

What is a classical tenor tone?

~ A perspective into a developing modern approach to classical tenor saxophone.

Over the past few weeks I have contacted by some of you with regards to classical tenor, mainly relating to sound and tone. Most seem to go a bit like this one...

"People tell me that I don't have a classical tenor saxophone tone, then I heard what most people refer to as 'classical tenor tone' and I don't like it. I mean, they are really great players, but I just don't like the tone at all. It irritates me the C setup when I hear it, I don't why, it just doesn't follow up on a 'good tone' for me. I'm just wondering if anybody else thinks similar to what I'm saying?"*

In my view there are many contributing reasons to the classical tenor tone question.

The first is the general expectation or preconception of the 'classical tenor' sound. I dislike what would be considered the mainstream or traditional sound / tone. I feel it is far too enclosed and thin as it tries to sound more like a alto or soprano not embracing it's full resonant character. Remember the tenor is actually quite a lot bigger in size and bore compared to the saxes mentioned above.

This leads me on to how we approach classical tenor playing physically. In this I don't mean embouchure. When playing we all hold ourselves / use a certain phonetic shape in our chest and throat, in the soprano it is more an Ee, with alto an Aaa or a combination of the both depending on with tradition you subscribe to. Now with the tenor not taught as regularly as it should as a principle saxophone by tenor specialists we naturally tend to automatically use the alto phonetic shape when we should perhaps use more of an open Oo, Au or Aw. This may also be partly down to the general impression that the alto and tenor are relatively similar to play which is simply not true. It is far easier to swap and change between alto, soprano and bari as we automatically completely reset ourselves knowing how different they are.

Tenor great, James Houlik bucks this trend having developed his own sound and tone that does not conform to the American tradition despite being taught at times earlier in his life by Sigurd Rascher and Cecil Leeson. What Houlik does so well is to take points and concepts from these masters but also have the confidence to develop it and go down his own path. I am a great fan of Jim's sound and tone as he allows himself to open up and play fully through the whole instrument not putting a limit or boundary that the American tradition may. If you have not seen it check out the video interview.

Now I don't want to get into a 'tradition' argument but I would say that their expectations on how we play may be partly to blame. To me the American tradition has an emphasis more on total technical control which to me sounds rather polite. First of all I don't dislike the traditions, they are around because they work and have been developed by leading saxophonists across generations and the world. Perhaps as mentioned above these traditions have been developed and focused with the alto and soprano in mind and not around the tenor or bari. More flexibly and not putting up walls or boundaries is what is needed.

I have always subscribed to a far more open and free sound compared to that of the American and French traditions. If I had to put it into a tradition I would call it part of the new British tradition, leading players include Andy Scott, Rob Buckland and Simon Haram. Historically this is relatively new tradition inspired by John Harle. Check out Andy Scott as he is a tenor specialist and one of the great tenor players and teachers.



Andy Scott

Rob Buckland

Simon Haram

Manufacturers also perhaps have a part to play. They have not in my view spent as much time developing the classical tenor mouthpiece, making it so difficult for us to find an effective set up. To me the classical aimed mouthpieces have chambers / bores that are too small or thin, making it harder to open up the whole instrument. On the flip-side of this modern jazz mouthpieces often offer up a tone that is too bright for classical uses. Striking a balance is the goal. I personally hope I've found this on vintage jazz mouthpieces. I play on a Brillhart EboLin 4* mouthpiece after much searching. In my view playing freely and openly should be the classical ambition. As soon the tone becomes bright however, to me is not classical. This combined with the points mentioned above to me least is perhaps why the classical tenor tone question exists.

If you follow the link you will find a short recording of me playing a short solo piece. Let me know what you think!

<http://soundcloud.com/mattlondonmusic/elegie-by-peter-meechan>

Recorded by myself in May 2011 on my 1933 C.G. Conn New Wonder Transitional. Looking at the musical saxophonic development in a wider sense I often notice that today's composers for the instrument is widely made up of the player composer. This in itself is not a negative issue, as many other instruments own development and repertoire has been and still is written by the player composer. For instance Beethoven, Liszt and Rachmaninoff contributed technical pianistic developed through their writing for the instrument.

Add to this the relative lack of cutting edge concert repertoire of substantial quality for the instrument, compared to that of the alto and soprano respectively. It should be our goal to help develop and broaden the instruments awareness to that of the public listener and more importantly offer insight to the instrument's understanding and impression to that of the modern classical composer.

However due to the saxophone's fairly inclusive and niche community I feel that the instrument's opportunity for wider exposure and development within the greater classical music world is being stunted though no fault of its own.

The question to why modern classical composers don't write more often or regularly in a solo, ensemble or orchestral context is an important one!

Right this has gone on long enough, geek time over! I hope it makes some kind of sense, and again this is just a personal opinion feel free to agree or disagree and thanks for reading.

By Matt London

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