

# A Master Lesson on Ryo Noda's IMPROVISATION I by Steven Mauk

The name Ryo Noda should be quite familiar to most college-level and professional saxophonists. Many of his compositions for saxophone, especially the unaccompanied ones, have become contemporary classics in the instrument's repertoire. Of these, probably none is more popular than his IMPROVISATION I.

Noda was born in Amagasaki, Japan on October 17, 1948. He studied saxophone from 1968-72 at the Osaka College of Music with the famous Japanese pedagogue, Arata Sakaguchi. Noda continued his studies in the US with Fred Hemke at Northwestern University and in France with Jean-Marie Londeix at the Bordeaux Conservatory. Noda is particularly well known for his performance of avant-garde works for saxophone, many of which are his own compositions.

IMPROVISATION I, written in Toronto in 1972, was Noda's first composition for saxophone. It is specified for unaccompanied alto saxophone and was unique at the time, due to its combination of Eastern and Western musical styles. The work, published in 1974 by Leduc, is approximately four minutes in duration and is dedicated to Jean-Marie Londeix.

## **Style**

The first aspect to consider in this piece is that of style. Those players who have grown up with European harmonies and tonalities may have difficulties interpreting the Japanese aspects of the piece. To prepare my students, I assign them recordings of Japanese music, specifically pieces that use the shakuhachi (an end-blown bamboo flute with five finger holes). This allows them to become immersed in the sound of Japanese music, so that they can better represent this style when playing the piece. Go to this web site to hear examples of shakuhachi flute playing (<http://www.shakuhachi.com/TOC-AudioLinks.html>).

Next, I have them do some basic analysis of the work, both for scale material and form. They quickly realize that the much of the piece is based around the five-note pentatonic scale of A-B-C-E-F. This scale, along with its neighbor tones, is clearly seen as the basis for the introduction, the *Vivo* and *Piu vivo*, and the closing *Tempo I* sections. The form is loosely an A-B-A, with a few bridge sections in between. (I use the double slashes with *fermati* as section breaks, which help me delineate the form.) The lack of meter and bar lines, however, evokes an improvisatory feeling, as if the player is merely creating a work around this scalar material.

Not all of the music is oriental in style. The trills at the end of line two, the first half of line five, and the opening figure in line six all sound like Western-influenced classical music. These may be played using standard vibrato, tone, and musical shaping.

## Pacing

The interpretation of the suggested tempo, rhythmic values, and notated rests and *fermati* play a major role in determining the pace of this piece. Noda marks *Lent et soutenu* at the beginning, which means "slowly and sustained." He indicates that an eighth note should be performed at the metronome marking of 80. This does not mean that the IMPROVISATION should be pulsated or played metronomically. Noda only gives some general guidelines to help the performer establish a pace.

One good way to practice this is to set the metronome at 80 and count out the beats from the beginning to the first *fermata*. Do this several times, so you get a sense of how much physical time is used to perform this passage. Then, without counting, play or sing the passage to fill that approximate amount of time, being sure to keep rhythms generally in proportion. By doing this, the piece avoids a pulse, but still occupies the appropriate amount of time.

One particular pacing problem occurs in the middle of line two, during the bracketed *ad lib.* section. Most students will just play these notes in a rather fast, rhythmic manner. I think that, just like a jazz *ad lib.* passage, this cadenza should be played in the style of the preceding music. Add some dynamics, rests, variable vibrato, grace notes, and cutting tones, just as was used in the first two lines. This makes the *cadenza* more interesting and continues the Japanese style.

The *accelerando* at the end of line two is quite important. It is used to set up the following *Vivo* and *Piu vivo* passages. The trills should always be rapid with the time between notes being reduced, as indicated by the diminishing rhythmic values.

Probably the biggest mistake most performers make is in playing the *Vivo* and *Piu vivo* passages too fast. Remember that *Vivo* only means "lively"; it does not mean play as fast as you can. I suggest that saxophonists practice it by eliminating the grace notes and just playing the melody. Shape this melody, adding both some *accelerandos* and *decelerandos*, to make it more interesting. Once the phrase shape has been established, the grace notes can be reinserted. Noda's marking of *non mesuré* (not measured) confirms this idea of metric flexibility.

The *Piu vivo* should only be a bit faster. Notice that Noda marks this passage with sixteenth notes followed by sixteenth rests. Together they still add up to eighth-note values, as in the *Vivo*, only now the notes are abruptly clipped. Do not be fooled into thinking this passage is twice as fast. Save the real speed for the end of the *Piu vivo*, where the *accelerando* is marked, or it will just sound sloppy.

The interpretation of the frequent *fermati* can also effect the pacing of the piece. Notice that *fermati* are used over a variety of sixteenth rests, eighth rests, whole and dotted-whole notes, as well as single and double slashes. Be sure you give these *fermati* different values, so that all the pauses do not become the same.

## Fingerings

An element that greatly affects the stylistic performance of IMPROVISATION I is the use of altered fingerings. I use them throughout the piece to create a more hollow, flute-like quality, similar to the *shakuhachi* mentioned previously. The following examples may be of help, but keep in mind that each brand and model of saxophone will require slightly different fingerings.

The initial D# is played with the palm E-flat and E keys only, while the middle E is played by just adding the high F# to this previous combination. The same fingerings are used on the D#-E just before the first *fermata*, as well as those throughout the rest of line one. The same altered fingerings are used at the end of line five and at the *Tempo I* of line six.

There are several other spots where altered or alternate fingerings simplify the piece. The middle of line two has a B to A#, which is best performed with a 1-4 fingering (the first fingers of each hand). This can then be followed by an alternate F#, which resolves smoothly to the F-natural. At the end of line two, the B-C trill should be played with the Side C, while the D-B tremolo works well with a B plus palm E-natural key.

The middle C# grace notes at the *Vivo* work best with a "covered" C# fingering. Begin by fingering the middle E and just lift the first and second fingers of the left hand to produce the C#. When the notes change to an F or D, use a different "base" in the right hand to correspond. (By the way, I think there is a mistake in the music near the end of line 3. I think the G# in the second group should be preceded by a high C#, not a middle C#.)

In the fifth line, the high C-F# leap works well using the front F fingering plus the high F# key. This means you have to roll the first finger a bit to get down to the B, but it does eliminate having to coordinate all of the palm keys at once on the upward leap. The same fingering can be used for the high F# near the beginning of line six. Other creative uses of fingerings are mentioned under the section of *Special Effects*.

### **Special Effects**

There are a variety of special effects used in this work, including variable vibrato, *portamento*, quarter tones, pitch bending, flutter tonguing, timbre trills, and cutting tones. While the chart on the last page of the music describes these terms, it does not indicate how they are to be performed. A brief discussion of these techniques may be of help.

Vibrato plays a major roll in IMPROVISATION I. The piece begins with straight tone and gradually develops into a vibrato. The undulations follow the shape of the wavy line drawn below the staff. (Be careful that only the vibrato changes, not the dynamic.) Avoid taking Noda's vibrato diagrams too literally, however, or the vibrato can become too wide. This will create a comical rather than mysterious effect. To retain the Japanese style, it is best to avoid vibrato except where indicated. The exceptions might be the beginnings of line five and six, which benefit from a more traditional approach. I even use a timbre vibrato at the beginning of the last note of the piece. I lower and raise the first two fingers of the right hand to bend the pitch up and down, and gradually change to a jaw vibrato as the amplitude decreases. The effect is more unique and effective than when using just a jaw vibrato.

*Portamento* means a bending or sliding between notes. This is easy to do with the voice, trombone, or string instrument, but difficult on the saxophone. The first pitch bend occurs in line one, where the upper A is bent 1/4 tone flat, back up to normal and then 1/4 tone sharp. I lower the jaw, open the oral cavity, and slowly add the first finger of the right hand to bring the pitch down. To raise it, I bring the jaw up while gradually adding the second and third fingers of the right hand, eventually ending up 1/4 tone sharp. (Other fingerings may work best on your instrument.) Practice will be required to make this bend seamless, without any abrupt shifts. This same figure is used at the end of the piece.

The other *portamenti* are indicated with bow-shaped markings. The intent is to bend from one note to the next, again as seamlessly and smoothly as possible. Line two contains a *portamento* from low E to middle D. I finger the low E and gradually raise the fingers of first the right, then the left hand, while slowly adding the Side C and palm E-flat keys to produce the D-natural. In addition, I quickly drop the jaw as soon as I begin to open keys and then slowly bring it up to produce the bend. Like the first *portamento*, this will need much practice to coordinate the jaw and fingers and to work out all of the bumps.

I use the same approach and palm-key fingerings for the *portamento* passage at the end of line five. The bend from middle A to B is done by slowly opening the Side B-flat, then lifting the second finger and manipulating the jaw as before. The *portamento* from B to E is done similarly and I again use the palm E-flat, E and F# keys to finger the middle E. Bending the jaw downward and slowly releasing the palm E and F# keys will make a smooth *portamento* to the final D at the end of the line.

One of the most confusing sections of the piece is the colored-in *decrescendo* marking on the last note of the first line. The chart indicates that this note should "Grow hazy tone or Flatter," which means very little. Above the note is the abbreviation *flatterz.*, which likely stands for *flatterzunge*, the German word for flutter tongue. This makes more sense and is what I use. For those who cannot flutter tongue, the *ad lib.* gives the player the option to eliminate this effect and merely *decrescendo*.

The timbre trills, used at the end of line four, are easier to understand. The high C# is played, followed by random and rapid finger motion using the fingerings suggested in the chart. The speed of the timbre changes are indicated by a diagram made up of tiny Xs: first very active, gradually slowing down, briefly speeding up again, and finally slowing to resolve into the high C-natural at the beginning of line five. Remember that the *decrescendo* is separate from the finger motion, so do not get louder when you speed up the fingers.

The most uniquely Japanese of the special effects are the *cutting tones*. These are short, accented, and abrupt releases of tone. I use a tongue release to stop the reed, making the effect more dramatic. There should be, however, no heavy tongue slap, just a sudden cutting off of the tone. Listening to Japanese music that employs this technique will help players understand how they are to be performed.

One last effect can be quite stunning if performed correctly. The high D# trills in line four are to be played with an *accelerando*, *crescendo* and progressively heavier accents. To amplify this effect, I add a quick pitch bend to each note (almost like one quick vibrato), which gets continuously wider and wilder. The effect is more like a human scream or howl than a saxophone trill and is reminiscent of Japanese vocal techniques. This is not indicated in the chart, but is a very effective personal interpretation of this figure.

Ryo Noda's IMPROVISATION I is an excellent contemporary piece for unaccompanied saxophone and one that creates a wonderful mood for the listener. Most advanced students with time and patience can master the techniques. I hope that these suggestions will make this creative piece easier to interpret and perform.