

The Art of Tone - Pt. 1

By Mel Martin

The first and last thing heard by an audience is your sound. So it is of the utmost importance that the woodwind artist go to every possible length to present the finest personal sound they can develop. Our job is to project a sound that has all of the elements of beauty: depth, strength, subtlety, nuance and character. These are all terms that can be applied to the concept of tone. Brightness, reediness, darkness, roundness, are terms that can describe tone. The concept of tone starts in the mind. A great tone has to be imagined before it can be produced. This is initially accomplished by listening to great players of your instrument. Critically listening for the character and quality of a great sound will lead to imagining a great sound. It is also important to listen to all instrumentalists and vocalists for their concept of sound.

Your equipment plays an important role in tonal development. For reed players, a great mouthpiece with a bad reed will not produce a very good sound. But a great reed on an ordinary mouthpiece can produce a fine sound. The mouthpiece should simply make your job easier. The practice of long tones is the single most important activity to promote tonal development. The physical requirements of holding a note steadily for a number of beats strengthen the embouchure, rib cage and diaphragm muscles. Inserting dynamics into long tone practice builds the ability to dispense a precise distribution of air. All exercises should be considered "long tone" exercises. The definition of technique is moving sound through your instrument therefore the quality of tone is of primary importance.



The mouthpiece, ligature and reed combination are primary to tone production. It is a three-way combination with the reed being the largest variable. Generally, reeds all play somewhat differently. The player can learn to manipulate the reed through sanding shaving, shaping and clipping. The player purchases the cut and strength most suitable for the mouthpiece and ligature and style of music. Then the reed needs to be shaped to fit the contour of the tip rail. It may be helpful to sand the side edges so that the reed is comfortable to the lip of the player as well. The entire setup needs to present the right amount of resistance and comfort in order to produce a free and unstrained sound. Mouthpieces usually are manufactured in rubber, metal, wood or crystal. Each material has its own tonal properties but it is the dimensions of the mouthpiece that determines the actual sound.

The materials and dimensions of your instrument also play an important role in tone production. The types of metals used in saxophones helps to create "the tone chamber". Once the air activates the reed, it enters the instrument as sound vibration and is amplified and pitched. Most saxophones are made of brass alloys. Lately, bronze saxophones have become more popular. Bronze is a brass alloy containing higher levels of copper, hence a more "orange" or "rose gold" appearance. These instruments tend to have a somewhat darker sound. Some saxophones are even made of solid silver. These instruments have very different properties than brass. They have more in common with flutes in one sense but are conical not cylindrical. The plating of an instrument also makes a stark difference in tone. Silver plating tends to make horns "brighter". Gold plating adds "darkness and a certain rich "core" to the sound via the overtones. Most instruments are lacquered but some players have the lacquer stripped to produce a "warmer" tone. Clarinets use aged grenadilla

wood but have been made utilizing cherry tree wood, pear tree wood, plastics, metal and rod rubber. Flutes are generally made of sterling silver but grenadilla wood, gold and platinum have also been used in high-end flutes. All of these materials have had a specific effect on the tonal qualities but it is always the dimensions of the instrument that create the scale and consistency.



Tone is the most expressive performance element for a player. When performing, the player needs to be free to express the different moods and feelings inherent in and appropriate to the music. The quality of a player's tone is dependent on the above-mentioned factors but is overridden by the physical properties and artistic inclinations of the player. The first sound a player made on his instrument is "his sound". From there, all efforts are directed towards achieving a sound as imagined. It is also about the acceptance of your sound. Many players are attracted to the sound of their idols and peers. A person's sound is like their signature, particularly on woodwinds. There are actually no two exactly alike. You have a sound to your voice, distinct fingerprints and a particular look. These are features that differentiate you from others. Your sound is no different. It is the way you can be identified, characterized and, hopefully, appreciated. There is no valid reason to emulate others except to learn about sound production. A period of emulation is fine early on but after an influence is absorbed, your sound is still essentially you. It is possible to approach tonal development as sculpting or shaping your sound. You may wish to acquire certain qualities and will go to great lengths to achieve this end. The result is still your personal signature but you may discover ways to make production easier, more efficient or just more enjoyable. From there on, it is a matter of acceptance.

Another central fact of tonal development is to find the more spiritual elements in playing music. The ability to concentrate for long periods of time on a note or series of notes is akin to "being in the moment". It is itself a process of enlightenment. But before you rush off to the practice room to become "enlightened", a little philosophical background may be useful. This particular idea is at the essence of Zen and other Buddhist practices. The idea is that this process shouldn't be used as a means to an end. It should be practiced for the sheer joy, discipline and resultant experience that it puts forth. Yes, it will help you to develop tone that, in turn, is used to express beauty in music. Audiences perceive this in a myriad of ways. The goal should be to uplift your audience through the essence of your sound. In jazz, your sound cannot be separated from your rhythmic, melodic and harmonic ideas. In classical music, tone quality is used to maintain the beauty and purity of the composer's musical vision. In either situation, the ultimate effect upon the listener is an elevated state of consciousness. The player, however, may or may not be entitled to this state while performing. This is why it is so important to try and achieve some of this when practicing.

