Double Tonguing On the Saxophone: Tips from the Masters

By: Sean Murphy

Although multiple tonguing is a common technique for rapid articulation in brass pedagogy, it has long been a source of mystery for many saxophonists. As composers have begun to explore the articulation possibilities of the saxophone, combined with an increased number of transcriptions being performed on the saxophone, double tonguing has become a necessary saxophone technique. Here are the teaching and performance strategies of some master saxophone pedagogues.
Timothy McAllister

I realized the importance of double tonguing early in my training upon hearing such great players as Al Galladore, Rudy Wiedoeft and my mentor, Donald Sinta. In high school I studied with Don LeFevre at the West Texas A&M summer band camp, and he stressed the absolute necessity of this technique for all ages, so I started on double tonguing as early as 15 years old. As I learned how closely practicing related to other forms of physical conditioning, I started to incorporate repetitive activity designed to build endurance and muscle response using the K sound. Because this consonant, whether taught as kay, kee,
or kuh is different from the traditional tah or dah articulation most students learn in beginning band, it is a tongue motion that must be isolated and practiced long before incorporating it into double tonguing.

I have students first verbalize an aggressive kuh or koo simply with their tongue and voice, while forming an embouchure. Next, students should get used to using K as a type of release of the airstream. I have students take a full, deep breath but hold the breath from escaping using a K syllable with the back of the tongue. Air pressure should build as students attempt to hold this tongue position in place. When the pressure reaches maximum, release the tongue and fully exhale with great force. When this is understood, add the saxophone mouthpiece and neck combination. Repeat the process, again, using K or G syllables and start to produce attacks only with these. Repeat as often as possible with increasing speed until reaching the point of fatigue. If students generate fatigue and even a slight bit of strain, the muscle action involved will begin to acclimate and rebound, thus becoming stronger. Caution students not to overdo practicing this.

Set a metronome to \( q = 60 \) and start using the kuh syllable exclusively while playing eighth notes. Vary how much accent is used and work to keep the rhythm perfectly steady over four to eight beats or until the breath expires. Students should take one minute to rest between phrases before increasing the tempo on the metronome and see how fast they can tongue using only the kuh syllable. It should be easy for students to tell when they have reached their limit,
at which point they should discontinue the exercise for the day.

This activity is a good way to learn and develop the motion itself, but later it becomes a warm-up before incorporating the alternating tah attack. Practicing the kuh attack should give it enough focus and ease that it matches the tah attack learned in beginning band. The articulations possible while double tonguing motion can range from a biting tak-kat to an effervescent dee-ga or lee-ga.

None of these effects are possible until the body is properly conditioned to play them, which must happen long before the musical applications. If we start teaching them early enough, young saxophonists will have never known a time when double-tonguing was considered an extended technique.

Timothy McAllister is associate professor of saxophone and co-director of the Institute for New Music at the Northwestern University Bienen School of Music, as well as soprano saxophonist of the PRISM Quartet.

Jean-Denis Michat
(Translated by Matt Taylor)
I remember first discovering double-tonguing
about 20 years ago in Ken Ichiro Muto’s interpretation of the famous *Ronde des Lutins* by Bazzini. Since then, double and triple tonguing entered the standard vocabulary of saxophonists. I have always maintained the belief that their use must be connected to a musical phrase’s demands rather than a simple question of pure speed. With conservatory students, I often introduce this technique in Fernande Decruck’s Sonata en ut-diese or in the second movement of Caesar Franck’s Sonate en la-majeur. The small cadence of the Fantaisie Brillante by Demersseman can also constitute that first experience.

Two different tongue movements are necessary to obtain technical control; however, to completely delete the unique respective identities of these two strokes considerably reduces the timbral interest of double-tonguing. Saxophonists must be able to both conceal and accentuate these two articulations. To double tongue is to evoke the same respiratory movement as is created by the bows of stringed instruments. The two tongue strokes should produce a push-pull or in-and-out movement.

Whatever the level of the student, the keys are flexibility, slow practice, and maintaining the flow of
the technique. The danger is always the mechanical double tongue like a machine gun. Even when double tonguing is performed fast, nothing should prevent the phrase from singing, with the articulation paving the way to help create an organic, free line with a certain rubato. All techniques that sound automatic should be banished.

Jean-Denis Michat is professor of saxophone at the Lyon Conservatoire, Lyon, France.

Eric Nestler

Multiple articulation, also known as double or triple tonguing, has gained popularity among saxophonists. Before learning double tonguing, saxophonists should first have a firm foundation in single tonguing; the majority of the repertoire for saxophone requires a flawless single tongue articulation.

Although the actual production of multiple articulation may be difficult, the concept is simple: when the surface rhythm is so fast that single tonguing is too slow, the performer may opt to alternate between T and K syllables, as if pronouncing the word ticket. When repeating this word several times in a row the last T of the first ticket becomes the first T of the next one. If the syllable pronounced causes the tongue to be too low in the mouth the definition of pitch may be lost. Such sounds as tah, kah, dah, and gah contribute to this problem. The word ticket keeps the tongue in an appropriate position to execute a very small rocking motion between the T and K syllables. This concept is helpful
when learning to double tongue, especially in the palm key register.

For quicker results, students should first try double tonguing using isolated notes in the middle to lower register of the saxophone. One possible exercise is to begin with open C# and then progress lower, by half step. There will come a point at which the articulation and tone lack definition. Make a note of what note this is, return to open C#, and progress higher by half steps until the articulation and tone lack definition. With time and practice, the range will expand.

First, strive to strengthen the kIH syllable. The following exercises are designed to help saxophonists equalize the tone of the kIH and the tIH syllables. Transpose the following single-note articulation patterns to all notes of the saxophone, and practice these exercises with a variety of dynamic levels.
Students can also practice using the uneven rhythms to create an even quality of sound between the tIH and kIH syllables. Although articulation is being practiced, the emphasis should still be on playing with a good sound. In the following exercises, it may be beneficial to practice the alternation of syllables both using TKTKT as well as KTKTK. This
strategy will further strengthen the K syllable.
When attempting to develop speed, begin with just a few isolated notes and gradually increase the number of repetitions. Transpose these exercises in half steps to all of the notes on the saxophone, beginning with open C#. Use a metronome to maintain a steady pulse and measure progress.

The next steps are to add double tonguing to short scalar patterns and then to entire scales. This will help develop finger-tongue coordination and speed. To
improve sound quality while developing double tonguing, first practice a given pattern slurred, then repeat the pattern with articulation. Practicing this way will help saxophonists focus on maintaining a steady and smooth air flow and tonal support. Ideally the tone quality of the articulated passage should match the tone quality of the slurred passage.
Each saxophonist should start these exercises at an appropriate tempo, which may vary from one student to the next, and gradually increase the tempo in reasonable increments while allowing considerable time for drill. Although such exercises may seem pedantic, students should strive to make each exercise sound musical. Exercises are a means to an end, which is to become a musician who has effortless technique. Daily, thoughtful practice with patience combined with intelligence will yield fruitful results.

*Eric Nestler is the professor of saxophone at the University of North Texas.*

**Griffin Campbell**

Double tonguing has become an essential technique for modern saxophonists. To create the articulation needed for this concept I first experimented with using the middle of the tongue to create the second syllable of the double tongue. With experimentation I have found that the back of the tongue works better to create the second half of the articulation.
When teaching this concept I have found that various exercises for flute provide a good foundation from which double tonguing can be developed and expanded upon. Almost any basic flute book will include exercises for double and triple tonguing, many of which use scales and arpeggios. Such exercises are based on familiar note passages so that tonguing can be the focus of the exercise. Although flute exercises are usually the most conducive for this type of articulation, any exercise can be creatively adapted for saxophone double tonguing.

Griffin Campbell is professor of saxophone at Louisiana State University.

Christian Forshaw
I had always assumed it was impossible for saxophonists to double tongue because the saxophone mouthpiece entered the mouth, unlike brass players and flautists. My motive for learning to double tongue was that as a student I developed a fear that my single tonguing was not fast enough. Every time I was employed by an ensemble there was always a concern that I would be presented with rapid
articulation passages that I couldn’t keep up with. One day of course my fear became a reality, and a piece was given to me consisting of twelve pages of tongued sixteenth notes at $q = 138$. My single tonguing was struggling to maintain pace for that length of time, so I was in trouble. Over the next few days I managed to produce an unrefined double tonguing articulation.

Since then double tonguing has taught me a lot about many aspects of playing, not just about rapid articulation. Most of the problems I have witnessed regarding saxophone playing stem from tension in the mouth, tongue, and throat, and double tonguing immediately highlights any problems in these areas resulting in a clipped, uneven, and blocked up articulation with many split and broken notes. Some of the problems caused by mouth tension are poor and inconsistent articulation, tightness and lack of resonance in the sound, and difficulty playing lower register notes. This tension has a number of causes, but the likely culprits are a weak, uneven, misdirected airstream or a set-up that results in too much back pressure.

When students begin to double tongue, the movement is usually far too big, with da and ga too close together in the mouth, creating more of a tu and ku. This often causes the second articulation to break or become extremely clipped and heavy sounding. It also makes double tonguing impossible on higher notes. I began to realize that this was because of the ku action disturbing the position of the back of the tongue, which should normally be in a specific arch in
order for the air speed and direction to be consistent, enabling the high notes to speak correctly. If the arch moves or is disturbed then the high notes cannot speak.

I encourage students to push the da and ga as far away from each other as possible, which means forming a ga with the glottis rather than a ku with the back of the tongue, and that the tu or da is a light action at the very front of the mouth. This aids general sound production in a number of ways by highlighting any problems in air pressure, air direction, and choice of setup. If the air pressure is weak or inconsistent then there will be a delay as the tongue and glottis release. Students then begin to understand exactly how much pressure is required as a constant during playing. The sensation of the articulated notes bouncing lightly on the air stream leads to vast improvements in general air support.

If the air is shooting up towards the top of the mouth, the glottal release will cause the notes to leap up the octave or find an even higher harmonic. If the air is shooting down and forward towards the front of the mouth then the notes will not break and many concerns about intonation and poor quality of sound are resolved.

If the mouthpiece or reed choice are too heavy then there will be too much weight put on the inside of the mouth. If they are too soft then it is impossible to build up sufficient air pressure to trigger double tonguing, which can only work efficiently when the right balance of set up is achieved. This facilitates
playing in every area.

Resolving the above problems leads to a much greater freedom when playing, releasing the body from tension in order to achieve a deeper breadth of expression. The big irony for me was that having developed a double tonguing facility, my single tonguing became much faster and more efficient. Although I chalked this up to a general reduction in anxiety about articulation, improving the three factors mentioned above helped to facilitate this.

Christian Forshaw is professor of saxophone at Guildhall School of Music and Drama in London. He is also the founder of The Sanctuary Ensemble.

A multitude of techniques exist to perform this technique on the saxophone. Exploration of which aspects produce the best results will allow saxophonists to develop this technique as a staple of modern performance.