

saxophone ensemble from their existing band program. Whether the group exists as something more informal, or a serious after-school weekly activity, saxophonists will gain significant musical knowledge through the spirited work of performing chamber music together. Performing in a small ensemble can help students who need an extra challenge to have an additional outlet for their creativity, and it may inspire students who are lagging behind to have a strong aspirational goal. If you're looking for a way to engage and challenge next year's mass of young saxophonists in your band program, consider creating a saxophone ensemble program as an innovative way to give them an unforgettable performance and learning experience.



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