

Resources for ABRSM Saxophone Syllabus 2026

Grade 3: A3 - The Mermaid

Below are a few ideas of elements of the piece to work on and discuss with your students

Background to the piece:

This is a piece of folk music, which would traditionally have been passed on by aural tradition. Listen to different recordings to identify differences and similarities and compare these with the ABRSM recording of this arrangement by Alan Bullard.

Establish the key of the piece:

Before playing the piece, make sure students can work out the key of the piece.

The F# and C# in the key signature, combined with the fact the piece ends on a D, indicate that we are in D major.

D major is one of the scales required at Grade 3, so ensure that students are comfortable with the scale and arpeggio of D major.

Note that every note in the piece is contained within the two octave D major scale.

Dotted rhythms:

Dotted rhythms are a key element of this piece.

Try having students listen and repeat a series of dotted rhythms that you play to them to get them used to the feel. (This also imitates the oral tradition of passing down folk tunes). Start with simple rhythms, and gradually make them more complex, eventually leading to the rhythms of the piece.

Have students play the D major scale with a dotted rhythm.

As a creative exercise, encourage students to improvise based on the D major scale, making use of dotted rhythms. (You can start with a call and response to lead into this to make it less daunting and improvise alongside the student to provide support).

Dynamics:

The piece uses a large range of dynamics from piano to fortissimo, and the dynamic builds gradually across the piece.

Get students to try playing a note starting as quietly as they can, making a crescendo to their loudest dynamic, and then a diminuendo back to nothing.

Make sure that students do not bite when playing quietly and keep the lower lip and jaw relaxed.

After playing a crescendo, ask students to play five notes in a row at the 5 different dynamic markings to demonstrate the dynamics of the different sections.

Finally play one bar from each of the sections consecutively to clearly illustrate the dynamic differences.

Remember that the air supply should be fast throughout with consistent support. There should however not be any feel of forcing the air for the loud notes, with the throat remaining relaxed throughout.

Low notes:

The piece goes down to a low D and many students struggle with low notes.

The key to low notes is keeping the embouchure relaxed and not allowing the bottom jaw and teeth to bite upwards.

If biting is a problem, ask students to play without their top teeth on top of the mouthpiece; this means that there is nothing for the bottom teeth to bite against, and allows the student to feel what this is like. (N.B. This is only a practice exercise, and teeth should be on top of the mouthpiece for a normal embouchure.)

Intonation:

In D major, the C# often sticks out from an intonation point of view.

The C# in the middle of the stave is typically flat, and you could consider introducing an alternative fingering to students at this stage; add the G key (left hand ring finger) and the octave key as a sharper fingering for this note.

Conversely top C# on the saxophone is typically a sharp note, and this can be adjusted for by adding the top two fingers on the right hand (F and E), or all three of the right-hand fingers.

Make sure to check the intonation of these notes with a tuner; there is some variation on different models of saxophones.