



By Willem Moolenbeek

Willem Moolenbeek has performed across Canada as a soloist and chamber musician. He has premiered many works by Canadian composers and has recorded several discs of chamber music. He is a clinician for Jupiter saxophones and teaches on the music faculties of McMaster University, the University of Waterloo, and National Music Camp. www.singingsax.com.

The Singing Sax

When Adolphe Sax conceived his self-named woodwind instrument, he envisioned a voice that would blend in with the rest of the orchestra or band as well as stand out as a solo voice. Operas by Sax's contemporaries such as Jules Massenet used saxophones as part of the orchestra.

He probably did not think about the saxophone as part of a choral ensemble; however, I have found it to be a particularly engaging voice when placed in the midst of a choir. My first experience with this was while working with the vocal ensemble TACTUS in 1998. At that time, we felt that the soprano saxophone was capable of augmenting the top range of the group by matching the timbre and dynamics of the soprano vocalists. Jan Garbarek's 1994 recording *Officium* with the Hilliard Ensemble opened the door for improvising saxophone to early music.

The saxophone can mimic qualities inherent in the human voice. Vocalizing in most cultures utilizes a pitch vibrato (a pulsing change in pitch) to colour the timbre with a view to enrich the emotional context of the sound. String players have long used a pitch vibrato through shortening and lengthening the strings by moving the fingers on the fingerboard. The saxophone has developed its own characteristic pitch vibrato. This is accomplished by varying the lip tension by slight movements of the jaw. This quality alone gives a greater scope for integration within a vocal group. Because the player readily controls the speed and degree of pitch shift, the application of the vibrato can be personal and specific. A phrase that is quiet and romantic can sustain a slower vibrato with less pitch variation whereas an exuberant gesture can use a faster, wider pitch shift.

The enormous dynamic range of the

saxophone also lends itself to work with a choir. It is able to fit into the harmony in a complementary and supportive role as well as soar above the choir when soloing.

I was recently asked why the saxophone has had so little use in the orchestra. Was it because the timbre was not compatible with "orchestral" instruments? Two reasons come to mind. First, it should be noted that most orchestral repertoire predates the saxophone. Even music that was composed after the advent of the saxophone generally did not utilize it, with a few notable exceptions, because composers at that time could not be guaranteed that the instrument would be around for the long haul. Many instruments have come and gone over the course of history. Concerto for sarrusophone anyone?

The second reason is that the performance values of saxophone have been rather uneven. Few instruments have as wide-ranging timbral options. I often point out at clinics that it can sound like a flute or a chainsaw and anything in between. The nail was driven into the coffin by Harvard professor of orchestration Walter Piston in his 1955 textbook when he wrote that "its tone has become, coincident with its ascendancy in the field of popular dance music, tremulous, oversweet, sentimental; and it is almost invariably played out of tune." Who would want that in their magnum opus?

Saxophone pedagogy has come a long way since the '50s and this argument is not consistent with current trends in contemporary chamber music where the saxophone is playing a greater role.

Canadian composers have made notable contributions to repertoire that utilizes the saxophone in choral music. Paul Halley, originally from Halifax, collaborated with New York soprano

saxophonist Paul Winter in the creation of the *Missa Gaia/Earth Mass*, which continues to be very popular with community choirs and uses a small mixed ensemble. More recently, Halley's *Sanctus, Benedictus* and *Agnus Dei* for choir, soprano saxophone, and organ are receiving numerous performances. The challenge when performing with pipe organ in a large sanctuary is the delay in hearing the organ when the saxophone is in front of the choir. I recommend standing close to the manual to ensure good ensemble.

In Paradisum by Timothy Corlis features the tenor saxophone with choir and piano. This bold and exciting work has a range from low B \flat to altissimo C. Similarly, the full range of dynamics from *pp* to *ff* is used in all registers. Again, I find that ensemble is best maintained by being close to the piano. Collaboration with the conductor is vital and some cues will be warranted depending on the director's interpretation of fermata and entries. *Three Songs of Light* by Srul Irving Glick for children's choir also uses alto saxophone and piano.

When improvising with unaccompanied choirs, I prefer to stand close to the sopranos to match tone and dynamics. A challenge to be considered in this situation is the possibility of the choir's pitch drifting flat in sections where the saxophone is not playing. The saxophonist, particularly on the soprano, has the ability to adjust the tuning by carefully changing embouchure support. Many wonderful choral arrangements of standard gospel pieces allow for improvising as well.

In the concert hall or the church, the time for saxophones and choirs is just taking off. Get out there and be part of it!