

Saxophone mini - treatise

L7 Alexander Technique

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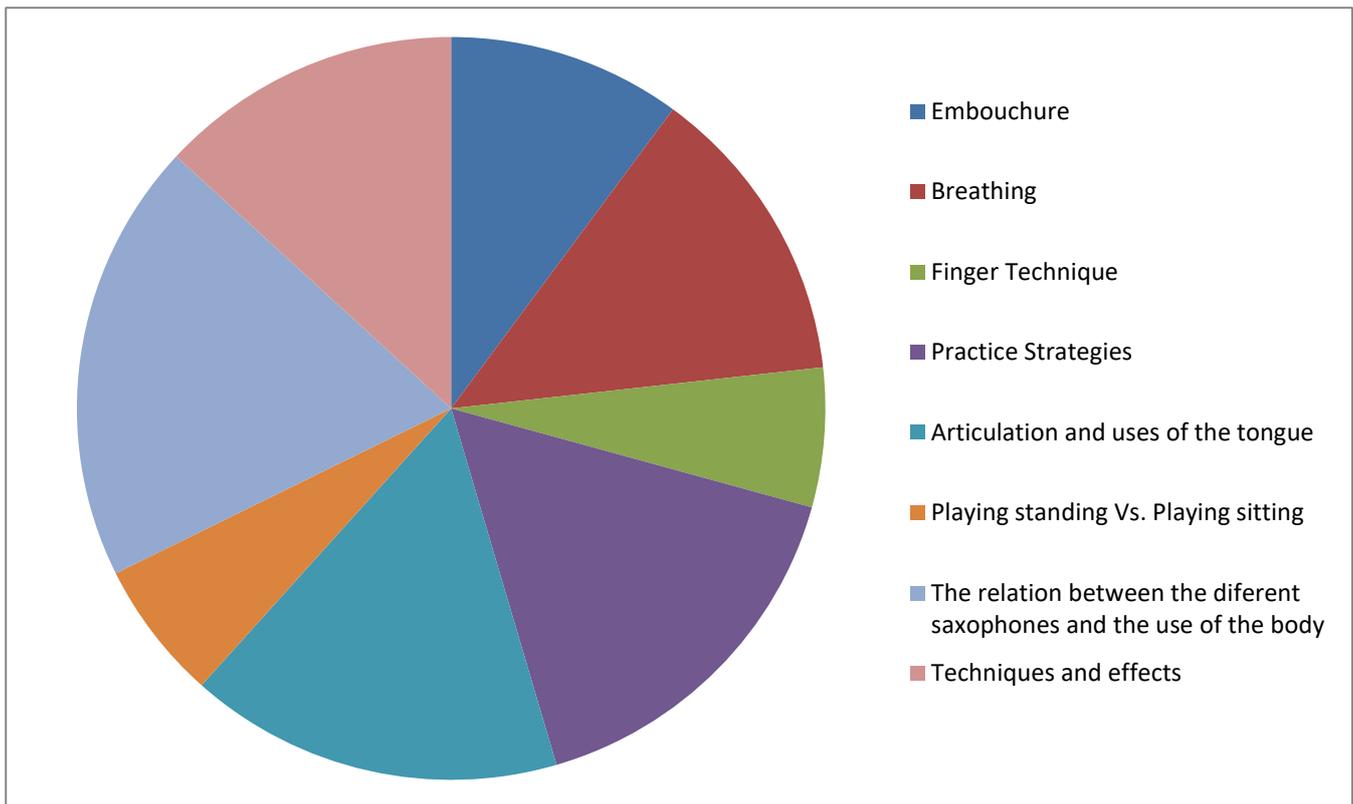
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Introduction

What are the key principles to play saxophone? I have made a questionnaire to discover what saxophone students at the Royal College of Music and Musikene (Centro Superior de Música del País Vasco) think are the most important subjects to write in this essay.

On the one hand, by asking the question: What subjects would you like to find in a saxophone treatise? We have obtained the following results:



On the other hand, I have also brought up the question: What is the biggest challenge in saxophone playing? Here, we have obtained some interesting answers like:

- Clarity of sound and articulation – making all notes speak perfectly first time
- Not closing the throat and the use of air
- Having to play so many different genres of music (contemporary, classical, jazz, etc.) on different saxophones while trying to maintain a common sound/style of playing for all instruments
- Playing in the performance the same way you have practiced the music

Having considered the data of the questionnaire, I am going to proceed to explain the next principles related with saxophone playing: Breathing, producing a sustained sound, articulation and the uses of the tongue, effects and

techniques, the relationship between the different saxophones and the use of the body, practice strategies, practice Vs. performing and flexibility between different genres and saxophones.

1. Producing a sustained sound

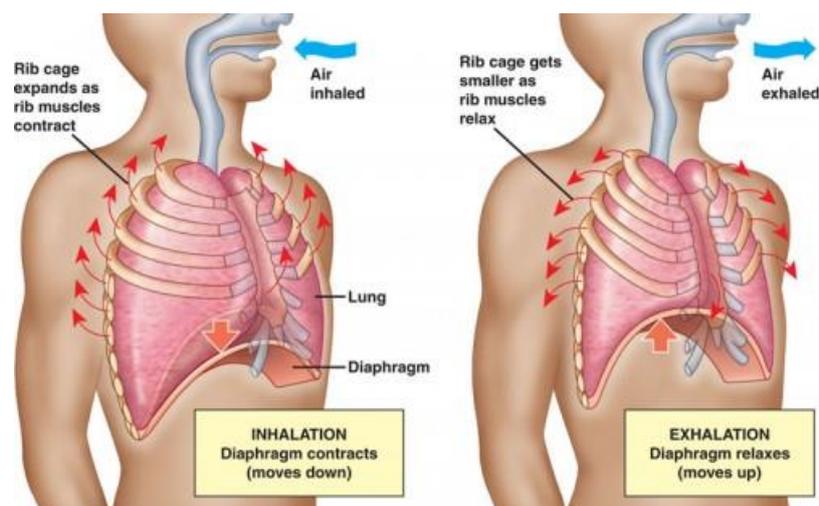
1.1 Breathing

Breathing is a natural function of the body that we need to use to be able to play any wind instrument. The use of the whole body and the emotions affects the way we breathe and vice versa. In other words, Alexander considered that we need to work in the Whole Self (mind and body). We can try and tense any part of the body and feel how that affects our breathing.

Having a free primary control (the relation between the head and the rest of the body) is basic to achieve a good breathing, so we work on these directions: We release our neck, so the head goes Forward and Up, in such a way that your back lengthens and widens. We also need to feel our feet and have our legs free because of the muscular connections from the diaphragm to the spine and the legs.

Given that we have a 'faulty sensory awareness', knowing where are located the joints that allows us to move can be very useful to know how to use our body. In other words, body mapping.

The diaphragm contracts during the in breath, moving down and then releases, moving up, during the outbreath. Any extra tension of the body disturbs the breathing, but specially the one in the abdominal muscles. The intercostal muscles move the ribs up and down and not out and in. We don't need any movement in the shoulders to breathe.



The best breathing exercise is the Whispered 'Ah'. It helps to avoid gasping breath before speaking or playing and to keep the throat open without blocking it.

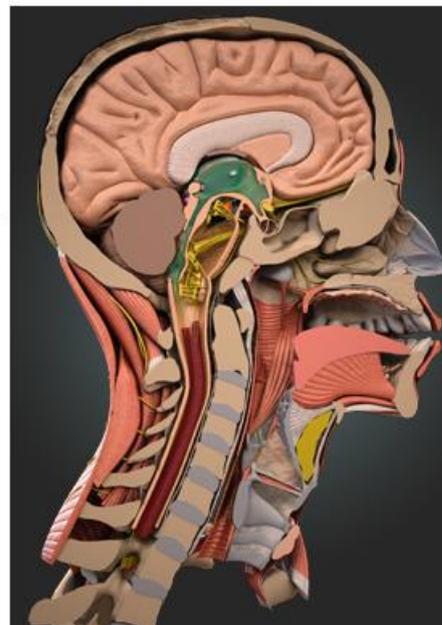
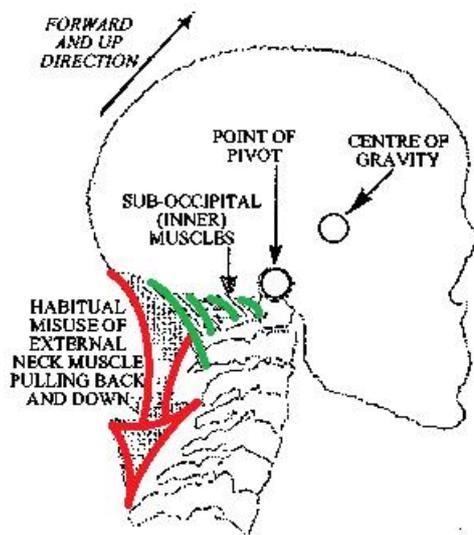
“Raise the soft palette (think of something funny so that you smile naturally – thus raising the soft palette); allow the tip of the tongue to rest on the top of the lower teeth, brighten your eyes as you release the jaw; let the air out, vocalizing a very soft ‘ah’, as if in a long sustained note but not sung; listen to the quality of your ‘ah’. Close your mouth and wait for air to go in your nose.” (Kleinman and Buckoke, 2013, p. 240).

In addition, it helps to remind us the way that the breathing works naturally and apply that in our playing.

1.2 Embouchure

- **Lips and teeth**

First of all, to put the mouthpiece into the mouth we need to open it. Our mouth is designed to be open by releasing the jaw and leaving it go down. We don't need to move the head forward. In classical saxophone, we should put the upper teeth in the upper part of the mouthpiece, approximately at one centimeter distance from the edge of the mouthpiece. We need this contact to be firm. By thinking that the head goes forward, we can base the weight of our head on the mouthpiece, by releasing the back of the neck and not pushing the teeth on the mouthpiece. The lower teeth are covered by the lower lip, making like a protective barrier between them and the reed. The corners of the mouth should approach the mouthpiece like if we were going to say something similar to 'ffffe' or a French 'u' sound.



- **Jaw Pressure**

Lots of people have too much pressure in the jaw, producing a narrow sound that sometimes even squeaks. This can be avoided by thinking about directions and knowing that we don't need to move the head to open the mouth, but releasing the jaw down.

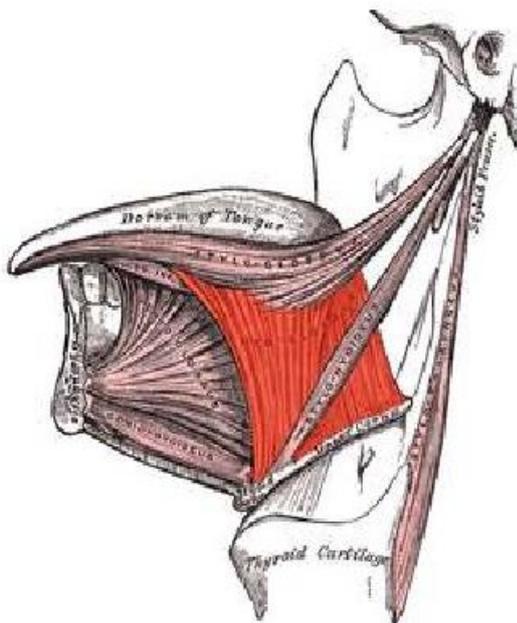


Then, we could add some exercises like playing low notes (C#, C, B, Bb, D) without using the tongue and without making the upper octave speak. In addition, we can play one passage blowing but just with air sound. Like this, you will need to have the jaw free. Little by little you can blow more and start having some sound at the same time as the air. If you have too much pressure on the jaw because the primary control is not in balance, the notes are not going to speak, so it is a good test to verify if you are

free.

2. Articulation and the uses of the tongue

We can use the tongue to change the tuning, the sound color and to do the altissimo notes.



To make an efficient use of the tongue we need to have it available to movement. In order to get that, we need balance in our primary control because as we can see on the image below, the tongue is inserted on the upper part of the neck.

After directing our primary control, we can think that the tongue releases, so that it goes down. It also widens and has a direction into the lower teeth.

- **Tuning**

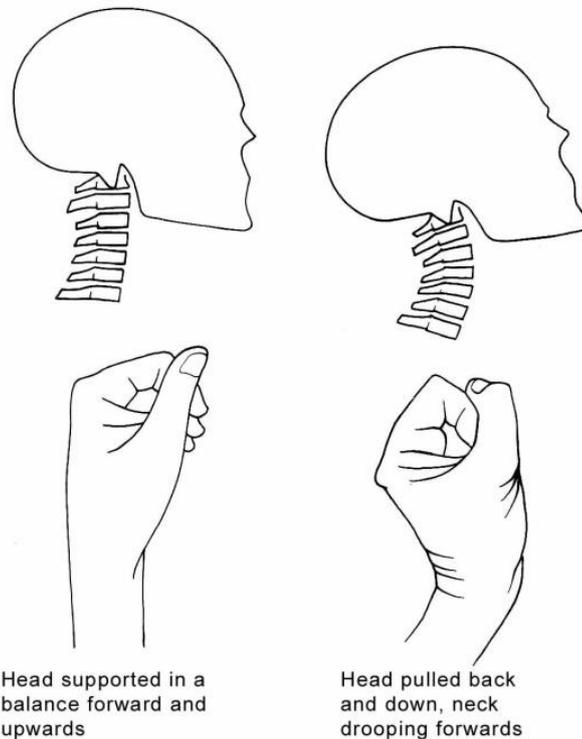
If we have such a tension that we always have our tongue in the upper part of the mouth, we are going to have tuning problems because we are going to be too

sharp in the high register. This tension on the tongue starts on the neck. We can verify the influence of the tongue in tuning singing a high note and a low note and being aware what the tongue does. One thing that usually happens is that once we notice that we are sharp we stress and we tense our neck more. So, at the first sign of being sharp just think 'neck free'.

- **Altissimo sounds**

To be able to play altissimo notes we need to think as if we were singing them, moving the tongue upwards. Try to whistle, notice in what position do you have

your tongue, and that is what you need to do to play altissimo sounds. When playing a high note or an altissimo note, a common saxophone habit is to lose the balance in our head like this:



That happens because if we press our lower jaw it seems easy to play high notes and also because we get anxious because it is not an easy register in the saxophone because of the conical tube. To avoid that, we have to stop and think in the head directions. It also helps to play the notes really piano and with a bit of air in the sound. Like this, you ensure that you are not making them speak because of too much pressure on the jaw due to a primary control that is not balance.

3. Practice Strategies

We can't doubt that practice is necessary to become a successful musician but if we don't do it properly we could make it much more difficult. I believe there are two principal Alexander concepts to achieve a good practice: End gaining and Habit Vs. skill.

End gaining is the tendency we have to focus just on the results and not on the process. If we focus more on how we practice each day, being concentrated, aware and in balance, we are going to improve better and faster than if we just think on the goals, because we are going to do better practice. Thinking more on results than in the process makes us more anxious and less aware of what we do.

When we practice our brain memorises everything we do. If when we practice we are concentrating and aware of what our body and mind are doing, our conscious brain is going to memorise good habits that we can rely on. Due to good repetition practice, these habits are going to be stored in the unconscious brain becoming a new skill. On the contrary, If we are not concentrating and we start losing our balance or doing unnecessary and unconsciously movements while practicing one passage, we are going to memorise that as well as the notes. That is to say, we are memorising bad habits

Usually, we don't notice that we have a bad or useless habit. For example, there are saxophonists that move the head to one side contracting the neck when they have to play an accent or that move the body down and bend the knees when they have to play a low note. All these habits are not necessary to achieve our goals and can work as interferences creating unnecessary tension or movement.

There can be musicians that like to do some extra movements and that they do it consciously. To be able to decide what we want to do and to identify what we are doing, we can't trust our proprioception, or in other words, how we sense the positioning of the parts of our body. F.M. Alexander started developing the Alexander Technique when he realised, watching himself on the mirror, that he was shortening the muscles in the back of his neck when he was reciting. For these reasons, it is very important to practice in front of a mirror and to record ourselves whenever possible.

Once we have realised that we have a habit we use inhibition and direction to change it. So, when we notice that we are for example, moving up the left shoulder as a lot saxophonist do, we stop playing. Then we can choose what to do, like thinking about the directions explained before and then playing again concentrating on not moving our shoulder up.

Next, I am going to explain some practice strategies that can help to avoid memorising habits that we don't want to have while practicing our instrument:

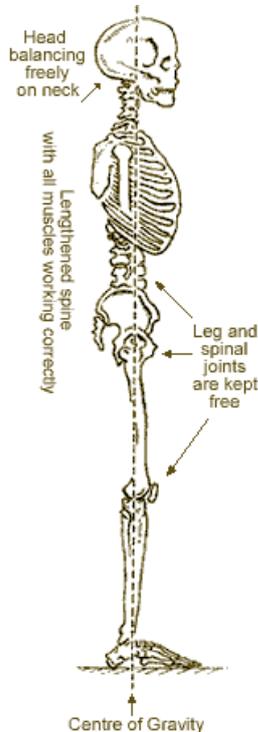
- **Fast passages**

How can we practice playing fast passages without going back to the starting pattern? One strategy is to practice slow, being aware of everything that is happening to avoid go back to the habit. But, we also need to be able to practice fast without stretching the neck, for example. How? Inhibition and direction:

When I have to practice a fast passage of semiquavers for example, I divide them in groups of four. Then, with the metronome in a fast speed, I play one group and I wait three beats while I try to release the neck or the part of my body I am tightening, or I can also think on the directions I need. Then I play it again, waiting for two beats and then for one beat between each group. Like this, my brain can memorise these four notes in a fast speed and with my body free and in balance. If I have tension in the neck, I think about releasing it, but

if like a lot of saxophone players, I tense my arms and fix them to my body, I think about one direction from the elbows to the thumbs and also that the elbows need to go out.

- **A long passage, difficult to maintain without breathing**



Usually, in long phrases, saxophone players tense the whole body when they are out of breath. If we play one passage a lot of times with extra tension because of the breathing, our brain is going to memorise this tension. We can play the passage more piano to memorise it without tension but again, this is not going to be the real situation. We can combine this exercise with the one before. So, we can divide the passage and use inhibition and direction.

- **Passage with extreme dynamic**

If we have to play very forte or piano, we can develop too much pressure in our jaw and our embouchure. Again, inhibition and direction is our solution. Also, we can play it in a more comfortable dynamic just to practice and to be able to concentrate on thinking how we are using our body.

In addition, we can use the air exercise explained in the articulation section if we have a very piano part, in such a way that, if our primary control is not in balance this exercise is not going to work. We can also use this exercises to practice fast passages with extreme dynamic or big intervals.

- **Accents, subito forte and sforzando**

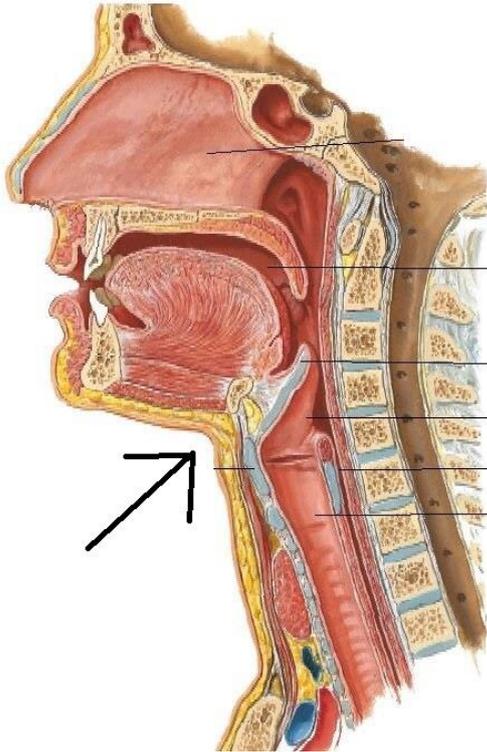
Lots of saxophone players push their jaw when playing any of these three things. We need to stop and think head up, weight down and jaw free and don't play the same thing with extra tension twice in a row.

- **Articulation**

In saxophone playing, there are three main articulation difficulties:

- Fast notes:

First, we need to be conscious of the relation between the head and the neck and then the body because the tongue is inserted in the upper part of the neck. Then separating in our mind the two actions or the three actions that we need to do: blowing, moving the tongue and moving the fingers. If we have these ideas organised, it is going to be easier and we are not going to be extra tense because of having to think too many think at the same time.



It is also very important not to have extra tension pressing the tongue against the reed. We just need to touch the reed with the tongue to make it stop vibrating. So, we just use the necessary tension we need to do any movement, and no more. If we try to play very piano when articulating, and we hear the noise of the tongue against the reed, we are doing too much movement. Also, I like to put one hand on my throat while articulating. If I feel the tongue moving, it is because it is too much movement and I am moving the back part of the tongue instead of the front part. As we can see in the image, this is just the point where the back part of the tongue is placed. To practice these exercise we always need to stop and think, inhibition

and direction.

- Low notes:

Making speak low notes in saxophone is one of the most difficult tasks because of the conical tube. We need all of our neck to be free. It is important for all the back and the front part to be free because we don't want to close our throat because of extra tension. In addition, lots of saxophonist tight their body up when trying to play a low note. So, we need our body to go down while the head goes up. Then, we leave our throat open and in the same position as if we were going to sing a very low note. Finally, we just need the right air speed to make the note speak.

In the end, it is important to bear in mind that we can practice at any time, even when we are on the tube. In any situation that we are standing or sitting, thinking about our balance, freedom and directions, we are practicing. We are memorising this instructions and our body is getting use to the change.

4. Practice Vs. Performing

In the questionnaire some people spoke about how to maintain the level you have when you practice and when you have to perform in front of an audience.

The result we get in a performance is a mixture between the way we have practiced and how much we have practiced the piece and our emotional and physical state. "Our emotional condition is expressed throughout the whole human organism, the mind and body, the complete Psychophysical Self".

(Kleinman and Buckoke, 2013, p. 240). Paradoxically, performing needs to be practiced, so, we need to practice the piece and our emotional state.

First, while practicing a piece we should practice in our thoughts. The Alexander Technique says that we cannot choose what we feel, but we can choose what we think, and this has an immediate effect in our feelings. Having negative thoughts or fears before or during a concert is not going to help in your performance and this is something that we can practice.

A good exercise is to do semi-supine bringing your mind to quiet. Trying to be present, concentrating in your breathing, thinking about directions (neck free, head goes forward and up...) and trying not to worry about other things. You will see that each time is easier to have a quiet mind the more you practice it. Then, when you arrive to the performance, you already know the piece, and you already know how to bring the mind to the present moment.

Secondly, we also need to practice these two things (Being present and knowing the piece) with a similar stimulus that the created by an audition or concert. Performing in front of some friends or recording yourself in video can give a similar stimulus. In the same way that we need to be able to practice a fast passage fast without having unnecessary tension, we need to be able to practice with an audience (stimulus) being able to control our mind.

Finally, we would be able to make the most important difference between the practice and the performance that is reacting to the public. If we have made a good practice, we have all the skills we need to play stored in the unconscious brain and we can use the conscious one to interact with the public. The attitude of an audience influences our way of playing because in a performance, unlike the practice, we try to communicate something to the public. In a performance you don't think how to play the saxophone, you don't think the physical actions you need to do because you have practiced it consciously and now have become second nature, now they are skills.

5. Flexibility between different genres and saxophones

Flexibility, for both saxophones and styles, is a combination of practice and the use of the body.

On the one hand, as almost everything, we can improve our flexibility by practicing it. We can practice with different mouthpieces trying to be able to adapt our playing to a new material just for a couple of hours. If we keep our primary control in balance, we will adapt easier to a new material. Also, using the same reed for a short period of practice and then changing to another can help us to adapt faster to new material. This way, we don't become too used to a reed and then experience difficulties when needing to change it.

On the other hand, I believe being a flexible performer requires freedom within the body. Watching other saxophone players, I have realized that usually, people who are stuck in a position are also stuck in a way of playing. On the contrary, people that are available to movement are more likely to be flexible changing saxophones and/or styles. So, I believe that being available to change means being available to movement.

The relationship between the different saxophones and the use of the body

First of all, we need more air pressure and embouchure pressure and a higher throat position for the higher saxophones than the lower ones.

Then, we need to adapt the use of our body to the different sizes of saxophones. Using different harnesses can help to feel more comfortable with the weight of the instrument.

First, we have to keep our primary control in balance no matter the size of the saxophone. Hands on the back of the chair is a procedure that can help us not to go to the saxophone, but to bring the saxophone to us. In addition, it helps to think that the elbows go out and knowing how the radius and ulna bones move.

To play sitting with alto, tenor and baritone, I believe that we should keep the saxophone in the middle as long as we don't need to bend the right wrist. Having the saxophone in the middle of the legs is going to make it easier to keep the symmetry of the body.

Finally, with soprano, after directing our primary control, we can think that the elbows go out and that we have one direction from the little finger to the elbow. We can try playing without the sling to feel how the weight is distributed between the hands naturally. We don't need to take it too high, something around 45° with the floor.

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