

An Overtones & Altissimo Primer



Playing the altissimo range of the saxophone takes a special set of skills and chops that must be specially learned and developed. NO ONE can just pick up a sax and play altissimo like Lenny Pickett.

What does it take to be able to play altissimo?

1. A really good tone from the lowest to the highest notes of your horn.
2. The right embouchure.
3. A great set of ears that have been developed through practice.

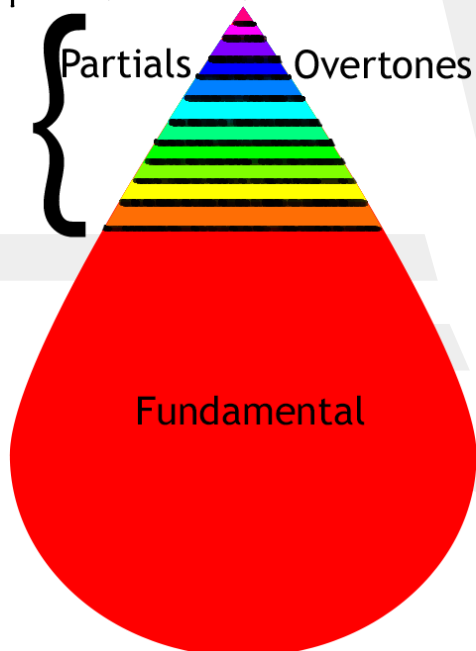
When should I start practicing altissimo?

1. When you are able to hear the pitches of the notes you want to play, before you play them.
2. When you've got a good tone, and spot-on intonation over the entire range of your sax.
3. Your embouchure is correct.

If any one or more of these is missing, work on these fundamentals before attempting the advanced techniques of overtones/altissimo.

What are overtones?

All notes played on woodwind and brass wind instruments are made up of various parts. The fundamental is the strongest, most prominent tone you hear. The weaker ones are called partials, overtones, or harmonics.



Before you can learn altissimo, you must be able to play overtones. Period. Full stop.

Why do I have to learn overtones before altissimo?

Because altissimo notes are really nothing but a partial of a fundamental note. (Pretty colour raindrop pic on previous page.)

If you think you're ready for overtones/altissimo, then here are some pointers to keep in mind:

1. Altissimo is all about intervals, and you have to be able to hear them/the note before you play your target note. The best way to practice this is to use a tuner when doing things like octave jumps. EG:

Octaves.

134.

Make sure you practice these over the full range of your horn.

2. After octaves, try doing 5ths, then 4ths. Get to learn what those intervals sound like. Hear the note before you play it.

Fifths.

131.

Fourths.

130.

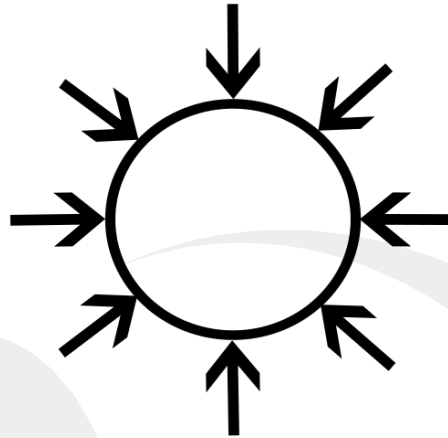
Like with the octaves, practice these over the full range of your horn.

3. We tend to blow sharp the higher we play on the horn, so it's critical that you can play from D₂ to F₃—F#₃ if you have a high F# key—in tune. It's not as easy as you might think—especially for notes C₃ and up.
4. If you're sharp in the top ½ of your horn here's what to try;
 - a. Drop the bottom jaw slightly
 - b. Bring the corners of your mouth in to form that “oooo” embouchure
 - c. Make sure you've got [good diaphragm support](#)
 - d. Don't allow your airstream to fluctuate

The key fundamentals when it comes to saxophone embouchure

1. Start with a review of Embouchure Exercises [Part 1](#) & [2](#).
2. The amount of MP you have in your mouth is going to vary depending on what size of horn you play. General rule: the bigger the horn, the more MP. Tenor players start with about 1/2”, alto players a little less, bari players a little more.
3. Fold about ½ of your bottom lip over your bottom teeth.
4. Form the “oooooo” sound with your lips to keep your lips positioned correctly & the corners brought in.
5. Keep your top teeth on the MP. DON'T BITE!

6. Keep your lower jaw relaxed, and your mouth in a circular position. Think of it like a wheel, with pressure exerted on it from all sides.



Stuff that can impact your altissimo efforts

Player

- ✓ Firmer embouchure necessary for altissimo may lead to biting. Don't let it.
- ✓ Learning to control lower jaw movement to allow optimal reed vibration.
- ✓ Learning to control the tongue and being able to arch it to the angle best able to increase air speed coming from the lungs. To do this, think: eeeeeeeee
- ✓ Proper diaphragm breathing is a must, since the speed of the air required for altissimo is greater than conventional notes.

Gear

- ✓ You may require harder reed due to increased embouchure tension.
- ✓ Some reeds work better than others here as well. I prefer synthetic reeds by Harry Hartmann. I use the Onyx, as well as the Copper Onyx. I also use the Legere Signature Series reeds on many of my horns. But I know lots of players who are cane purists, and will only play on cane—despite not being able to tell that I am a synthetic player. Go figure.
- ✓ Some mouthpieces simply work better than others. What works well for some players, may not work well for others.
- ✓ Some ligatures assist with altissimo, while others don't. A good MOR lig I have used since HS is the Rovner brand. I don't notice much difference between the dark and the light, but if I had a choice, I would pick the light. It does seem to make the top tones pop a bit easier.

- ✓ This is an area where players are going to have to experiment with different combos of MPs, reeds, & ligas until they find something that works for them, and that fits their overall style of play.

Excellent References for more information/study

Saxophone Altissimo: High Note Development for the Contemporary Saxophone Player, by Robert A. Luckey

The Art of Saxophone Playing, by Larry Teal

Developing a Personal Saxophone Sound, by David Liebman

Universal Method for Saxophone, by Paul DeVille