Saxophone Vibrato

John Talcott 5/3/16

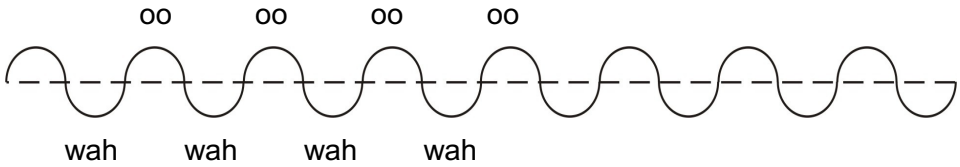
Vibrato is the name given to the pulsating sound that singers, string players, and other instrumentalists produce to add richness and expression to an otherwise straight, pure tone from their instruments.

The vibrato used on the saxophone is the same as that used on the jazz clarinet. It is called a “jaw vibrato” which is sometimes confused with the “lip vibrato”.

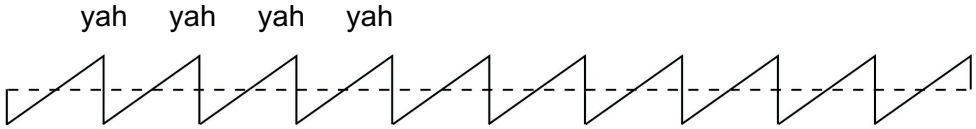
Steps to learn to produce a jaw vibrato:

1. Place the top of the right hand under the jaw and say “wah-oo-wah-oo-wah-oo-wah-oo”.
2. Feel the jaw move up and down (not forward and back) about 1/4" each cycle.
3. Play a first finger B on the saxophone moving the jaw up and down in this manner.
4. Keep the bottom lip in contact with the reed, and keep the air moving.
5. Exaggerate the waves at first. It will sound very unmusical at this point.

Picture the sound as smooth “rolling waves”.



It should not sound jerky like a “nanny goat vibrato”. Players who do vibrato too fast too soon generally end up with a vibrato that sounds like this. It is important to be patient and follow the directions below.



To learn to play vibrato smoothly up to speed, play the Bb concert scale in whole notes ascending and descending at mm=60.

Week 1 Put 1 “wah-oo” cycle per beat. Exaggerate the movement. Work to make it smooth.
Week 2 Put 2 “wah-oo” cycles per beat. Continue to exaggerate the movement.
Week 3 Put 3 “wah-oo” cycles per beat. Move the jaw up and down at the same rate.
Week 4 Put 4 “wah-oo” cycles per beat. The distance moved is less as the speed increases.
Week 5 Put 5 “wah-oo” cycles per beat. As the speed increases the vibrato will refine itself.
Week 6 Put 6 “wah-oo” cycles per beat. This is the fastest the vibrato should ever need to go.

A trick to feel 5 to a beat is to think u-ni-ver-si-ty, u-ni-ver-si-ty. If fives are too difficult, an other way to practice that speed is to move to mm = 75 and do 4 pulses per beat. If sixes are too difficult, 4 pulses per beat at mm = 90 will produce the same speed of vibrato. Most saxophonists nowadays perform vibrato somewhere around 5 to 6 pulses per beat at mm = 60.

Important: In actual musical performance vibrato is never played this “mechanically”. These exercises are meant to gain control of the vibrato at various speeds. The best way to learn to play with vibrato musically is to listen to and play along with great artists such as Eugene Rousseau, and Paul Brodie. “The Swan” from “Carnival of the Animals” is an excellent slow piece to work on a vibrato. This link is to a video of Paul Brodie playing Debussy’s “The Swan”.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=knr-Mkm6b5o