

# Interview with the Legendary Marcel Mule

## on the History of Saxophone Vibrato

Marcel Mule was born on the 24th of June, 1901 in Aube, a small town in Normandy, 80 miles from Paris. Young Marcel was educated in the conventional academic manner of the time and was expecting to pursue a teaching career.

The First World War disrupted his musical studies and in 1921 he was called to serve in the Fifth Infantry, which necessitated a move to Paris. After military service, he joined La Musique de la Garde de Republicaine and in the ensuing years, along with his freelance career forged the sound and style which was to greatly influence generations of saxophonists to come.

This was greatly facilitated through his being the first saxophone professor at the Paris Conservatoire since Adolphe Sax left in 1870. He taught at the Conservatoire for 25 years.

### HISTORY OF THE VIBRATO ON SAXOPHONE

*Marcel MULE interviewed by  
Claude DELANGLE*

Claude Delangle: I do like very much to visit you almost every year, but if today I take a few notes, it is because the students at the Conservatoire (Paris) have requested me to do so. They told me: "You know Marcel Mule very well, we don't!"

My purpose here is to transmit a heritage. You have often talked to me about the circumstances which led you to use vibrato on the saxophone. Could you recall them here in a chronological way?

Marcel Mule: All starts with jazz because in the early twenties when I arrived in Paris, I heard jazz orchestras. I was very surprised and even scandalised to discover rather bizarre saxophonists, goat sounds, a sort of vibration. I remember a tall devil who was at the Folies Bergères and who did not seem to know the notes, he blew in a soprano sax, it was enormous. I was a bit scandalised.

On the other hand, I had to get into jazz because it was a rewarding income. As I was a soldier at that

time, it brought a little well-being to my normal financial circumstances. Therefore, little by little I was led to belong to jazz orchestras, for replacements. I would do anything.

But I have never abandoned the depth of my acquired sound which had been taught to me by my father who was a very good saxophonist of the old school. He was very artistic, a great musician and he played that instrument very well. Thus I had benefited from the first principles that he communicated to me.

Between the ages of 13 to 20, I only practised as an amateur because my father wanted me to be a schoolteacher. I worked as a schoolteacher for seven months after which I went to Paris to start military service. At that time I was able to choose a regiment which included military music. While being part of the music unit, I was able to meet students of the Conservatoire where there was evidently no saxophone tuition (1923). There were among them some very good musicians and I started to play with orchestras. It was laborious because one had to be entirely free. I had only small parts, from place to place, but I had acquired a sound for jazz orchestras

with the craftsmanship of the time. Little by little, I succeeded in finding the undulating vibrato favoured in jazz. I was considered as a good jazz instrumentalist. The choruses (solos) were limited enough. I did some but I was not a "king of the choruses." I did not particularly like that.

On the other hand, I had a certain success with the sonority that I had acquired and after two or three years, I was already part of the Garde. I belonged to the orchestra of the 'Ritz', conducted by a black man. He had quickly accepted me and considered me as a remarkable element; he took great care of me. He liked what I did and I improved that sound.

In those times, one would play melodic works, some of the American Irving Berlin, some bostons and slows which we called blues. {Boston: A slow type of waltz, also called Valse Boston, coming into vogue in American Ballrooms circa 1910. Compared with the ordinary waltz it has a certain complexity of rhythm and accompaniment which later allied it to jazz. From Everyman's Dictionary of Music, Eric Blom} There were ample opportunities to demonstrate sonorities and I was known in that milieu.

I continued to play at the Garde without any undulation in the sound.

C.D. Would it have been allowed?

M.M.: Yes, maybe, but I did not try. I did not really get the opportunity.

I entered the Garde in 1923. I became a soloist almost immediately as I replaced François Combelle, who was the father of Alix Combelle. I was invited to his place and it was he who advised me to apply for the Garde. I auditioned and my success came as a surprise as no one knew me. I was then judged as an interesting soloist, I would even almost say remarkable. It was said that I played perfectly, all my interventions were approved.

Years passed, but at the Garde I did not change anything.

I played with the Opera-Comique (orchestra). At that time there was only Werther, {an opera by Massenet which used saxophone} at least once a month, perhaps even more. I also played with other orchestras — Colonne, Padeloup, Lamoureux and the Société des Concerts, almost everywhere. I was the official saxophonist outside jazz while playing in a different way. It was something else, without vibrato.

In 1928, at the Opéra-Comique, a ballet was written by a good musician, a pianist who knew me as a Jazz saxophonist. He wrote "fox trots," one blues and other dances which were in vogue at the time and of which I have forgotten the names. In the blues, he had written a very expressive solo for the saxophone. I immediately formed an opinion about it. I knew him but notwithstanding that, we had not had an opportunity to talk about it. During the rehearsal, I played as I do normally, as if I had played Werther, not any other way. Then he said to me: "I have written very expressive, that means with vibrato".

I said to him: "but here we are not used to play like that, this is a symphony orchestra, not a "jazz orchestra".

- "It does not matter, just play like you do normally in jazz."

- " very well but it will be your responsibility" and I thought it would lead to a scandal.

And I played that phrase, moderately and it pleased him. The musicians were impressed, I heard pleasing remarks. Some believed that that it was a new player. It was not the same fellow who played! Although I feared a scandal, it had been a success. And the colleagues from the Garde who were behind me said: " You should play like that at the Garde." But I told them that it was impossible, it was not the same style of music.

But it made me think and while moderating it a bit, progressively, I have utilised vibrato elsewhere. I played Ravel's bolero like that.

C.D.: And in the "Vieux Chateau"

M.M.: No, the "Vieux Chateau" I played with several conductors without vibrato, it is only at the end that I played it with vibrato. Then, little by little I started using it at the Garde and it was a total enthusiasm. I changed completely my way of playing from the point of view of expressivity; I thought I was expressive but I was not convinced, because you have to bear in mind that at the time there were flautists like Moysé and others who played in a classical way.

C.D.: Would the horn players use vibrato?

MM: At the Opera, Defame and Violet used vibrato also.

C.D.: For them it was not influenced by jazz?

M.M.: Not at all, It was the need for expression. There were oboists who used vibrato. There was one at the Garde, whose sound was perfectly undulating, it was very beautiful, another at the Lamoureux Orchestra but really, most oboists played still with a straight sound, giving all their passion, if I dare say, in their interpretation and on the point of view of emotion, they were nearer to the strings.

As far as I was concerned there was still a lot of work to do. But I managed to impose myself like that. I was considered as one of the greatest soloists in Paris; each time I

played it was terrific, it was curious. This transformation happened, a total change; I think that it was a formidable evolution. And what is curious is that this ballet, a dance suite at the Opéra-Comique was named "Evolution"!

For years, I have analysed that and I have received an enormous amount of letters from musicians who wanted to play as I did and I was really obliged to explain.

C.D.: And how did you explain?

M.M.: I have discovered that what I was doing corresponded to a certain speed, which I have codified so to speak. I suggested to them to work that on held notes evidently and to apply that later to phrases, notably in the studies of Ferling which have been a marvellous instrument of expression and which have to remain as such because they are relatively simple formulas but they can prepare for any sort of phrasing. I realised that when I would teach that, I also learned. I have learned a lot with the students.

I have imposed that with authority, being convinced of what I was doing and imposing that to students who were eager to be convinced as they agreed with me. At the Garde also, there were a few who were not convinced when I imposed that, but most of them approved. I was considered as Paris' greatest soloist, simply because of that! The saxophone was revealed owing to that.

I imposed something that I would continue to impose if I would still teach, that is, that the normal correct speed is around 300 undulations for a minute. Considering that the vibrato is made of a high note and a note a little flatter, it is necessary to lower a little, not too much, and at a certain speed. I taught to play a note without vibrato, then with a lower note with the same fingering and same embouchure. Then I suggested acceleration and an undulation occurred for work at 300 undulations per minute. This is how work starts, without being a prisoner to counting. Setting the metronome at 75 gives four vibrations per beat. If one sets it at 100, it gives 3 vibra-

tions, if one sets it at 150, it will be 2 vibrations. If one sets it at 60, it is a little more difficult, that would give 5 vibrations. But one can reach this result quite well. I advised them to work in that way and to apply it to melodic lines and to always control the speed so that it would not be excessive either way and definitely not to drop under lest one would get the "oua oua" (wa wa) that one hears sometimes with some instrumentalists and with some singers mainly in bass voices.

I have known instrumentalists, a flautist in particular who played marvellously, in a very supple way and he was very surprised that one would practise vibrato with a metronome.

It is true, why with a metronome, that appears aberrant! I imposed a speed and found myself facing peculiar cases at the Conservatoire:

a student who played not badly at all but, in my opinion, set a too tight vibrato and it was with difficulty that I would get him to play at a slower pace. When he had achieved it, it was magnificent and when it happened I would always ask the other students: "it is good: why?"

It was my point of view and in fact I have not changed since experience proved that it was successful. From then on, the instrument was recognised by many.

Then, why is it me who brought all that?

Being a soloist at the Garde, when a soloist was wanted in an orchestra, I was always chosen and I imposed that. I had the merit of maybe analysing that fact. I have known and I know still many people who had a remarkable sound but they did not know how they produced it, they were unable to notate

what they were doing. They did not think about it. On the other hand, I have read, years ago, in a method of my violinist granddaughter, Nathalie, that vibrato work is codified. As for speed, it varies a little, but not that much.

There is the story, what has made the success of the instrument, its eloquence, to be a voice!

The first time that I played Ibert's Concertino, it was on Radio, with a conductor who directed the orchestra, René Baton. He told me: "it is curious, it sounds like a female voice, a soprano voice." He heard it as such and it pleased me because that was what I intended. I have been lucky to control it and not be wrong.

C.D.: It was general approbation.

M.M.: General approbation. It was an incredible success! Amongst the composers: Darius Milhaud - I

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-- Mark Walton

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have played a lot with him - Jacques Ibert used the *Larghetto* one day for the beginning of a film sequence. It was necessary to be very cautious, he wanted a certain colour and an undulation as well.

I played this several times and I could feel that he searched for a certain timbre. We got there eventually. It was magnificent and he told me: "It really moves me", I will always remember that. That was how he conceived the instrument.

In the "Chevalier Errant," he gave a very important part to the instrument with a very expressive phrase, two small very eloquent cadenzas as well. The first time that we played that at the Opera, after the announcement of the composer, a colleague added "...and the solos were composed by Marcel Mule!" That tells you the importance it had.

The same evening, the violin soloist at the time, Henri Merckel came to congratulate me. That demonstrates the approbation that I encountered. Other musicians as the oboe player, a member of *Orchestre National*, said: "so, are you going to give us a lesson today?" That tells you the impact the instrument had! This reputation went over the borders, it was inevitable; I have played in Switzerland, in Germany just before the war, in England, in Holland...

I would like to revert to the story of Jacques Ibert with Sigurd Rascher. Someone wrote in the magazine of the ASSAFRA, letting believe that I was jealous of Sigurd Rascher. As if I would be jealous of him! I did not allow myself to tell them that it was an error. In fact he enquired about me recently. I had been on a jury panel with him in Geneva in 1970 where we had a little misunderstanding. But I am not jealous of him and he is not jealous of me.

He astonished Ibert with his high pitched notes. I made his acquaintance in 1932 at an audition at the Russian Society. We played the Quartet of Glazunov and he introduced himself, he was professor in Copenhagen at that time: "I played saxophone on four octaves!" I had the opportunity to hear him after-

wards and I understood.... Jacques Ibert was indeed astonished.

Jacques Ibert was astonished by the high pitched notes but he changed his mind about it. He came to tell me one day that he had written a concerto. I had heard the first movement *Larghetto* and said: "you climb rather high, it is not quite my sphere at the moment." He told me "but I do not really want it." I played the *Larghetto* like that and I declared in Geneva that Jacques Ibert preferred it like that.

C.D.: How did you learn to play the saxophone?

M.M.: I did not learn the saxophone alone. I received considerable influences. I learned the saxophone with my father, he gave me the first good principles. He had a certain artistic sense: he made me sing on the instrument but sing without expression. It was a contained expression, one had it in oneself but others did not hear it, which is where the difference is. Whereas there, with the vibrato, everyone enjoys it, only it has to be handled with elegance and a serious dosage. One has to know how to do it.

C.D.: What sort of tuition did your father get?

M.M.: He socialised with musicians of the military band, that is all. Suburban teachers had helped at the beginning then he worked by himself.

C.D.: Did other people teach you the saxophone?

M.M.: No, but from age 9, I played the violin and my provincial teacher gave me a good start. When I came to Paris, I was lucky enough to work with a great violinist who taught me a lot about interpretation.

C.D.: And you have transferred your technique on the saxophone.

M.M.: I was tempted to do as much on the saxophone evidently. I played the violin as warmly as possible, but with the saxophone it was considered that it did not work. On the other hand, when I would hear the oboist I told you about earlier, I marvelled at the sound he produced.

C.D.: Saxophone was played

without vibrato but did oboists and flautists use vibrato?

M.M.: Only two or three oboists would vibrate: before Moyse, Philippe Gaubert, a really great flautist had a very warm sound but did not use vibrato. I have known many flautists like that who played remarkably. Lavallote at the Opera had a pleasing sound but it was not the same emotion as certain others heard around 1925, for example: Cortet, Crunelle and others like Dufresne at the *Orchestre National*. There were very expressive instrumentalists and others who tried, notably a cor anglais which would give stomachaches!

C.D.: A method for the saxophone advocates a knee vibrato...

M.M.: It was Viard, one of my competitors at the time. He was an occasional saxophone player. He played with a knee. When he played soprano, it was very complicated; he played the soprano stuck on the alto! But he had a certain reputation. One day, he played the Rhapsody of Debussy,. It was not a great success! I had neglected all of that for a long time...

He used to come to the STRARAM concerts. It was an association founded by a choral conductor from the Opera whose name was Straram. He offered himself an orchestra owing to his marriage to a very rich woman. That allowed him to step out of obscurity as orchestra conductor. He had recruited the best players of Paris to regroup them in his orchestra. It is also what Münch did later on.

Viard was there but his activity as soloist had not been a success. I took over but left soon after. I worked a lot on films at that time and my quartet had many concerts. I played everywhere.

C.D.: Which of your activities seems today, to have been the most important?

M.M.: It is teaching at the Conservatoire which has given a considerable scope to the instrument. Bichon told me that there are 150 saxophone teachers in France today!

C.D.: Tell us about the quartet.

M.M.: The Quartet was created in 1929 at the initiative of Georges Chauvet whose help has been invaluable in the foundation and during the life of this group. He was the secretary and has accomplished an immense task - including the copying of transcriptions-he had taken this venture to heart. He played baritone. At the beginning, when we talked about it, he said, "we will have the opportunity to play together", and when he saw how successful it became, that it became serious, he worked in earnest.

The quartet underwent some transformations. We did not like much one of the elements of the Garde, it was insufficient! We let him go and another quit out of solidarity. A split happened.

Two other elements joined us: one, named Lhomme, was from the Garde. The other was Paul Romby. Romby started at the Garde in 1934 but it did not really suit him. He had a rather bizarre job. He worked very well in the quartet. We were limited in our touring because we belonged

to the Garde.

In 1936, when for multiple reasons I left the Garde, Romby followed me, Chauvet left because he had reached retirement age and we replaced Lhomme with Charron. We called ourselves the "Quatuor de Saxophones de Paris".

Before Gourdet there were Bauchy and Josse.

Then many changes took place. Gourdet came; he introduced almost all concerts, he was a remarkable lecturer, and we changed our name and became known as "Quatuor Marcel Mule."

The quartet has rendered enormous service to the saxophone. When we dared to play a quartet of Mozart, for example the "dissonances quartet" it was rather crazy but we had so little to play. And we were judged through that! Afterwards we obtained some repertoire but we had more success playing Mozart.

We played everywhere in Italy. Evidently we had no repertoire, only the Glazunov, it was no fun. But we managed. We acquired a few little pieces from Pierné, Absil, Jean Rivier,

Pierre Vellones and others: there was only a limited repertoire.

In those times, there were still composers, real good musicians and they wrote really well. We could play them and they were accepted by the public. As for now....

C.D.: I own a recording of "Bolero" conducted by Ravel, were you there?

M.M.: I have played with Ravel in concert but I do not remember having played with him for a recording. I have played for the first hearing of Bolero at the Opera for the ballets of Ida Rubinstein under the direction of Straram but I believe it was in 1929.

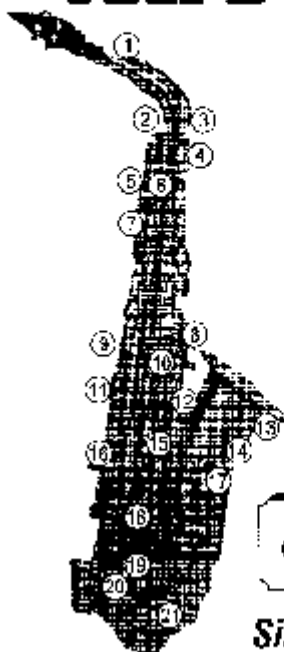
C.D.: Did Ravel particularly like the saxophone?

M.M.: Very much so. But we were not able to have a contact with him, he did not say anything, he was a rather secretive man but he had us in good esteem.

C.D.: Did he hear your Quartet?

M.M.: Yes, I had arranged some of his songs, some of his melodies to attract his attention. He had heard them and had decided to write something but he fell ill. Nobody had

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a real contact with him. He would ascend the podium but it did not amuse him.

C.D.: He was very demanding about tempi. He went to see Toscanini in his dressing-room to tell him: "Sir, your tempo is totally wrong."

M.M.: Oh yes, Toscanini seldom erred but there he was wrong. He had wanted to "interpret" that. He used accelerandos. It was not what was wanted.

The ballet presented a dancer who performed evolutions on the stage. At each new intervention of an instrument, a new dancer entered and it finished with an enormous crowd on the stage of the Opera. It was impressive.

C.D.: Did you play with him in his version of the "Pictures at an Exhibition"?

M.M.: No, I have played that around 1925 with a conductor named Emile Cooper, then with Monteux who played that a bit too fast to my taste.

C.D.: If you agree, let us talk a little about the material with which you have played. In the years 1925-1930, what were your mouthpieces?

M.M.: The old mouthpieces, with a large bore and rather resistant reeds with slight open lays. There were mouthpieces with little bores, metal mouthpieces.

C.D.: Were these mouthpieces in ebonite or in wood?

M.M.: In wood, then we got ebonite mouth-pieces at Selmer's, then they created the metal mouthpiece with which I played for a long time. I played the Selmer instrument in 1923. Afterwards, I played the Couesnon around 1928. The tester at Couesnon fell ill, it was Mayeur, a clarinetist who played saxophone for the ballets at the Opera. I was then engaged by Couesnon to replace him and as the instrument was not in good condition, I continued to play the Selmer instrument for a while but the director asked me to design a model that I could play. The whole programme of manufacture was rethought but it was not easy because one always encounters obstacles when innovations are oc-

curing in a company.

They sold a good deal of them. The foreman was a bit of a saxophonist and a bit of a clarinetist. It was not easy to perform tests. After a year, we managed to offer an alto which was successful and that I played for 18 years, up to 1948. After which I moved to Selmer's.

C.D.: For which reason did you leave Couesnon?

M.M.: I was not really satisfied with what Couesnon did at a time when I received more interesting offers from Selmer, there were perspectives, I turned towards the best working situation.

C.D.: How did it work at Selmer's?

M.M.: This was also laborious. We had to deal with a factory director in Mantes, Lefevre (his son took over). This Mr. Lefevre, very competent, did not like transformations and yet it was necessary to progress to maintain production. We managed to transform things little by little.

The Selmer company has developed considerably. It is a very well run business. There has been progress for sure, but it was not always as I wanted it. Nouaux afterwards managed a few more improvements. It is a domain in which one must always get better.

C.D.: And at the Conservatoire, would your students give you worries?

M.M.: I have not had any problem. I do not recall people who did not practise. I attached an enormous importance to sound.

It is true for all instruments, for all voices. These 300 undulations per minute, I control them each time I hear a good voice. Many women sing marvellously, more so than men. There are extraordinary female voices.

Take two musicians: one has a sound as I conceive it and the other has the faults of which I often speak; you make them perform in front of anyone and you make that person choose.

I bet that it is the first one who will be chosen, it is human. It is a natural satisfaction of the ear.

As I said in Gap during an exchange of views with Londeix: I consider that an "auditive enjoyment" may be more important than a visual enjoyment. When one is facing very beautiful scenery or a marvellous painting, one gets a shock. However, it does not give me the same physical satisfaction than the one given by a voice or an instrument of which the sound is very moving.

As for flautists, it is the same thing, one hears some remarkable ones. There were remarkable horn players in France but it had been decided that vibrato was part of an out of date romanticism. I have heard that on radio. Some horn sounds lingered in my ears, from Thevet for instance. Originally there was Devemy who produced emotion in the horn and he has taught many students.

C.D.: It is true, nowadays no horn player vibrates. Oboists, flautists and bassoonists vibrate, clarinetists not at all or very little, trumpet players very little, horn players not at all. For you, is this linked to fashions, habits, taste?

M.M.: It is mainly linked to tuition. I remember that in my class, all students had more or less the same sound.

C.D.: Did you give many examples?

M.M.: Yes, of course, and I would show them often how I played before. It made them laugh and they were right!

C.D.: Did you give long examples?

M.M.: No, it was in details mainly.

C.D.: Did you encounter major basic technical faults with some students?

M.M.: No, I did not encounter problems with students who had been taught by my former students who had become teachers. I was already lucky to have an assistant. I have had the help of your old teacher Mr. Bichon who is remarkable, you have been one of his first students. He worked a lot in the region of the Rhone-Alps, he was very dedicated to his students.

C.D.: Who are the personalities

who have influenced your career?

M.M.: Toscanini, he was a person-age. I never played with him but I saw him conduct. It was special. With rigour he obtained the maximum. He demanded what he had under his eyes so to speak, although he was almost blind. There was a limpidity, a clarity in his performances that others could not obtain and one wonders why. It is a mystery. He had a very strong will. Many said about him: "with him, one does not play as one plays with the others." He was very demanding. He had an enormous influence.

C.D.: In 1989, when we researched your teaching at the Conservatoire, we realised that Claude Delvincourt had been a very important personage in French musical life.

M.M.: Very much so! Mainly for us because it is owing to him that we have had a saxophone class. He was director of the Versailles Conservatoire and I had been every year on the examination panel of the saxophone class during Marcel Josse's tenure

and he often said: "when will a saxophone class be established in Paris?". Rabaud was director in Paris at that time; he liked very much what we did with saxophone and was prone to say that "if we had funding we could create this class immediately". But he was unable to do it.

As Delvincourt became director, I asked for an appointment two months after he took up the post (1941) and he told me straight away "I know why you are here, do not worry. It is the first thing I will do". And he kept to his word, he established the saxophone class, as well as other classes, for instance the percussion class.

He was well regarded in the political spheres; it was during the war and he has been able to benefit from the help of Cortot who was minister for the arts in the Pétain Government -for which he was blamed of course - but he did a lot of good owing to his personality;

he imposed many of his views as a musician.

I went to see him; I had often played with him, notably the rhapsody of Delannoy with Jacques Fournier at the cello. He took this to heart and we had worked seriously, it was interesting. He conducted from time to time, the Symphonic Orchestra of Paris so I knew him well.

I had been advised to go and see him about the saxophone class. I would not be surprised if he helped for its creation. And so it was for the percussion class; Passerone, the percussion teacher saw him. The presence of Cortot was not negligible but it was Delvincourt who submitted this creation project.

C.D.: Claude Delvincourt was very enterprising.

M.M.: Yes, it was said that he had a great idea per day! It was maybe true but he had no one to put some order in these ideas. He was not helped as he should have been. He was a remarkable man, very pleasant

This interview first appeared in the November, 1994 issue of APES (International Association for the Development of the Saxophone) and was translated for Australian Clarinet and Saxophone by Huguette Brassine, Senior Lecturer, Queensland Conservatorium. We are grateful to Ms. Brassine for making this interview available in English.

## From the World Wide Web

Here are some musical sites on the Internet which should be of interest to our readers:

<http://home.netvigator.com/~coco/lugard.htm>

An extensive list of Wind Quintet Repertoire

<http://www.zeta.org.au/~dvolkmer/tuneit.html>

Musical instrument tuning software for Windows. Shareware cost: \$20.00

<http://www.clarinet.org>

International Clarinet Association Official Website

<http://www.teleport.com/~jdumars>

The International Saxophone Home Page

<http://www.sneezy.org/OCR/>

The On-line Clarinet Resource - articles, reviews, brief lessons

<http://www.jdhite.com>

The J&D Hite Site for Clarinet and Saxophone Players

<http://www.geocities.com/BourbonStreet/1389/>

Sax on the Web pages - Harri Rautiainen's Saxophone Page

<http://www.morsax.com>

Victor Morosco's Home Page

<http://www.next.com.au/amc/>

The Australian Music Centre - everything to do with Australian music and composers. The entire catalogue is on-line.

<http://www.en.com/users/cassara/clarinet/>

The Jazz Clarinet home page

<http://www.yeodoug.com/>

Douglas Yeo Trombone Home Page. Bass Trombonist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Click on "articles" and you will find some good advice regarding preparation and execution of auditions, which is equally relevant to

all instruments.