



# Studying the Altissimo

— James Nightingale

To continue the discussion started by Peter Rickard in the last issue of *Australian Clarinet and Saxophone*, I would like to introduce Dr John Sampen, who is the Distinguished Artist Professor at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. Dr Sampen is one of America's leading concert saxophonists and is particularly recognised as a performer of contemporary music. He has recorded with Belgian and Swiss National Radio and is represented on the Orion, Albany and Capstone record labels. In addition to contemporary literature, Sampen regularly performs traditional saxophone repertoire in recital with pianist/composer Marilyn Shrude. He holds degrees from Northwestern University and has studied with Frederick Hemke, Donald Sinta and Larry Teal. He is an active member of the North American Saxophone Alliance, of which he has held the post of President.

## Prerequisites

- 1) Secure a mature embouchure with consistent control of traditional range and a centred tone on palm keys and front high E and F.
- 2) Acquire a personal knowledge of throat/tongue position and its relationship to tone and pitch.
- 3) Mentally prepare for a long-term learning project—security in the high register generally requires years of experience and work.

## Beginnings

- 1) Finger front F and practice adding side Bb to secure a high F# pitch (without using high F# key). If there are problems, adjust tone/quality and support for high F. Always use this note as a tonal measuring guide. Most problems in the higher range can be corrected with the proper production of high F.
- 2) For problem solving, experiment with the following: a) tongue location (high/low or back/forward), b) arch of tongue (usually a higher arched tongue for altissimo), c) air direction (high or low), air focus.
- 3) Relate desired tone to pre-imagined pitch. Practice singing the tone before attempting

- to play.
- 4) Experiment with varied fingering possibilities (as shown in this list) and isolate successful choices. Gradually expand range and personal adaptations.
- 5) Immediately work into literature (e.g., Creston *Sonata*, Hartley *Duo*, Tull *Sarabande and Gigue*). Prepare for initial performance failures – this range demands extreme experience and confidence.

## Secondary Option

If unsuccessful at this point, start “overtone” studies (e.g., bugle calls) to help condition throat/tongue placement. Such study may also be useful for advanced students who need additional security. Studies of traditional “top tone” books may be useful (e.g., Lang *Beginning Studies In the Altissimo Register*, Londeix *Hello Mr. Sax*, Nash *Studies In High Harmonics*, Rascher *Top-tones*, Rossi *Altissimo Repertoire Etudes*, Rousseau *Saxophone High Tones*, Sinta *Voicing*).

## Additional Suggestions

- 1) Generally a positive and optimistic attitude produces the best results. It is helpful to take an analytical approach in “diagnosing” the problematic conditions (e.g., when an

altissimo note is missed, did it “squeak” too high or too low?) Such information helps define a throat/tongue strategy for correcting the problem.

2) Engage in short altissimo sessions, usually near the end of a practice session to help save the lip.

3) Playing along with the teacher/friend often seems to encourage successful results.

4) Never consider altissimo playing as impossible or difficult; this is a long-term learnable skill. If possible, start the learning process in high school—younger students are more adaptable to the necessary physical adaptations of the altissimo range.

— Dr. John Sampen

## Key to fingering chart

Most notations are quite obvious, but the exceptions are:

- C1 = High D key
- C2 = High E flat key
- C3 = High E key
- C4 = High F key
- C5 = High F sharp key
- x = Front key (above the first L.Hand finger)
- a = Side B flat key
- c = Side C trill key
- f = Side F sharp trill key
- C = low C key
- 8ve = octave key

The fingering chart has been adapted from Dr Sampen's extensive list by James Nightingale. We have not included suggestions above Double High D#, but if you would like a copy of the complete list, either contact James: (email <jwnightingale @primus.com.au>) or Dr Sampen (email <jsampen@bgnet. bgsu.edu>) directly.