

Tuesday, December 11, 2007

Mike Smith "The Art of Playing Lead Alto"

Category: Music

The Art of Playing Lead Alto

During the heyday of the great big bands, lead alto sax was arguably one of the most important chairs out of the seventeen or eighteen musicians in the band. And although that heyday is long past, young musicians still learn the art of lead alto playing in high school and college bands, as well as in rehearsal and special project groups. But, like every other business, the music business has been hit hard by economic malaise and downsizing. Nowhere is that more apparent than in the supplanting of live musicians by computerized technology, and in the consequent smaller number of musicians in pit orchestras and "big" bands. So the call for a saxophonist to play lead alto—an art in and of itself—is growing ever more infrequent. But when that call does come, the best musicians are ready. This master class will help developing saxophonists, as well as professionals who have not explored this area of expertise, prepare for the responsibilities of being a first call lead alto player.

EQUIPMENT

A good lead player has a sound that effectively synthesizes both brightness and body, a sound that projects over the brass and rhythm sections and produces a strong foundation for the section to follow. The mouthpiece and reed combination are vital in the sound production. Mouthpieces are a very personal thing; for me or anyone else to make a recommendation as to brand or model does an injustice to the individual player. The truth is that the best way to set out finding the sound that works best is to begin by researching the equipment choices of lead alto players whose sound you find most appealing, with the understanding that their set-up might not work the same way in your mouth. There are so many different mouthpieces on the market that this choice has to be yours. The lead players I know are using a whole spectrum of mouthpieces, including Meyer, Berg Larson, Rubber Links and Brillharts. And a vibrant reed is essential. I prefer a medium open mouthpiece with a medium soft reed (Rico Jazz Select 3s). In any case, the mouthpiece/reed combination has to be flexible so you can bend and shape notes. Just remember: What works for one player doesn't always work for you. Our physical makeup (oral cavity, tongue placement and teeth etc.) makes sound production different for everyone.

STYLES

In the big band era it was the lead also player's responsibility to play in the specific style of the bandleader who hired him. Basie, Ellington, Kenton, Goodman, Dorsey, Henderson, Miller—each had their own distinctive sound informed by their approach to vibrato, time feel, and the bending of notes. Because many of the gigs we are called for have books with music from all these different bands, today's lead player has to have a comprehensive familiarity with each and every one. For example, lead in the Kenton band used very little vibrato, but in the Basie band Marshall Royal liberally used vibrato and bending to produce the vocal quality that band's lead chair was famous for. Musicians have a wealth of recordings at their disposal, and an essential first step in style development is careful listening to the

various lead alto players. Pay careful attention to how their particular sounds shape the overall sound of the sax sections they led.

RESPONSIBILITIES

An outstanding lead player has to prepare and practice his or her skills with the same intensity required of a soloist. When performing a written line you must make it sing with emotion and feel, just as you do when soloing. Accurate reading is a prerequisite, as well knowing when to take a breath and to cut off notes at the end of a phrase. Listening and working closely with the lead trumpet player on tutti band sections is what gives a band the tightness that separates a great band from a pickup band that sounds under rehearsed. To lead a section you must have confidence in your reading, style and sound, as well a dynamic range that extends from forte to piano without sacrifice of strength or control.

INTERPRETATION, PHRASING AND DYNAMICS

As I mentioned earlier, good sight-reading is a must. Sight-reading involves more than just playing the right notes; that's just the beginning. The whole of the music, with every instruction and cue, must be taken in at a glance. Knowing when to play notes long or short, crescendos, decrescendos, paying close attention to dynamics are all aspects of first-rate reading. Again, careful listening to famous big band records is a must in learning how to phrase. Inexperienced players should mark their parts and practice with recordings of the music they are performing. It's very helpful to try and follow the lead player on the recording; this helps the inexperienced lead player interpret the music the way it was originally performed.

BIG BAND LISTENING LIST LEAD ALTO PLAYERS

Fletcher Henderson Benny Carter
Duke Ellington Russell Procope Johnny Hodges
Count Basie Marshall Royal
Stan Kenton Lenny Niehaus Art Pepper Charlie Mariano
Benny Goodman Hymie Schertzer
Glenn Miller Hal Mcintyre
Quincy Jones Phil Woods
Thad Jones & Mel Lewis Jerome Richardsen Dick Oatts
Duke Pearson Jerry Dogian
Toshiko Akioishi Gary Foster
Maria Schneider Tim Ries Steve Wilson
Gordon Goodwin Eric Marienthall

This is by no means a complete list, but it represents different eras and styles of big band music and lead alto styles.

EXAMPLE: The example shown is the original lead alto part from Billy May's arrangement of Luck Be a Lady, as recorded on Frank Sinatra's album, Sinatra at the Sands with Count Basie & the Orchestra. This introduction has a sax section lead-in for the first 13 bars. This is a perfect example of Marshall Royal taking a soloist approach with the lead part. His vibrato and dynamics are complementary to Sinatra's voice. And this is just what the arrangement demands. May's lead alto line isn't simply a supporting line; it's contrapuntal, a counter-melody, to the vocal line. Luck Be a Lady is known as a hard-swinging tune, but the introduction is mostly lyrical and legato, with glissandos ending in heavily accented notes to add a percussive punctuation. In listening to Royal's lead playing, it's apparent that he's listening closely to the singer, sensitive to the rubato feel that's established, so that he weaves his melodic lines in and through the vocal line smoothly and expertly. There's a lilting quality to Royal's sound, but it's also controlled and controlling; he guides the section like a sax choir. As the intro ends and the arrangement moves into the swinging body of the tune, Royal holds the section back with the force of his playing, so that when the brass and rhythm hits in the ensuing measures, and Sinatra comes in with that famous phrase, "Luck, be a lady tonight," the punch and drive of it has all the more energy and impact. He understood the musical power in that clever juxtaposition of the lyrical and the swinging.

It's no coincidence that my list of lead alto players would also make the list of pre-eminent jazz soloists in all of their respective eras. I'm convinced that the same musical sensibilities that informed their primacy as soloists translated into a deeper understanding of the requirements of a lead alto player.

CONCLUSION

Consistency, good intonation, and phrasing are all aspects of superior lead playing. But just as important, if not more so, is the easy, self-confident discipline and instinctual control that are essential in any leadership position. That self-assurance inspires confidence in the rest of the section. And that implicit trust that the section leader will guide them in the right direction with the correct tone and style is what brings a greater degree of excitement and intensity to any band's sound.

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