
The Saxophone Program From Conservatory to Career

Reverse Engineering Success for the Modern Saxophonist · the Preparatory Year to the Ninth-Year
Maîtrise.

Thomas Hornig · Professor of Saxophone 1994 to 2024 · Henri Selmer Paris Artist · The Whole Horn

Reverse engineering success

The philosophy

The philosophy guiding this proposal is simple yet profound: to succeed as musicians, our students must be at the center of the musical experience. They must be classically trained and jazz-trained, receptive to all musical styles, and, above all, they must possess a work ethic that is second to none. Leadership in music is defined by hard work and dedication, and it is this ethos that we seek to instill in our students.

The blueprint

It is not merely a curriculum revision; it is a blueprint for cultivating the next generation of musicians who are not only technically proficient but are also versatile, innovative, and resilient in the face of an uncertain future.

This forward-thinking approach is designed to equip our students with the skills they need to navigate and thrive in a world where traditional boundaries are constantly being redrawn. By reverse-engineering success, we ensure that our students are not merely surviving in this changing landscape but are leading the way forward.

The ethos

“Leadership in music is defined by hard work and dedication, and it is this ethos that we seek to instill in our students.”

They must be classically trained and jazz-trained, receptive to all musical styles, and, above all, they must possess a work ethic that is second to none.

The first twelve weeks

Watch the video · 26 s

PHASES 1–2 · WEEKS 1–4

Phase 1: Foundational Setup and Embouchure (Weeks 1–2)

Instrument Assembly and Familiarization · Posture and Hand Position · Embouchure Development

Phase 2: Sound Production and Relaxation (Weeks 2–4)

Initial Sound Production · Relaxation Techniques

Long tones

Open in the app

Long tones · soft to full and back (messa di voce)

Open in the app

PHASES 3–4 · WEEKS 3–12

Phase 3: Articulation and Scale Introduction (Weeks 3–5)

Articulation Fundamentals · Introduction to Major Scales

Phase 4: Mastery of the 12 Major Scales (Weeks 5–12)

Achieve fluidity in all 12 major scales across the full range of the instrument.

The first twelve weeks

C major, one octave, staccato then tenuto; G, F and B $\flat$ major, one octave

[Open in the app](#)

Major scales, all 12 keys · full range (written low B $\flat$ to high F) · Full Studio; two octaves on the free app

[Open in the app](#)

Begin the journey towards mastering all 12 major scales, which are the foundation of improvisation and technical fluency. As students gain confidence in their scales and technical skills, introduce them to ensemble playing.

Structured Saxophone Program: Early Development Phases

Every year, in The Whole Horn

Each link opens the year's scales in The Whole Horn, written for the student's own saxophone (all 12 keys; the app starts at two octaves, ♩ =60).

Preparatory Year

Major scales · all 12 keys

Open

First Year

Major scales and arpeggios

Open

Second Year

Major and harmonic minor scales

Open

Third Year

Major, harmonic minor, arpeggios

Open

Fourth Year

Major, harmonic minor, arpeggios

Open

Fifth Year

Diminished scales

Open

Every year, in The Whole Horn

Each link opens the year's scales in The Whole Horn, written for the student's own saxophone (all 12 keys; the app starts at two octaves, ♩ =60).

Sixth Year

Diminished scales · arpeggiated 7ths

Open

Seventh & Eighth Years

Daily routine · scales and arpeggios

Open

Preparatory Year

Building the Foundation Through Engagement and Performance

Watch the video · 20 s
thewholehorn.com/curriculum/saxophone-program/

Watch the video

Curriculum focus

Embouchure and Sound Production: Focus on creating a stable, flexible embouchure and producing a clear, consistent tone.

Hand Position and Fingerings: Introduce basic fingerings starting with G, A, B, C, and progressing to other notes as the student gains confidence.

Note Recognition: Use exercises to help students identify notes on the staff and connect them with the correct fingerings.

Rhythm Reading: Begin with simple rhythms in 4/4 time, using whole notes, half notes, and quarter notes.

Scale Practice: Start with the C major scale, focusing on even tone and finger transitions.

Articulation Exercises: Introduce simple articulation patterns within the scale practice to develop clear tonguing and breath control.

Simple Repertoire: Introduce easy, melodic pieces that are both enjoyable and educational.

Long tones

Open in the app

The Milestone: every note, from G up to the top and down to the bottom, tongued, very quietly

Open in the app

C major, one octave, in whole, half and quarter notes

Open in the app

Preparatory Year

Building the Foundation Through Engagement and Performance

Major scales, all 12 keys, one octave

Open in the app

C major, one octave, staccato then tenuto

Open in the app

The year

Each week: Individual Lessons (1-on-1 Sessions) · Ensemble Rehearsals · Masterclasses · Performance Opportunities.

Ongoing Evaluation: Regular check-ins during lessons to assess students' progress with note recognition, rhythm reading, and basic technical skills.

“Students in the preparatory year should be encouraged to learn all 12 scales. This is counterintuitive for most educators. The rationale is retention. Students are very concerned with their own success, and if they can be led to believe that learning 12 scales is an absolute necessity, on the other side of that they will see themselves as outliers. This is why the Milestone exercise in the app really is a milestone.”

Practice this year in The Whole Horn

Open in the app

First Year

Building on the Foundation with Increased Structure and Performance

Watch the video · 24 s
thewholehorn.com/curriculum/saxophone-program/

Watch the video

Curriculum focus

Scales and Arpeggios: Continue with the 12 major scales, now expanding to two octaves where possible.

Long Tones and Dynamics: Exercises to develop control over dynamics and tone quality.

Theory Basics: Introduction to intervals, simple key signatures, and basic chord structures.

Sight-Reading: Begin sight-reading simple pieces, focusing on accuracy in rhythm and pitch.

Articulation Exercises: Continued work on tonguing techniques, with exercises that introduce staccato, legato, and slurs.

Phrasing Concepts: Introduction to the idea of musical sentences, encouraging students to think about how phrases should be shaped and connected.

Simple Pieces: Start with simple melodies and gradually introduce pieces that incorporate basic articulation and phrasing techniques.

Etudes: Introduce very simple etudes that focus on specific technical aspects, such as articulation or rhythm.

Major scales and tonic & dominant arpeggios, all 12 keys, two octaves

Open in the app

Long tones · soft to full and back (messa di voce)

Open in the app

First Year

Building on the Foundation with Increased Structure and Performance

Intervals by ear (Name It, level 1); 3rds and triads in the major keys

[Open in the app](#)

Major scales, two octaves, staccato then tenuto

[Open in the app](#)

The year

Each week: Individual Lessons (1-on-1 Sessions) · Ensemble Rehearsals · Masterclasses · Performance Opportunities.

Daily Practice: Parents should ensure that their child practices for at least 30 minutes each day, gradually increasing the time as the child becomes more comfortable with their instrument.

Practice this year in The Whole Horn

[Open in the app](#)

Second Year

Building Technique and Introducing Expressive Playing

Watch the video · 17 s
thewholehorn.com/curriculum/saxophone-program/

Watch the video

Curriculum focus

Scales and Arpeggios: Focus on mastering major and natural minor scales, with an introduction to harmonic minor scales.

Long Tones and Dynamics: Exercises to improve dynamic control and tone quality, focusing on smooth transitions and a balanced sound across different dynamics.

Theory Development: Expand on rhythmic concepts such as dotted rhythms and syncopation.

Sight-Reading: Develop sight-reading skills using simple etudes and pieces that challenge the student's ability to quickly recognize notes, rhythms, and key changes.

Articulation Exercises: Continue working on clear, consistent tonguing and slurring, with an emphasis on developing control over different articulation patterns.

Phrasing Concepts: Explore phrasing more deeply, encouraging students to think about the emotional content of their music and how to express it through dynamics, articulation, and tempo.

Classical Repertoire: Introduce intermediate-level classical pieces that challenge the student's technical abilities while developing their musical expression.

Etudes: Begin working on simple etudes that focus on specific technical challenges, such as those by Langenus or small sections from Heller's Etudes.

Part 1 of 2: major scale, natural minor scale, chromatic scale, tonic & dominant arpeggios · two octaves

Open in the app

Part 2 of 2: harmonic minor scale · two octaves

Open in the app

Second Year

Building Technique and Introducing Expressive Playing

Long tones · soft to full and back (messa di voce)

[Open in the app](#)

Major and natural minor scales, two octaves, staccato then tenuto

[Open in the app](#)

The year

Each week: Individual Lessons (1-on-1 Sessions) · Ensemble Rehearsals · Masterclasses · Performance Opportunities.

Structured Practice: Parents should continue to ensure that their child practices regularly, aiming for 45 minutes to an hour a day.

Method books: Selected Studies for Saxophone — H. Voxman; Melodious and Progressive Studies for Saxophone, Book 1 — David Hite.

Practice this year in The Whole Horn

[Open in the app](#)

Third Year

Developing Technical Proficiency and Musical Independence

Watch the video · 19 s
thewholehorn.com/curriculum/saxophone-program/

Watch the video

Curriculum focus

Scales and Arpeggios: Students should master all major, natural minor, harmonic minor, and melodic minor scales, extending to three octaves where possible.

Altissimo and Extended Techniques: Begin introducing the basics of altissimo playing (higher register) and other extended techniques such as growling or multiphonics, as appropriate to the student's level and interest.

Advanced Theory Concepts: Students will explore more complex harmonic structures, including secondary dominants, modulations, and chromaticism.

Sight-Reading: Sight-reading exercises will now include pieces with more challenging rhythms, key changes, and less predictable melodic lines.

Complex Articulation Patterns: Exercises should now include more varied and complex articulation patterns within scales, etudes, and repertoire.

Advanced Phrasing: Students will work on shaping longer, more complex phrases, understanding how to use dynamics, rubato, and articulation to convey the emotional content of the music.

Classical Pieces: Introduction of intermediate to advanced classical repertoire, such as pieces by Jean-Baptiste Singelée, Heitor Villa-Lobos, or Eugene Bozza.

Etudes: Continue with more advanced etudes from composers like H. Klose or C. Rose.

Jazz Standards and Improvisation: Begin working on more complex jazz standards, focusing on both improvisation and interpretation.

Part 1 of 2: major scale, natural minor scale, chromatic scale, tonic & dominant arpeggios, diminished 7th arpeggios, augmented triads · full range (written low B $\flat$ to high F) · Full Studio; two octaves on the free app

Open in the app

Third Year

Developing Technical Proficiency and Musical Independence

Part 2 of 2: harmonic minor scale, melodic minor scale · full range (written low B $\flat$ to high F) · Full Studio; two octaves on the free app

[Open in the app](#)

The year

Each week: Individual Lessons (1-on-1 Sessions) · Ensemble Rehearsals · Masterclasses · Performance Opportunities.

Encouragement of Independence: Parents should continue to support their child's practice routine but also encourage greater independence.

Daily practice: an hour to an hour and a half a day.

Method books: Jazz Conception for Saxophone — Jim Snidero.

Practice this year in The Whole Horn

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Fourth Year

Transitioning to Advanced Studies and Professional Preparation

Watch the video · 24 s
thewholehorn.com/curriculum/saxophone-program/

Watch the video

Curriculum focus

Advanced Scales and Arpeggios: Mastery of all scales (major, harmonic minor, melodic minor) and arpeggios across the full range of the instrument, including altissimo register.

Altissimo Register: Focused exercises on developing control and consistency in the altissimo register, with an emphasis on tone quality and intonation.

Extended Techniques: Introduction to extended techniques such as multiphonics, which are essential for contemporary repertoire.

Advanced Harmonic Analysis: Detailed study of harmonic structures, including modulations, secondary dominants, and complex chord progressions.

Counterpoint and Voice Leading: Introduction to the principles of counterpoint and voice leading, with practical applications in both classical and jazz contexts.

Complex Articulation Patterns: Exercises that incorporate varied articulation within complex passages, focusing on precision and clarity.

Advanced Phrasing: Students will refine their phrasing techniques, focusing on long, complex phrases and the use of rubato, dynamics, and articulation to shape the musical line.

Classical Repertoire: Introduction to advanced classical works by composers such as Glazunov, Ibert, and Debussy.

Etudes: Continue with advanced etudes from composers like Jean-Marie Londeix and Marcel Mule.

Jazz Standards and Contemporary Music: Exploration of more complex jazz standards and contemporary music, with an emphasis on improvisation, interpretation, and the integration of extended techniques.

Part 1 of 2: major scale, harmonic minor scale, tonic & dominant arpeggios, chromatic scale · full range (written low B $\flat$ to high F) · Full Studio; two octaves on the free app

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Fourth Year

Transitioning to Advanced Studies and Professional Preparation

Part 2 of 2: melodic minor scale · full range (written low B $\flat$ to high F) · Full Studio; two octaves on the free app

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The year

Each week: Individual Lessons (1-on-1 Sessions) · Ensemble Rehearsals · Masterclasses · Performance Opportunities.

Parental Involvement: While students at this level should be increasingly independent, parental support remains important.

Daily practice, from this year on: 3 to 6 hours a day; at least three hours on a bad day.

The expectation, for students and parents in the Fourth and Fifth Year: 4 to 5 hours a day.

That would be the year that really determines whether or not they're going to make it through to the seventh and eighth year.

Method books: Exercises Journaliers d'Entretien — Marcel Mule; 48 Famous Studies for Oboe or Saxophone — W. Ferling, edited by André J. Maquarre.

"When you prepare for performance, there are no half measures. It doesn't work that way."

"This is a serious course in a serious conservatory, and unless you're gonna seriously engage, the conservatory is really not very impressed, and ... the backing and support and the endorsement of that student on the part of the conservatory is contingent upon their reciprocal engagement, following the recommendations of their teachers."

Practice this year in The Whole Horn

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Fifth Year

Advanced Level

Core objectives

Technical Mastery: Students will achieve a higher level of technical proficiency, focusing on extended techniques, advanced articulation, and control over a broader dynamic range.

Expressive Performance: Developing the ability to interpret and perform more emotionally and stylistically complex pieces with a focus on phrasing, tone color, and expression.

Expanded Repertoire: Introduction to more challenging repertoire, including contemporary works and transcriptions of pieces originally written for other instruments.

Musical Interpretation: Students will begin to make informed interpretative choices, drawing from historical and theoretical knowledge.

Ensemble Collaboration: Continued emphasis on ensemble playing, focusing on chamber music and smaller ensemble settings, as well as participation in wind orchestras and big bands.

Assessment

Technical Proficiency: Evaluated through technical exams, focusing on scales, arpeggios, and études.

Repertoire Performance: Assessment through solo performances, with an emphasis on interpretative choices and technical execution.

Ensemble Participation: Graded on collaboration, leadership within the ensemble, and overall contribution to the group's performance.

Music Theory and History: Written and oral exams testing understanding of the theoretical and historical context of studied pieces.

Improvisation: Graded on creativity, fluency, and integration of classical and jazz elements in performances.

Daily practice: 4 to 5 hours a day (from the Fourth Year on, 3 to 6 hours a day; at least three hours on a bad day).

Part 1 of 2: whole-tone scale, diminished (half-whole) scale · full range (written low B $\flat$ to high F) · Full Studio; two octaves on the free app

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Fifth Year

Advanced Level

Part 2 of 2: diminished (whole-half) scale · full range (written low B $\flat$ to high F) · Full Studio; two octaves on the free app

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Practice this year in The Whole Horn

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Sixth Year

Mastery and Professional Preparation

Watch the video · 22 s
thewholehorn.com/curriculum/saxophone-program/

Watch the video

Curriculum focus

Advanced Altissimo and Extended Techniques: Focused development of the altissimo register, with exercises that aim for precision, consistency, and musicality.

Complex Scales and Arpeggios: Mastery of all scales, including whole-tone, diminished, and augmented scales, as well as complex arpeggios that cover the full range of the instrument.

Advanced Harmonic Analysis: In-depth study of advanced harmonic concepts, including chromaticism, polytonality, and complex modulations.

Form and Structure: Detailed analysis of the form and structure of complex pieces, with an emphasis on how these elements inform interpretation and performance.

Nuanced Articulation: Advanced exercises in articulation that focus on achieving clarity and precision in even the most challenging passages.

Expressive Phrasing: Continued development of expressive phrasing, with an emphasis on shaping long, complex phrases and creating a coherent musical narrative.

Classical Masterworks: Students will prepare and perform advanced classical repertoire, including concertos, sonatas, and other major works by composers such as Glazunov, Ibert, Denisov, and Creston.

Contemporary and New Music: Exploration of contemporary music, including works by living composers and pieces that incorporate extended techniques.

Jazz and Improvised Music: For students specializing in jazz or contemporary music, continued work on jazz standards, original compositions, and free improvisation.

Part 1 of 2: whole-tone scale, diminished (half-whole) scale, tonic & dominant arpeggios, 7th chords on the major scale, 9th chords on the major scale, diminished 7th arpeggios, augmented triads · full range (written low B $\flat$ to high F) · Full Studio; two octaves on the free app

Open in the app

Sixth Year

Mastery and Professional Preparation

Part 2 of 2: diminished (whole-half) scale · full range (written low B $\flat$ to high F) · Full Studio; two octaves on the free app

[Open in the app](#)

The year

Each week: Individual Lessons (1-on-1 Sessions) · Ensemble Rehearsals · Masterclasses · Performance Opportunities.

Career Planning and Development: Throughout the year, students should work on developing their professional portfolios, including recording demo tracks, building a resume, and creating an online presence.

Method books: Londeix Guide to the Saxophone Repertoire, 1844–2012 — Jean-Marie Londeix.

Daily practice: 4 to 5 hours a day (from the Fourth Year on, 3 to 6 hours a day; at least three hours on a bad day).

Practice this year in The Whole Horn

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Seventh Year

Licence · Advanced Studies in Saxophone

Curriculum focus

Etudes and Exercises: Intensive work on advanced etudes (e.g., Marcel Mule, Jean-Marie Londeix, Sigurd Raschèr) and technical exercises designed to address specific challenges and enhance overall proficiency.

Scales and Arpeggios: Continued emphasis on scales, arpeggios, and other technical exercises, with a focus on speed, accuracy, and evenness across the instrument's range.

Solo Repertoire: Advanced works for solo saxophone, including concertos, sonatas, and contemporary pieces.

Chamber Music Repertoire: A selection of challenging chamber works, ranging from classical to modern, that require a high level of ensemble playing and interpretative collaboration.

Historical and Stylistic Interpretation: Detailed study of performance practice across different periods, focusing on historically informed interpretation and the adaptation of stylistic elements to the saxophone.

Contemporary Techniques: Exploration of extended techniques (e.g., multiphonics, altissimo register, circular breathing) and their application in contemporary repertoire.

Part 1 of 2: major scale, natural minor scale, whole-tone scale, diminished (half-whole) scale, chromatic scale, tonic & dominant arpeggios · full range (written low B $\flat$ to high F) · Full Studio; two octaves on the free app

Open in the app

Part 2 of 2: harmonic minor scale, melodic minor scale, diminished (whole-half) scale · full range (written low B $\flat$ to high F) · Full Studio; two octaves on the free app

Open in the app

Seventh Year

Licence · Advanced Studies in Saxophone

The year

Each week: Individual Lessons (1-on-1 Sessions) · Chamber Music and Ensemble Rehearsals · Masterclasses and Workshops · Performance Opportunities · Academic Studies · Electives.

Final Recital: The primary assessment for the seventh year, where students will present a program that showcases their technical and artistic achievements.

Daily practice: 4 to 5 hours a day (from the Fourth Year on, 3 to 6 hours a day; at least three hours on a bad day).

“4 to 5 hours a day is what the expectation would be for those degrees anywhere in the world, and that should be the standard, and ... it gets progressively more serious.”

Practice this year in The Whole Horn

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Eighth Year

Advanced Preparation for Maîtrise

Curriculum focus

Daily Technical Routine: Students will follow a daily routine of scales, arpeggios, and technical exercises designed to maintain and enhance their technical skills.

Advanced Etudes: Continued study of etudes from composers like Marcel Mule, Jean-Marie Londeix, and others, chosen for their technical difficulty and ability to develop specific aspects of saxophone playing.

Solo Repertoire: A selection of challenging solo works, including major concertos, sonatas, and contemporary pieces.

Chamber Music Repertoire: Students will engage with complex chamber music works that require advanced ensemble skills and a deep understanding of musical interaction.

Interpretation Across Styles: Continued emphasis on the interpretation of different musical styles, with an exploration of performance practices from the Baroque period to contemporary music.

Contemporary Music Techniques: Exploration of contemporary saxophone techniques, including the use of electronics, improvisation, and non-traditional notation.

Part 1 of 2: major scale, natural minor scale, whole-tone scale, diminished (half-whole) scale, chromatic scale, tonic & dominant arpeggios, 3rds on the major scale, 7th chords on the major scale · full range (written low B $\flat$ to high F) · Full Studio; two octaves on the free app

[Open in the app](#)

Part 2 of 2: harmonic minor scale, melodic minor scale · full range (written low B $\flat$ to high F) · Full Studio; two octaves on the free app

[Open in the app](#)

Eighth Year

Advanced Preparation for Maîtrise

The year

Each week: Individual Lessons (1-on-1 Sessions) · Chamber Music and Ensemble Rehearsals · Masterclasses and Workshops · Performance Opportunities · Academic Studies · Electives.

Pre-Maîtrise Recitals: Multiple recitals throughout the year will serve as both assessments and preparation for the Maîtrise recital.

Daily practice: 4 to 5 hours a day (from the Fourth Year on, 3 to 6 hours a day; at least three hours on a bad day).

Practice this year in The Whole Horn

[Open in the app](#)

Ninth Year

For the ninth-year Maîtrise program, students should present a repertoire that not only challenges their technical prowess but also demands deep musical understanding and interpretative skill.

Maîtrise repertoire

Henri Tomasi – Concerto for Alto Saxophone and Orchestra
Edison Denisov – Concerto for Alto Saxophone and Orchestra
Pierre Max Dubois – Concerto for Alto Saxophone
Edison Denisov – Sonata for Alto Saxophone and Piano
Luciano Berio – Sequenza IXb for Alto Saxophone
William Albright – Sonata for Alto Saxophone and Piano

The Maîtrise

Performance Experience: By the ninth year, students should have extensive performance experience with a wide range of repertoire.

Well-Rounded Development: The goal is to ensure that students emerge from the Maîtrise program as versatile musicians, capable of tackling both the classical saxophone canon and the most demanding contemporary works.

Evaluation Criteria: In their final recital, students should be evaluated on their ability to interpret a diverse selection of works, demonstrating not only technical proficiency but also artistic maturity and a deep understanding of the stylistic nuances of each piece.

Daily practice: 4 to 5 hours a day (from the Fourth Year on, 3 to 6 hours a day; at least three hours on a bad day).

"4 to 5 hours a day is what the expectation would be for those degrees anywhere in the world, and that should be the standard, and ... it gets progressively more serious."

Practice the Seventh & Eighth Year routine

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The three cycles

Watch the video · 24 s

Preparatory Cycle

Preparatory to Third Year (High School Equivalent, roughly the French lycée)

During these years, the primary goal is to establish a strong foundation in musical technique, literacy, and performance.

First Higher Cycle

Fourth to Seventh Year (College/University Equivalent, ending in the Licence)

The focus shifts towards specialization, with students expected to engage in more complex repertoire, develop a personal style, and prepare for professional-level performance.

Second Higher Cycle

Eighth and Ninth Year (Graduate Equivalent, ending in the Maîtrise)

Two years at master's level.

The three cycles

The Leap

Developing a Musical Identity

It is during the early years that students should begin to see themselves as musicians, with music as a central part of their identity.

The leap from the Preparatory Cycle to the First Higher Cycle is not just a technical or academic one—it is also psychological and emotional.

The whole course

Every year of The Study of Saxophone, with its method books, repertoire and exam requirements, is on thewholehorn.com.

The Saxophone Program and the Study of Saxophone

“There is no conflict. One is a program that lines up with what [conservatories] are likely to want to prescribe, in a world where beginner students still don’t know what they want ... The Study of Saxophone. That is my research, and it’s wide open, and it doesn’t really have to conform to any program that’s out there ... a library of resources available to students and teachers around the world.”

By reverse-engineering success, we ensure that our students are not merely surviving in this changing landscape but are leading the way forward.

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