

Six altissimo studies for the developing performer



Composed by Emma Jones

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Introduction

This study book has been created as part of a research project into the teaching of the altissimo register and is aimed at accompanying current resources for anyone who is beginning to use the altissimo register in their playing.

Each study addresses a piece of saxophone literature and uses phrases, rhythmic patterns and features of the piece within the composition to practise the elements which are required for its performance.

The author's suggestions can be found underneath, including potential exercises, quotes and book references to consider with each etude. A short background on the piece and its composer is included as well as a recording of the study and suggestions of CD listening.

Saxophonists must have a large assortment of altissimo fingerings which can be used in different combinations, dependent on a piece's context. In general, the depression of fewer keys results in a lighter, faster technique which is useful for conjunct passages where the pitches are scalar or located together. Disjunct passages where pitches are isolated are likely to have more keys depressed which results in greater stability in leaps between intervals. Evidence of this can be found in a discussion of the modes of overtones in Rousseau's *Top Tones for the Saxophone*.

A common theme in the selection of the following repertoire is that they were primarily created by performer-composer relationships. Through its troubled history to be considered a serious concert instrument, saxophonists pursued major works to showcase the versatility, substance and emotion of the instrument while also the proficiency of the performer themselves.

As someone who really struggled with the register but is beginning to see steady progress, I would really stress to make time to read up on the many method books that are available today (most of which are listed in the bibliography). Time, patience and aural imagination are the three things that have pushed my progress forward, I would strongly recommend that you try them too.

Ingolf Dahl - Concerto (1949)

The Dahl concerto was commissioned by Sigurd Rascher in 1948 and is a piece which very much embraces the virtuosic potential of the saxophone. Igor Stravinsky himself described this Concerto as being one of the finest works he had ever heard.¹ It has since become one of the core concertos in classical saxophone repertoire.

There are several optional altissimo passages to be considered especially in movement two – which Dahl excitedly communicated with Rascher about after completing the work,

*“Finished! I am in the midst of the orchestration, will be done in a few weeks. Hope you will like the slow movement – maybe not at first but when you come to know it – you asked for 3 and a half octaves and you got them...”*²

While employing the altissimo register of the saxophone can bring a greater level of tonal virtuosity to the music, the musicality of implementing the extended register of the instrument must be considered. Many of the passages are to be performed at very soft dynamic levels which can prove difficult however, the brilliance of the register is necessary in the climactic moments.

The version of the piece that is most commonly played today is not the one that Rascher performed for many years. There is a difference of 8 minutes of music between the two versions. The changes in these versions include eliminations of entire sections, added optional solo passages, and reductions to the number of musicians needed in order to present the work. Dahl's indication of the traditional range of the saxophone for the optional altissimo passages further promoted the performance of this work as it became more technically accessible.

Although Dahl is of Swedish and German descent, Dahl is widely considered an American composer due to his musical success following his immigration to the United States during the second world war

Suggested original recordings:

John Harle (sax) New World Symphony. (11th April 1995) *Defining Dahl*, CD, Chicago: Argo

Kenneth Tse (sax), University of Iowa Symphony Band. (12th June 2012) *Martyrs for the faith*, CD, Connecticut: MSR Classics

¹ Christopher Scott Rettie. A Performer's and Conductor's Analysis of Ingolf Dahl's Concerto for Alto Saxophone

² Adam D Muller. High Register Excerpts of Selected Alto Saxophone Concerti: A Critical Anthology

$\text{♩} = 72$

p *cresc.*

mf 3 3

f 3 3 3 *mp*

mf

This study largely focuses on moving in a step-like manner through its altissimo, with most of its material from the second movement of this concerto. E₃, F₃ and F₃[#] should be played with the front fingerings. Take your time, go as slow as you dare and try to make the notes really sing.

EXTRA: When you are comfortable with this study add in some vibrato on the dotted crotchets and be aware of any changes you need to keep the note stable **OR** Try playing the whole study at a quiet dynamic, remembering for this you will need to increase your air support.

David Maslanka - Sonata for alto saxophone (1988)

Strongly influenced by music of the past – Franz Liszt, Francis Poulenc – the Sonata for Alto Saxophone and Piano alternates between an innocent stroll in the park and a fierce breaking of tonal and formal boundaries. The three movements are adaptations of old forms – the first a sonata, the second an ABA song form, and the third a rondo. Maslanka challenges the saxophonist's thinking and use of the extended range throughout the entire sonata, demanding technical proficiency and musical agility.

When David Maslanka composed the *Sonata*, he said “Now, the altissimo register, I just understood from players that this was possible and this was about how far you can go and I just wrote the music because that's what I want to hear.”

An avid composer for the saxophone, Maslanka has composed several saxophone quartets, pieces for saxophone and piano and saxophone solos with wind orchestras. The first movement of his concerto *Fire in the Earth* would be a good challenge for altissimo that is becoming confident.

When looking at this sonata, there are many quick semiquaver changes so the finger work needs to be as easy as possible. A good starting point for a range of fingerings would be Sigurd Raschers '*Top-tones for the saxophone*' or Rousseau's *Saxophone High Tones*.

Suggested recordings:

Steven Jordheim (sax), Christine Dahl (piano). (Sep 26, 2000) *The music of David Maslanka*, CD, Albany, New York: Albany Records.

Otis Murphy (sax) Haruko Murphy (piano). (2nd February 2011) *Fantasy*, CD, Arizona: Arizona University Recordings.

The musical score consists of six staves of music in treble clef. The first staff (measures 1-6) is in 6/8 time with a tempo marking of $\text{♩} = 60$ and a dynamic of *mf*. It features semiquaver repetitions of a phrase with a slur over the top notes. The second staff (measures 7-12) continues this pattern. The third staff (measures 13-19) changes to 4/4 time, marked *p dolce*, and includes a crescendo leading to *mf cresc.* at measure 17. The fourth staff (measures 20-24) is marked *f* and continues the semiquaver repetitions. The fifth staff (measures 25-28) is marked *rit.* and ends with a dynamic of *p*. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, ties, and dynamic markings.

With this study it is important to consider the approach to and departure from the top tones. The sonata also requires that some passages are performed at the dynamic level of piano. It is essential here that fingerings which give the most stability are used.

EXTRA: Try tonguing the initial pitch of the phrase every time it comes back in the semiquaver repetitions.

Lars-Erik Larsson - Concerto (1932)

'I want to write music that is beautiful'

Lars-Erik Larsson was one of the leading figures in 20th century Swedish music. His music is often defined as neo-classical, which is certainly true as far as many of his works are concerned and which undoubtedly applies to the slow second movement of this concerto. Each movement has its foundations in an ABA ternary form

Among his Swedish contemporaries, he was the most performed and most loved by his own people, even by many who were not familiar with his name, but knew of his music.³

Written in 1932 for Sigurd Rascher, a result of them meeting at an international contemporary music conference, Larsson would have been encouraged to include the altissimo register, a request which was granted with the concerto asking for a three and a half octave range, the first movement asks for a F₄ twice! This concerto is considered to be one of the first major saxophone pieces to utilize non-standard tonality.

Suggested original recordings:

Christer Johnsson (sax) Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra. (7th January 2002)
Lars-Erik Larsson, CD, Stockholm, Sweden: Caprice

Pekka Savijoki (sax), Stockholm New Chamber Orchestra. (1st April 1995)
Saxophone Concerti, CD, Akersberga, Sweden: BIS.

³ Anders Olof Lundegård, Anders Lundegård, Classical Saxophonist [Web site], "Background and Emergence of the Swedish Saxophone Concerto - Lars-Erik Larsson, Op. 14," D.M. thesis, Northwestern University, 1995, Site address: <http://www.classicalsaxophonist.com/Larssonbio.htm>

$\text{♩} = 92$

The musical score is written in treble clef with a tempo of quarter note = 92. It consists of seven staves, each containing measures 1 through 24. The music is characterized by frequent triplets and slurs, indicating a focus on finger dexterity and rhythmic precision. Dynamics include *mf* (mezzo-forte) and *f* (forte). The key signature has one sharp (F#). The piece concludes with a double bar line at measure 24.

This study plays with the notes around the break and several leaps into the top tones. A sense of playfulness should accompany this study through the shifts in tonality. With the big jumps, try singing the two notes first and check the interval range by playing an octave lower. It is important to make sure you're not overshooting or underestimating the size of the interval.

EXTRA: Play the first half from memory! Concentrating on fingerwork, airstream, tongue position – stop! Try approaching this study with a positive attitude and a new focus of playing from memory and you will be able to see how much your muscles have already adapted to the register. It may grant you more success than you think.

Piet Swerts - Klonos (1993)

Belgian composer Piet Swerts has written a variety of works for saxophone, many of which have been commissions for competitions. Klonos was a commission by the Tromp Music Competition in Eindhoven.

Composed in 1993, the Greek word Klonos translates to an intense muscle spasm or contraction, such as found in the heart. This is a picture that Piet Swerts associates with the movements that some saxophone players make when they are in the midst of playing a fiery passage, like an intense jazz solo. The work is a dashing fantasy with a modest, though intense, middle section, and ends with a reprise of great virtuosity. Aside from the constantly changing key signatures, the saxophonist is required to play in the altissimo register often and so must be agile while playing the fast lines with a technical ease so as to be heard throughout the work.

Most of his compositions are constructed around a single germinal theme, have a geometric quality to them, and use pan-chromaticism. This last technique creates an illusion of atonality or the absence of tonality while maintaining a key centre. These three features can be seen in Klonos. Imitation also plays an important role in Klonos.

Suggested original recordings:

Koryun Asatryan (sax) Jang Eun Bae (piano). (7th February 2002) *Saxophone Caprices*, CD, Holzgerlingen, Germany: Hanssler Classic

Daniel Gauthier (sax), Jang Eun Bae (piano). (22nd April 2003) *Miniatures - Music for Saxophone and Piano*, CD, Detmold, Germany: MDG.

$\text{♩} = 120$

The musical score consists of six staves, numbered 1, 2, 6, 9, 12, and 15. The tempo is marked as $\text{♩} = 120$. The first staff (measure 1) starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic and contains a long slur over a series of beamed notes. The second staff (measure 2) continues the pattern with accents. The third staff (measure 6) shows a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic, followed by a forte (*f*) dynamic, and then another *mf*. The fourth staff (measure 9) continues the rhythmic complexity. The fifth staff (measure 12) starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The sixth staff (measure 15) concludes the sequence with a final slur and a double bar line.

This study focuses on rhythm, articulation and has lots of passages over the break. Separate out the main ideas which repeat in different ways and become confident with the small passages before playing them altogether. Keep air support strong throughout.

EXTRA: Record yourself playing this study and listen back to it. This piece as described earlier should feel a little rough. See if this is coming across in your performance. If it is, try the study a little closer to the original piece's tempo of quaver = 168 and see how quick your finger work can be.

David Muczynski – Sonata (1970)

“Muczynski’s music is very melodic in an Aaron Copland fashion and very rhythmic and percussive— an American Béla Bartok if you will. The unique combination of these two disparate styles along with the regular use of jazz harmonic structures combines to create Muczynski’s style.”⁴

Muczynski’s Sonata was written in 1970 and dedicated to saxophonist Trent Kynaston, an American jazz and classical saxophonist who commissioned the work with the intention to premier it at the Second World Saxophone Congress in Chicago.

Echoing this study books introduction, this work started with a very different title in mind – Desert Sketches or Desert Serenade. Kynaston stated in an interview that,

“the mind-set of the classical saxophonist at the time was such that if he used one of those titles, many players might not consider it a —serious piece and overlook it. I suggested he call it Sonata, even though it had only two movements. After it had been out for several years he had said he was glad we had made that decision but now when I play it I have these visions of that desert scene and I wish we had followed his original thought”

The opening melodic line, a major second followed by a minor third, is developed throughout the sonata. All of the melodic material in the first movement comes from this idea which is then restated dramatically in the saxophones altissimo range – here the range is being employed as a dramatic tool.

Suggested original recordings:

Otis Murphy (sax) Haruko Murphy (piano). (26th April 2011) *Summertime*, CD, England: Saxophone classics

Hayrapet Arakelyan (sax) Eun Bae Jang (piano). (5th June 2012) *French Connection*, CD, Ratingen, Germany: ARS Produktion.

⁴ Jean-Marie Londeix, A Comprehensive Guide To The Saxophone Repertoire 1844-2003. Edited by Bruce Ronkin.(Cherry Hill, New Jersey: Roncorp Publications, 2003), 272.

♩ = 132

mf f

9 mf f

17 mf

25 f

33 f

41 f

45 f

Be careful not to rush the quavers, especially those marked with a slur. Play close attention to the marked articulation, particularly the G#₃ with an accent, make sure there is a difference between the accent and the staccato.

EXTRA: Make up your own articulation for each repeated section but make sure you are doing the same thing each time **OR** invert the dynamics, so instead of crescendo make a diminuendo without letting the tone quality weaken.

Takashi Yoshimatsu - Fuzzy Bird Sonata (1991)

“A bird is the greatest melody maker with the motion of a bird’s wing or its movement on the ground creating a rhythm, its very lifestyle becomes the musical mode of expression.” Yoshimatsu

Yoshimatsu is generally considered to be one of Japan’s greatest composers in the western classical style; his compositions are sensitive to the capacities of each individual instrument. Fuzzy Bird Sonata was written for Japanese virtuoso Nobuya Sugawa in 1991 as a part of Yoshimatsu’s continuing ‘Bird’ series.

Prior to its composition Sugawa performed several standards from the repertoire for Yoshimatsu to create an aural image of the saxophone. The use of altissimo and glissando come from this experience and it is evidence of the influence of Sugawa’s performances on the composition. This piece shows a road to the classical saxophone which is neither strictly classic nor jazz.

Since Yoshimatsu was not familiar with writing for the saxophone, after hearing Sugawa perform he would not have considered the altissimo register as separate from the normal. This means he wouldn’t have hesitated to write into it since he knew his performer was more than capable of executing it.

Suggested original recordings:

Nobuya Sugawa (sax) BBC Philharmonic. (27th May 2008) *Nobuya Sugawa plays Honda, Yoshimatsu, Ibert, Larsson*, CD, Colchester: Chandos

Sarah Markham (sax), Paul Turner (piano). (28th March 2011) *Run, Sing, Fly*, CD, England: Saxophone classics.

Freely
♩ = 60

6

11

16

21

23

f *mf* *mp cresc.* *f* *mp* *cresc.* *f*

This last study's focus is on glissandos and trills, two key features of the original piece. To be able to slide between the altissimo, the notes have to be stable and speak easily first as single notes. Play the glissandos which are in the normal range first and feel how you move from one note to the other. It is still the same process with the higher notes but requires an even faster stream of air. Make sure you are trying this at a comfortable dynamic.

EXTRA: Sound each altissimo trill individually. Play each note slowly then begin to build up speed into a proper trill, like this:

Helpful Hints

1. Sing through all exercises to simulate the motion and position of the muscles used to produce each note as well as internalising the sound of each note – use a piano if you need it to check correct pitch, remembering to transpose any written note up by three semitones.
2. Practise single note movements slowly before building up speed until they are quick and accurate
3. Use a saxophone friend! Play in octaves with each other, the person with the lower note should use a tuner to keep the higher note accurate
4. If front F is a new concept, really focus on matching sound and intonation to that of 'regular' F with a slight increase in air and arching of the tongue - see Sinta's *Voicing* method book for the F trick as a different way of approaching this
5. Until muscle memory is strong, always start by using the most stable fingerings available to you. It may mean a more difficult fingering pattern but fingerings can be refined at a later date when the oral work is more concrete and confident.
6. Practising the altissimo register is tiring! Try practising finger movements without playing, as this will save your lip. Little and often is best.
7. Vibrato should be avoided in the early stages of progression as it will affect the note stability, add this in later when you feel confident that the note will speak clearly and in tune.
8. Don't forget about tuning. Play passages an octave below written to really focus on intonation, then do the same an octave higher.

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