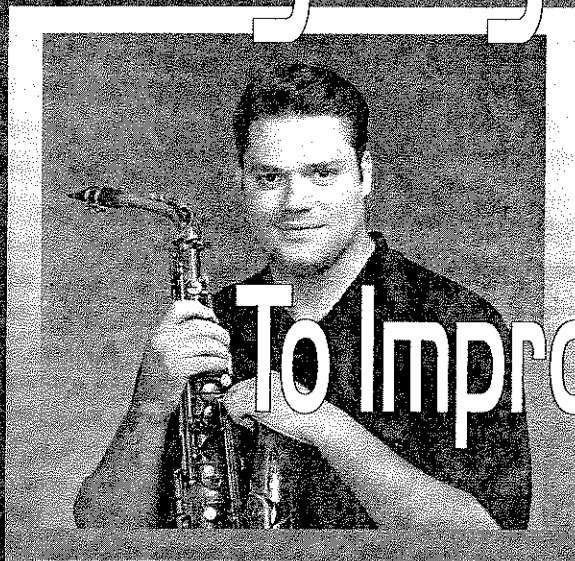


Using Key Clicks

By Paul Haar



To Improve Your Technique

There is an old saying that goes, "Out of every bad moment, some good must come." For me the bad moment came two years ago when I contracted the flu during Christmas vacation. What was to be three weeks of relaxation and practice turned into three weeks of confinement to a lazy boy chair. The only thing I could do with my saxophone during that time was hold it, with thoughts of what might have been. However, this time of confinement turned into a wonderful moment of discovery and thus the focus of this column.

One of the great problems facing each of us is the pursuit of solid technique while struggling to find enough practice time to build it. Our available time often comes at the worst time. It is usually after the kids are in bed or when any practicing would wake the neighbors in the apartment complex. If there were only some way to capitalize on moments like these.

While I was feeling sorry for myself in that lazy boy, I would hold my horn and finger scales and familiar patterns. I was itching to play but my physical condition would not allow blowing into the saxophone. As I grew more and more restless, I continued to finger those scales. As I kept going, I began to notice that the constant "click, click, click" of the keys produced rhyth-

mic patterns. When I focused my attention to my technique, I began to notice that when I was playing evenly, a unique rhythmic pattern emerged.

This got me thinking. Half of practicing is technical. We are either trying to sure up familiar material such as scales or we are trying to learn new material. So, I continued to practice those key clicks each day with the hopes that what I was doing would, at best, stop some of my technical decline. Each day I would start out with major scales to the 9th, later moving on to digital patterns and solo passages. Once I was able to blow into

Table 1

C major	C Sharp Major	
D Major	E Flat Major	E Major
F Major	F Sharp Major	G Major
A Flat Major	A Major	B Flat Major
B Major		

the horn, I found a strange sense of familiarity as if I had never been sick. To my surprise, my technique didn't decline, it improved!

Key clicks have long been used as a musical effect in new music. The conical nature of the saxophone, along with the covered key system (as opposed to the open hole construction of a clarinet or flute) allows for a wonderful array of percussive sounds. If we can learn to identify the rhythmic patterns of a scale or passage, using key clicks, then we could practice these elements, at least technically, without physically producing a sound on the horn. If we are playing them evenly a unique rhythmic pattern will emerge.

To demonstrate this idea I am going to use something familiar to all of us, major scales. For each major scale there is a rhythmic pattern that identifies it. For a complete list of rhythmic patterns please see table 1.

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

Before you begin experimenting with this idea, there are a few things to keep in mind. The only percussive noise we want to hear in this exercise is the key click. Make sure your instrument is in good physical repair. Any missing corks, felts, or pads are going to create extra noise. Additionally, torn or old, dry pads may produce different effects than are common.

This exercise is a wonderful time to check for good hand position. Make sure your fingers are relaxed, curved and remain close to the keys when fingering the exercise. Use a decisive but not overly firm amount of pressure when depressing the keys. You should be able to hear a good key click with normal pressure.

This exercise has been tested on saxophones of traditional shape, from soprano through baritone. There should not be much, if any, difference from brand to brand. There may be some change for those players who use straight altos and tenors.

THE EXERCISE

This technique can be used with any scale, pattern, solo, etude, etc. For the purpose of this article I am going to use a one octave C major scale. Example 1a shows a typical C major scale from the root, up to the 9th and back to the root. First play the scale and take note to how even it is. What one often focuses on are the audible pitches that are produced when blowing through the saxophone.

Next, remove the neck of the saxophone to have a second opening to hear the key clicks. This opening is closer to your ears and will help you focus on the rhythms that will be produced.

Taking the same scale, you will now finger the scale with key clicks. Begin by fingering a low D. This scale exercise begins when you depress the low C key and produce a key click. Continue fingering this scale numerous times. You should

begin hearing a rhythmic pattern emerge that sounds something like example 1b. If you are playing the scale evenly, this rhythm will emerge. If you are uneven, another rhythmic pattern will be produced. If we were to write out the rhythm focusing strictly on the accents it would look like example 1c.

Continue on to other scales such as C# major, D major, etc. until you have played all twelve major scales. You can check your patterns against the rhythmic patterns found in table 1. If your technique is even, you should find the same patterns as in the table. Remember that each scale is played to the 9th. Once you have gone through all twelve rhythmic scales, replace the neck on your saxophone and play through these scales as you would normally.

Again, this concept is not limited to just scales. Any technical passage can be used. Simply start slow and increase the tempo when you are sure you are playing evenly. With repetition you will notice that a pattern will emerge.

I have used this technique a great deal since the birth of my daughter. Once she is asleep, I get out my music and start "clicking." The next day, when I arrive at my office, I focus on applying musical concepts such as articulation, vibrato etc. I have been able to maximize my time and I learn music in a much more efficient manner.

I hope this concept will help you achieve your goals. I am interested in hearing how this exercise works for you in your practicing. I welcome you to email me at phaar@utk.edu. Until then happy practicing. §

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