

By Greg Banaszak

A Lesson With James Romain

Dr. James Romain serves as Associate Professor of Saxophone and Assistant Director of Jazz Studies. He received the Doctorate of Musical Arts degree in Performance and Pedagogy from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he was a student of Professor Debra Richtmeyer. Dr. Romain is the first saxophonist to be awarded the D.M.A. degree from that university. While at UIUC, he was awarded the Cooke Fellowship, served as teaching assistant for the saxophone studio, and won the woodwind concerto competition. At UIUC, Dr. Romain co-founded the Red Onion Saxophone Quartet, an ensemble that has taken prizes in regional North American Saxophone Alliance competitions and was awarded the silver medal at the 2001 Fiscoff National Chamber Music Competition. He has performed with the Illinois Symphony Orchestra, the Champaign-Urbana and U of I Orchestras, and in numerous masterclasses. Dr. Romain premiered a new sonata by Chinese composer Dr. Jian-Jun He at the 2003 World Saxophone Congress.

Prior to coming to Drake, Dr. Romain served as Instructor of Woodwinds and Jazz Studies at Casper College in Casper, Wyoming. As director of the Casper College Jazz Festival, he hosted approximately 1,500 students in 90 jazz groups from around the state each February. While in Casper, he also held the chair of principal clarinet with the Wyoming Symphony Orchestra, and is a past president of the Casper Chamber Music Society. Previous to his tenure at Casper College he served on the faculty at the University of Wisconsin, River Falls for two years. While in the Midwest, he appeared frequently as a member of the Ancia Quartet, and as tenor saxophonist with the Twin Cities Jazz Orchestra. Dr. Romain has also taught at Amarillo College in Amarillo, Texas. He holds prior degrees from the University of North Texas, where he was a teaching fellow and a student of Professor James Riggs. As a jazz saxophonist, he has performed with Clark Terry, Ron Miles, Eric Gunnison, and at the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland.

TEACHING PHILOSOPHY

The essence of my approach to teaching is to create a climate that stimulates my students' individual creativity, intellect, and self-motivation. By teaching students as much about how to learn as about what to learn, they become self-sufficient and self-directed learners, eventually able to become their own teachers. As my own goals are met, the student will gain the requisite motiva-



tion, critical thinking skills, technical proficiency on their instrument, and the musical intellect that will lend depth and credence to their performance and other professional activities. I seek to create an exceptional learning environment on multiple levels. By the end of their four years in my saxophone studio, for example, it is my goal that the students will become their own best teachers, a critical transformation that will determine their future success as saxophonists, musicians, and educators. Not only am I teaching the professional musicians and educators of the future - I am, through the medium of music, an active participant in the enhancement of their personal lives, as the musical, intellectual, and interpersonal skills that they hone in musical environments extend to all arenas of their lives in an array of positive ways.

I wish to emphasize that, in my view, there is no point at which my journey towards excellence as a performer, teacher, advisor, and mentor will be concluded. I regard myself as a lifelong learner, and make every effort to set that example for my students. The highly collaborative environment that defines our wonderful department at Drake University not only provides me with a great deal of personal and professional stimuli and fulfillment, but also serves as a model for the many collaborations that are a part of our students' lives, and will remain a part of their lives after they leave. I am continually impressed by the expertise of my colleagues and their dedication to teaching, and I constantly refine and improve my teaching based on their collective model.

My passion for excellence in teaching is modeled on my passion for excellence in my own musical performance. The same obsessive drive for perfection in my playing extends to the process of perfecting my students' playing, and my teaching. I bring to my saxophone studio a life-long enthusiasm for music and all things related to the saxophone, and my students often remark (with occasional exasperation) on my meticulous attention to all minute details of performance. As an example, I frequently record students in their lesson and engage them in a conversation about details of phrasing, dynamic, tonal color, vibrato depth and rate, and articulation, as we listen to the recording together, seeking to identify and address areas that need further refinement. I have seen that that these traits do make an impression on my students, and I observe with great pride that, as they internalize these traits within themselves, their own performances take on greater clarity, authority, and a level of professionalism that is often remarkable.

TECHNICAL MASTERY OF THE SAXOPHONE

In the area of technical mastery of the saxophone, I share with my students many of the specific techniques that I employ on a daily basis to address challenging passages in the music that I study and perform. I help students to build a technical foundation by emphasizing consistent practice of overtones studies to aid with control of the oral cavity and air stream, scales of all kinds, scales in 3rds, 4ths, and 5ths, arpeggios, and etudes that are selected to challenge each student on the areas that he or she is currently struggling with in their playing. I teach the student techniques to employ in learning technical passages—playing passages backwards, changing rhythms, moving the reference beat, changing groupings, all with the eventual outcome of giving the student complete control over their instrument and over their own technique.

MUSICALITY CAN BE TAUGHT

Musicality, though often mistaken for the ever-elusive “talent,” can be taught, and I have developed a number of techniques that I use to engage my students in the process of refining the musical phrase. I insist that they bring all of their theoretical and historical knowledge to bear on pieces that they study with me, as these areas inform a thoughtful performance in ways that enhance its depth and power. One of the first areas that I address is to break down the structure of the line into its simplest and broadest form. Buried within even the most angular and contemporary melodic line, there is almost always a horizontal melodic phrase, often several operating simultaneously on multiple strata.

As an example, Jean-Marie Londeix's saxophone transcription of the Prelude of J.S. Bach's *Cello Suite No. 1* opens with an arpeggiated figure, F-C-A, then F-D-Bb, F-E-Bb, and finally F-F-A. At first glance, they appear to be very much vertically oriented. However, I ask the student to play the bottom of each consecutively, F-F-F-F, then the middle voice, C-D-E-F, and finally the uppermost voice, A-Bb-Bb-A. What then becomes apparent is that Bach has written a 3-part chorale, with three smooth lines. The challenge for the performer, then, is to explore ways in which those lines may be clarified and reinforced.

The next step is to listen to several representative recordings of the work on the original instrument, in this case I use recordings by Rostropovitch and Starker, and also in saxophone transcriptions to hear various, and often entirely different, approaches to realizing this important goal. While it would be much easier and quicker in the short run to simply play a passage and say, “Do it like this,” the end result of my methodology is that students are expected to think for themselves, and create an interpretation that is grounded theoretically, historically, and with an

understanding of performance practice that goes beyond the saxophone. Rather than playing something exactly like I play it, I want the student to put the same thought into their performance as I do, though the end result may well be very different from mine.

APPLIED PERFORMANCE

In ensembles (Jazz, saxophone quartets, and jazz combos), I demand the same level of thoughtfulness and engagement that I do in my applied studio, and I relentlessly nudge students to become ever more critical and aware of the sounds that they create individually and collectively. The art of listening, a topic addressed by Karlheinz Stockhausen in his essay, *The Art To Listen*, is one that not only can be taught, but must be taught, as most of what passes for listening among the non-musician public

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is so passive as to be all but useless to the performing musician. In order to be able to listen to their own contributions to the complex texture of an ensemble, and to make assessments and constant corrections based on what they hear, the student must learn to listen to recordings with a high degree of specificity.

The casual listener can afford to let the sound merely wash over them in a pleasant way, but the musician must analyze those sounds, discern formal structures, identify genre, provide historical context, and critique performance details. In ensembles, I guide my students through the process of listening to recordings, and then turn their sharpening ear on themselves, pointing out specific details of pitch, tonal matching, articulation clarity, evenness of technique, and interpretive aspects of the musical line.

The successes of my students validate my own efforts, and create a positive cycle of excellence in learning, performance, and teaching that operates at ever-higher levels within my applied studio, ensembles, and academic courses.

QUALITY OF SOUND

The saxophone has such a wide ranging tonal potential. The contrast between the tone of Claude Delangle and John-Edward Kelly is but one obvious example of the remarkable tonal capacity of our instrument. Outside of the concert saxophone arena, the differences may be even more striking. Think of Lester Young and Michael Brecker who both have unique and strikingly personal voices. Still they are so disparate in character as to be heard almost as two distinct instruments, even though both played the tenor saxophone. These examples inspire me to explore the full capacity of the instrument. I believe very strongly that the tonal image (aural concept) is the strongest determining factor in the development of a personal tonal concept. Like many saxophonists, I also experiment frequently with different saxophones, necks, mouthpieces, ligatures, and reeds, in an ongoing process of exploration and curiosity.

WARM-UPS, LONG TONES AND VIBRATO

As for warm-ups and long tones, they are a part of my playing and teaching. In particular, I make use of the "Tuning CD" drones in open 5ths to provide a pitch reference for those kinds of exercises. I'll generally spend a minute or two with the concert A/E track, locking in all of my F#'s and C#'s (on alto), and stabilizing my pitch for that practice session, and for the day. Then, I choose one other key for the day, and set the Tuning CD to that key. I go through diatonic long tones, descending in note pairs (Do-Ti, Ti-La, La-Sol, Etc.) from a middle-register tonic to the low-register tonic. Within each pair, I crescendo for six or eight counts, change pitch, and then decrescendo for six or eight counts. This provides structure for the dynamics, as I am very aware of the progression from pp to ff (six beats) or ppp to fff (eight beats). I generally do this at a metronome marking of 60-88, sometimes with straight tone, sometimes with vibrato. With vibrato, I am also thinking about matching the depth and intensity of the vibrato to the dynamic. I will usually begin and end (pp or ppp) with no vibrato, introducing it very subtly as the dynamic increases. The vibrato must always be 'married' in character to the dynamic, as these two elements are integral to making sense of changes in musical intensity.

It's important to keep in mind that attention to a rich, colorful, and beautiful saxophone sound needs to be a constant obsession and an ongoing pursuit. Sometimes students will focus on that during long tone exercises, and then forget about it when they address scales, etudes, and technical repertoire. Without constant attention to sound, our voices will not be a consistent presence in our performance.

PEDAGOGICAL MATERIALS

I've developed a routine that works for me, and I help my students to structure and maintain a routine that is appropriate to their individual level of development. For a typical 1st-year or 2nd-year undergraduate music major, I expect full-range major, natural minor, harmonic minor and melodic minor scales and 3rds. Each student is at their own stage with technical work, but aiming for sixteenths at quarter=128 is a good goal for those students. I stress to them that scales are not an end in themselves, but rather an opportunity to observe their technique, make assessments about inaccuracies or inefficiencies in their playing, and develop strategies for correcting those issues. In so doing, they are becoming better saxophonists, a much more motivating goal than the apparent drudgery of simply 'learning scales.' Most of this work is done by explanation and by sketching out the routine in their notebook. If I do use written scales studies, I generally recommend the Londeix *Les Gammes et Les Modes*.

Beyond basic technical proficiency to be gained through such a routine, I also emphasize musical concepts. I don't want my students to isolate technique from musical considerations of shape, direction, and energy, but rather to integrate those into their technical work, so that those concepts become as ingrained in their playing as much as a solid and refined technique.

BUILDING YOUR REPERTOIRE

Certainly the most important step is to seek out a qualified teacher. Local colleges and universities are one option, but don't overlook the very fine performers and teachers that you may find in local junior high and high schools, or perhaps teaching in a studio at a nearby music store. Assess their teaching based on recommendations, listening to the quality of their students, and through taking a 'sample' lesson. It's a close relationship, so it needs to be a good fit both teacher and student.

As for repertoire development, we have a canon of works that have become an integral part of the process of developing as a concert saxophonist. Seek out recordings that are well reviewed (SJ, Saxophone Symposium, American Record Guide, Amazon.com reviews, etc.) and begin building a collection of recordings. Not only are they an important reference as you work on specific pieces, but far more important is the collective inspiration that they can provide.

A Comprehensive Guide to the Saxophone Repertoire: 1844-2003 by Jean-Marie Londeix, is an indispensable reference for serious saxophonists, and James Umble's *Jean-Marie Londeix: Master of the Modern Saxophone* is a substantive resource for thorough essays covering many aspects of repertoire and pedagogy, in addition to providing the definitive biography of M. Londeix.

CAREERS IN MUSIC

Versatility is paramount and today's players cannot afford to limit themselves to one style or genre or music, but must be conversant in as many as possible. Given the absence of full-time orchestral positions for saxophonists, young players/college students need to broaden the scope of their experience and interests. 'Classical' players should study jazz performance and repertoire, and the converse is equally true. We should strive to think of ourselves as saxophonists; even better, as musicians, rather than pigeonholing ourselves into one arena or another. Doubling can only serve to improve one's prospects for gainful employment.

In the realm of academia, the many outstanding up-and-coming young saxophone virtuosos need to recognize the troubling fact that, while being a stellar classical performer on virtually any other 'orchestral' instrument might be enough to provide a chance for employment in an orchestra, albeit a slight one, it

is not the case for us. There are a handful of positions in military performance ensembles that may provide that opportunity to a select few, but the vast majority of saxophone performers graduating with B.M., M.M., or even D.M.A. degrees from top schools and programs face rather stark employment prospects. While that outlook may seem bleak, there is good news. By equipping themselves to be at home in a variety of performance settings, today's saxophonists have the unique opportunity for employment as classical performers (occasional orchestral gigs, recitals with colleagues, etc.), jazz players (local 'rehearsal' big bands, club and casual dates, coffee shops), doublers (local productions, touring productions), and teachers (through local high-school programs, adjunct work at colleges and universities, and full-time college and university professorships), but only if they adequately prepare themselves to attain a high standard in each area.

In addition to versatility as saxophonists and woodwind doublers, it is also extremely advantageous for performers to cultivate ancillary interests. In my case, my undergraduate study as a jazz performance major at UNT was complemented with a minor in music theory. At the M.M. level (also at UNT), my work as a classical performance major was strengthened and rounded by my pursuit of a minor in jazz studies. Finally, during my D.M.A. work at the University of Illinois with Debra Richtmeyer, I also took full advantage of the extraordinary Ethnomusicology faculty by pursuing a minor field in Ethnomusicology, including coursework in the music of India with Charles Capwell, Africa with Tom Turino, Improvisation with Bruno Nettl, and Andean music ensemble.

By strengthening myself in non-saxophone areas, I have strived to set myself apart from 'pure' classical saxophonists, and won four college teaching positions, including my current position as Associate Professor of Music at Drake University in Des Moines, IA, where I'm in my sixth year. In each instance, it was my knowledge and experience outside of classical saxophone studio that set me apart from other highly qualified applicants. In my first job at Amarillo College, a one-year sabbatical replacement, I taught, besides saxophone studio, music appreciation, clarinet, bassoon, flute, and jazz.

At the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, I taught saxophone, clarinet, flute, directed the jazz ensemble, taught jazz improvisation, and taught first-year theory and ear training.

At Casper College, I taught saxophone, clarinet, jazz theory and improvisation, jazz combo, directed the jazz ensemble, and coached saxophone quartet. In my current position, my studio teaching is (finally) limited to saxophone (though I continue to perform professionally on flute and clarinet as well), but I also teach several other music related class and ensembles.

In addition to these wide-ranging teaching responsibilities, I also serve as Recruiting Coordinator for the Department of Music, a fairly demanding and time-consuming job.

Outside of my Drake responsibilities, I also serve as the Membership Director for the North American Saxophone Alliance, a position that gives me an opportunity to 'give back' to an organization that I have long benefited from, and also gives me the chance to get to know saxophonists from all walks of life, including educators, students, and saxophone enthusiasts. §

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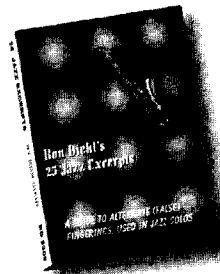
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