

Corta-jaca by Gonzaga

Grade 5 Saxophone

Background to the piece

When approaching a new piece with a pupil, it is a great idea to encourage some wider active listening and to discuss what you think the important 'ingredients' of the style are. In this case, I am drawn to the dramatic melodies, upbeat lively tempo, percussive rhythmic drive, dance like energy, and the conversation between instruments.

Detail on the page

Starting a new piece is always exciting but it can be overwhelming when there is a lot of detail marked in the score. In this piece, observing the articulation, ornaments and dynamics will enhance the character and flair of the performance but can be tricky when also focusing on finger work and complex rhythms.

An idea you could suggest to your pupils is to imagine they are artists and tackle sections of the piece in three ways:

1. **Pencil sketch** - Focus on the notes and the rhythms. As the tempo gradually increases, a sense of the phrasing will emerge, so aim to plot the breath marks as well.
2. **Watercolour** - Once the notes and rhythms are comfortable, add the dynamics and observe the marked articulation.
3. **Oil painting** - Now consider the effect the dynamics, tempo and articulation have in bringing the music to life giving it colour, mood and personality. Discuss descriptive words, images, characters, or even a story line.

Low notes

Many saxophone players struggle with low notes, and the opening section has plenty of them to navigate. There are a few things which might help. Firstly, the embouchure needs to be relaxed so avoid allowing the bottom jaw and teeth to bite upwards. Singing the pitch of the notes and noting how open your throat needs to be is also helpful. The lower register on the saxophone has a beautiful warm quality so you could imagine you are playing a cello to help the tone really sing. Encourage playing scales to the full extent of the saxophone range so low notes are practised on a regular basis. An example of this would be Eb major up to top F and down to low Bb and back to the tonic.

Structure and sense of key and harmony

The ABA structure of this piece is clearly marked by modulations. The dramatic opening is in C minor leading to the B section in the relative major key of Eb major, with the dominant 7th in the key of Eb being featured heavily. The contrast of major and minor keys gives a great opportunity for characterisation. Try writing descriptive words on the music for each section for inspiration.

Eb major scale and C minor scale are on the grade 4 syllabus so may have been covered before but definitely worth revisiting them now as well as introducing the dominant 7th arpeggio in Eb. Using a metronome, see if you can gradually build up the speed of the scales to match the tempo marking of the piece. This would mean playing semiquavers at around 88 BPM.

Percussive rhythms

Using body percussion or a shaker, play along with the ABRSM recording, copying the rhythms you hear or creating up your own. The dramatic drive to the music partly comes from the syncopation. This can be tricky to read so, your pupils might find it easier to learn the rhythm aurally. Try adding words to the patterns and demonstrate using call and response on one note only.

Melody and accompaniment

This piece is a musical conversation with the melody being passed between players. Listen to the ABRSM recording with your pupils to decide the role of the saxophone in each section. My favourite moment is at bar 37 where the saxophone dances delicately around the melody played by the piano before taking centre stage again at bar 44.

Ornaments

The trills in this piece are very effective and need to sound effortless. However, they are tricky as the LH little finger used to trill to Ab is quite weak. Keeping hands relaxed and the LH wrist still, try the trill slowly playing for as long as you can in one breath. Then gradually increase the speed and maintain the trill for far longer than the required minimum. It is possible to play trills at different speeds, so experiment with this to see how it changes the character. These exercises should be done in short bursts only to avoid any finger fatigue.

Articulation

To give the melody a sense of drama and flamboyance, I would suggest that the articulation should be light and clear. The start or attack of each note needs attention, and it is worth experimenting with different syllables such as *ta* or *ti*. Away from the saxophone, try singing a rhythm using one of the syllables. Then back on the saxophone, tongue the same rhythm on one note paying attention to the position of your tongue when you were singing.

I really enjoy playing this piece with its sense of journey as the saxophone climbs in pitch leading to a powerful and theatrical ending that will be memorable for the audience.