

WRITING MUSIC FOR SAXOPHONES

This is a short information sheet for musicians who wish to create clear, easy to read music for the saxophone. It is based upon my experiences as a jazz saxophone player and the common mistakes that people make when setting out their parts. It covers the basics such as range, transposition, blending, use of altissimo etc.

TRANSPOSITION

This section is a brief introduction to the concept of transposition. If you already understand how transposing instruments work in principal then please skip to the section entitled 'range' where you can see how to put this information in to practice for particular saxophones.

Most saxophones are transposing instruments. This means that the note 'C' on the saxophone does not sound at the same pitch as 'C' on the piano. The common keys which saxophones are made in are B flat (which includes tenor and soprano as well as less common bass and soprillo saxophones) and E flat (alto and baritone, as well as contra bass and soprano). There are also 'C melody' saxophones, which are made at concert pitch and do not require transposition, however these are less common.

When a saxophonist plays a C on a B flat saxophone such as the tenor, the note that comes out sounds at the same pitch as concert B flat (B flat on the piano). Similarly, on an E flat saxophone such as the alto, a C comes out at the same pitch as concert E flat. On a B flat saxophone all the note letter names are one tone higher than they would be on the piano (i.e. C on the piano is D on the sax, G on the piano is A on the sax and so on), and on an E flat saxophone all the note letter names are one minor third lower than they would be on the piano (i.e. C on the piano is A on the sax, G on the piano is E on the sax, etc.).

Range

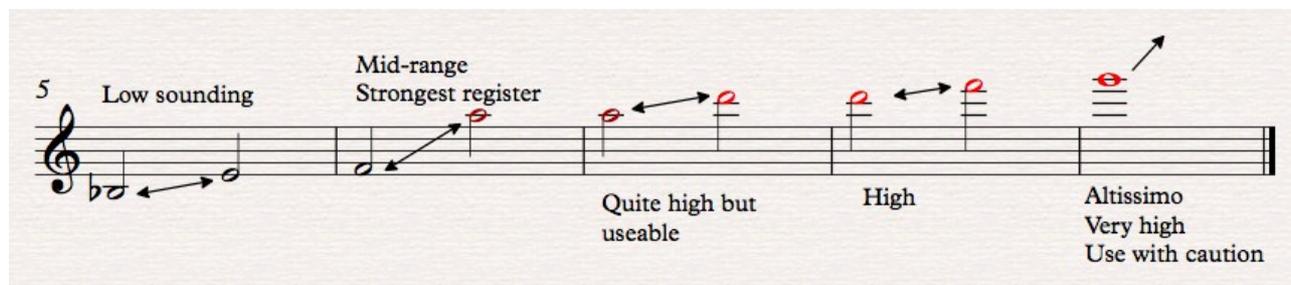
The previous section explained the basics of transposition. However when putting this in to practice it is important to consider the range of the saxophone you are writing for. If you have composed a melodic line on the piano and wish to write it out for a saxophone player to play, it is not as simple as writing the line down at the pitch you composed it at on the piano and shifting everything up a tone for a B flat sax or down a minor third for an E flat sax.

The written range for all saxophones is the same. All saxophones read in treble clef, and their written range extends from B flat below the staff to F above the staff (although some saxophones have a key for F# above this or even G, and the range can be extended through use of altissimo). Because saxophonists are used to reading the same written range on all saxophones, it is up to the person writing the score to make allowances for the differing pitch of the instrument. If you write the same notes on a page and give them to a tenor saxophone player and to a soprano saxophone player, you will find that the same written notes sound an octave higher on the soprano than on the tenor. A melody that sounded mellow and lyrical on the tenor can suddenly sound piercing and screechy on the soprano. Saxophone players come across this discrepancy all the time and may be able to make allowances for it by putting some passages up or down an octave, however it is MUCH easier to sightread music (especially difficult music) if the composer/arranger has made allowances for this ahead of time and this will save time and frustration in rehearsals and allow rehearsal and practice time to be spent on more productive matters.



The other factor to consider when writing for saxophone is that not all parts of the range of the saxophone sound the same. In this paragraph I will be speaking from the point of view of the WRITTEN TRANSPOSED PITCHES of the saxophone. I should also note that this is my personal opinion, your mileage may vary. The 'nicest' sounding (and by far easiest to play) part of the saxophone's register extends from roughly F (in the space at the bottom of the staff) to A above the staff. There is some leeway either side of this but this is meant as a guide. This middle range can be played at any dynamic with ease and should be in tune and under control. Anything below this will sound low, even on the soprano where it is not actually low relative to other instruments at that pitch, but due to the timbre of the instrument at that pitch it will be perceived as a low note, and will not blend very well with the ensemble. This range is difficult to play quietly

without 'sub-toning' which is a technique that mutes the sound and changes the quality of sound produced. It may also sound slightly sharp. Anything above this range will begin to sound high and may sound slightly strained, even on the baritone, again due to the timbre of the instrument at this range. Anything above F (3 ledger lines above the staff) should be considered the altissimo register. It is very high, difficult to play, difficult to keep in tune, unreliable, hard to blend, hard to sustain and should only be used with full awareness of the quirks of this register. It can be very effective if that's the sound that you want, however it is not for the faint of heart. If you are writing harmony for multiple saxophones and want good blending and good intonation, stick to the middle of the range.



Here is how all the information above applies to the four most common saxophones:

SOPRANO

Written range:



Range on the piano:

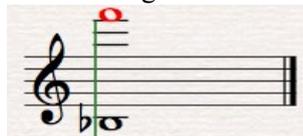


Soprano is the easiest saxophone to transpose for (apart from the C melody) as it is closest to the written pitch of the piano. Low B flat on the soprano (the lowest note) sounds as A flat below middle C on the piano. To transpose for soprano, just move everything up one tone from where you would play it on the piano.

Soprano doesn't blend easily with other instruments and is notoriously difficult to play in tune. The high register is very high sounding indeed, altissimo can be quite painful to listen to and the lower notes can sound great but are difficult to play at low dynamics. Be nice to your soprano player and stick to the middle of the range and keep the soprano at the top of your crunchy jazz voicings, don't expect the soprano to be able to fit easily in to the middle of close harmony.

ALTO

Written range:



Range on the piano:



To transpose for alto saxophone move all your notes UP A MAJOR SIXTH from the pitch that they are written on the piano. A common mistake is to transpose everything down a minor third, if you must do it that way please then transpose everything up an octave or else you will make everything much more difficult to read. We don't like reading melodies written on 5 ledger lines below the staff!

The same considerations of range apply to the alto sax as to the soprano, although alto is more forgiving generally (the soprano is the least forgiving of all the saxophones). Altissimo is more possible although still

difficult and to be avoided in difficult fast passages. Alto can blend far more easily in an ensemble than soprano, but try to avoid the extremes of range.

TENOR

Written range:



Range on the piano:



To transpose for tenor saxophone move all the notes UP A NINTH (or a major second plus an octave) from their written pitch on the piano. If you just go up a tone and not a full octave and a tone you will make things much harder to read, for the same reasons highlighted above.

The same range considerations apply, however the upper range of the tenor is more mellow than the alto and can be used more liberally. Lower end is very low.

BARITONE

Written range:



Range on the piano:



To transpose for baritone saxophone, you need to move all your notes UP A THIRTEENTH or a sixth plus an octave.

The same range considerations as all saxophones apply, the low end is extremely low but sounds great at the bottom of chords as a bass note or pedal. Top end is plaintive and mellow and can be used freely, however altissimo is difficult as with all saxophones.

ONE FINAL THING

If you use Sibelius, don't forget that if you write a piece using no key signature and then transpose the piece for saxophone, if you don't uncheck the box that says "transpose key signatures" Sibelius will add two sharps to your tenor part and three sharps to your alto part.

Reading your atonal chromatic lines with an arbitrary A major key signature is no fun at all. If in doubt, use no key signature.

And don't forget to check for double sharps! (and unnecessary E sharps, F flats, B sharps and C flats)

Follow all this advice to the letter and you will have a happy saxophone player who is free to devote all their energy to making your music sound as good as possible. :-)