

Version 3 - Draft



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Introduction

The Manx Saxophone Ensemble was established in June 2007. Originally envisaged as a quartet, its profile changed rapidly and permanently when a dozen players turned up to the first meeting !

Since then, the ensemble has met on a weekly basis in term time for rehearsals, and has grown to around 15 players. We've become established on the island as an informal performance-oriented band. Our repertoire incorporates a wide variety of musical styles but accents livelier, upbeat tunes.

The MSE, as we're more commonly known, is a community group. It's a not-for-profit organisation, and we employ a relaxed membership policy. If you can read music, and play any type of saxophone, then we'd love to hear from you.

Entry to the group is subject to a limit on group numbers and instrumental balance (numbers of Altos, Tenors etc.) , and we make use of informal auditions to ensure incoming players will be able to both contribute positively to the group and feel comfortable in group rehearsals.

If you're reading this as a potential group member, please don't be put off by the idea of an audition. This is conducted in around ten minutes on a one-to-one basis, and the entry standard is not particularly challenging. As a guide, if you're able to play tunes to a CD backing, you've probably already achieved the standard of playing necessary !. Please see page 3 for details.

Our primary aim as a group is to have fun and promote saxophone music, through playing to the public at various island venues. With this in mind, our concert schedule generally comprises between 6 and 12 events each year, many of which are in the summer 'concert season'. In addition, we like to build in a few 'socials' as it's not all about the music.

Whilst the ensemble doesn't set out to teach the basic mechanics of how to play the saxophone, we do help our members to improve their playing and their confidence by addressing common performance techniques in rehearsals. However, we would always advise you to take saxophone lessons in addition to any MSE involvement, particularly if you have limited experience of playing the sax.

Learning and developing as both individual and group musicians, is at the heart of the MSE philosophy. In rehearsals you'll find yourself taking part in group exercises, and firming up on musical theory, as well as playing pieces from our extensive repertoire.

Developing your craft outside of the group's rehearsal schedule is entirely optional, but we've found that most players like to progress over time, and you'll find plenty of support for extra-curricular learning activities if you wish to take part. These might include playing in small groups, joining other groups to promote more varied experience, taking exams and so on.

To find out more, why not check out our 'About Us' page, and if you're already a saxophonist, you'll naturally want to move on to the 'Joining In' page !

We look forward to seeing you in rehearsals !

Jem Cotton

Jem Cotton

Music Director

Joining the MSE

Since its inception until May 2010, the MSE operated an open membership policy, with no specific entry criteria. However, as a result we saw a few inexperienced players apply to join the band, some of whom left quickly - sometimes after just a rehearsal or two.

From talking to a few of those who passed through the group in this way, we've learned that the level of music we now play in the MSE, whilst generally not particularly challenging, can be daunting for the complete beginner ... and trying to play in a group whilst being out of your depth, can be highly embarrassing experience.

The MSE now employs a simple audition for new starters,. This comprises a series of simple tests ;

- Playing the candidate's favourite piece (with or without backing)
- A short sight-reading test based on a typical MSE tune
- Discussing the candidate's knowledge of keys and scales and general musical terms and directions.

To clarify, we have set a fairly easy minimum standard for new entrants, simply to ensure they are able to join the group productively and enjoy the ongoing learning process with the ensemble. We're not necessarily looking for accomplished musicians, just those who will enjoy the experience, and contribute positively.

As a guide, the minimum set of abilities any player in the MSE should be able to demonstrate are ...

- Sight-reading music at an equivalent of ABRSM Grade 2, with a reasonable degree of accuracy
- Controlling the dynamic output of the instrument, and play with a consistent tone.
- Playing all the notes on a sax confidently (certainly from Low 'C' up to high 'D')

Individual Preparation

As the MSE is a community band which features players of greatly varying abilities, it follows that practice times and methods will vary to suit. Whilst an experienced player will get to know a piece quite well having played it only a few times, an inexperienced player may need to run through the same material many more times to get to the same level of fluency.

Preparation for Practice

We all set out with great ambitions to practice regularly, and then often find that in the event, we've put in rather less time than we'd promised we would. We're all busy people, and subject to distractions - so here's a few simple tips to help you practice regularly, and make the most of your practice time.

Build a Realistic Routine

If you decide for instance that you will practice twice a week for say 45 minutes, then find two suitable slots in your diary, write them down and stick to them. If you leave it open, on the basis that you'll 'find the time somewhere'. you won't. Other demands on your time will take priority and you'll reach the end of the week with no time to practice.

Don't put unrealistic demands on yourself. It's better to put in two 20 minute sessions and achieve them, than to go for three hour-long slots and fail to find time for any of them.

We each have our own preferences for practice slots - some prefer intensive sessions to really get in the flow, others prefer little and often as they get tired quickly. Adjust your practice regime to suit.

Take away the barriers to practice

If it takes you say 20 minutes to find everything you need and get set up to practice, then you will have established a substantial barrier, which will give you reasons to 'not bother today'.

If you have room and the facilities ...

Set out a ready-to-go practice area, with everything you need close to hand.

- **Your music source** - A home stereo (or PC with a decent speaker system) to play backing tracks

- **Your instrument**

- **A Music Stand and Sheet Music**

- **A Tuner**

- **A MIDI Player** - This is a 'nice to have', but can really assist your learning. Your PC will be able to play MIDI's, or you can purchase an inexpensive keyboard with MIDI playback facilities. If in doubt, ask the M.D. for advice on suitable models.

Ideas for effective Practice

Learn Scales and Keys

When you are familiar with the notes in any given key, playing pieces in that key becomes much easier. In particular, runs of notes (extracts from the scale) fall easily to hand. Playing scales is boring, but essential to becoming a fluent musician. The same applies to learning keys, but again it's essential. You should as a minimum learn the major scales to all of the keys played in the MSE **and commit them to memory**. The keys we generally use are 'C', and keys featuring up to four sharps and four flats.

Get in Tune, Stay in Tune

Buy a tuner. Before every playing and practice session, use the tuner to ensure you and your instrument are in tune, and listen carefully to the sound you make. Over time, you'll develop a sense of natural tune, and learn to judge when your instrument is in or out of tune - even without a tuner.

Combine Scales and Tuning

Play the notes of each scale slowly with a tuner in front of you, and adjust your embouchure to keep each note in tune. Initially, the lowest and highest notes will seem hardest to get in tune. Over time, your embouchure will change automatically to keep the notes in tune as you play.

Practising Pieces

For inexperienced players, my advice is always to start slowly, making sure you are able to play all the notes of a given piece comfortably, and have a good basic understanding of the structure. Once you've put this in place, you can increase the tempo, playing along to either a MIDI file or an MP3, to cement your earlier efforts and start become more familiar with the piece.

Practicing the notes and timings for a given piece of music, until you are comfortable with it, will have give you 'spare concentration room' which will allow you to focus on the finer points of the music.

When you've learned a piece effectively, you should be able to play the piece without undue reliance on the printed score. You will be able to look at the conductor / leader, then resume your playing without losing your place. We'll call this having a '**working knowledge**' of the piece.

Note : As a guide only, experienced players will be expected to achieve a working knowledge for ensemble pieces within two rehearsal sessions, less experienced players within four rehearsal sessions.

More experienced players will inevitably learn ensemble pieces more quickly than others, and are encouraged to actively support others in accelerating their learning through direct interaction and through playing their parts confidently for others to follow.

Check Bluenotes on the Web-site

Information on rehearsal sessions, concerts and events in general will be updated on a regular basis in 'Bluenotes' - a document in the member's area of the band's web-site (www.saxband.co.uk) . Please check this on a regular basis, and always before setting out for a rehearsal session, to make sure you're working to the latest information.

Group Rehearsals

Making effective use of our rehearsal sessions is essential if we're to make the most of the ensemble's musical potential. We assume that you will have put in whatever time is necessary during the week, to ensure that you are prepared for each rehearsal session. Therefore, this section of the guide details a few simple guidelines to help our rehearsal sessions run smoothly.

Punctuality

Yes, it sounds obvious - but we all fall into the trap of allowing 'just enough time' to get to practices, which inevitably leads to turning up as the practice starts. Please ensure you turn up with enough free time to set up your sax, get it warm and tune up ready for the start of the session. If you've got any burning questions to ask, now's the time - not when the session gets fully underway.

Consistency

Being in a music group requires dedication and consistency. If everyone else turns up to practice and you don't, not only will you find yourself falling behind, you'll inevitably start to hold the group back. This is unfair on everyone, so please make every effort to turn up to every practice, and stay for the allotted time.

Etiquette

Everyone suffers set-backs, minor emergencies and surprises. However, these are by definition rare events, and it's very seldom that you will find yourself having to miss a practice session at short notice. MSE rehearsals are often dependent upon individual players, so where you can please make sure you give the M.D. at least two day's notice if you are unable to attend.

Golden Silence

It's tempting to fill the short gaps in-between individual rehearsal pieces, with chatting to your neighbour or getting in a quick last-minute practice for the next tune on the list.

However, with members talking amongst themselves or 'noodling' with their instruments, communicating with the band becomes very hard work for the session leader.

There are times when we all take a small break between tunes, so if the leader is also taking a break feel free to get in a quick practice, or have a quick chat with whoever's around. However, please recognise when the leader is trying to talk to one or more band members, and stay quiet for the duration.

Following the C.A.L.L.

It's easy to find yourself in the trap of starting to play a piece of music without first checking it over. However, this is much like embarking on a car journey without looking at the map - you might well find surprises on the route that catch you out.

The CALL therefore, is a quick Aide Memoire, aimed at reminding you to take say 20 seconds before playing a piece of music to check it over, make sure you understand the flow, and take note of key instructions (changes of key and tempo, dynamic instructions and so on).

The CALL can be found at the end of this guide. Please print it out and keep it with you for reference.

Contributing Positively to the MSE

The MSE is an informal, friendly group with an accent on having fun through making music.

However, any such group needs to establish standards of conduct to ensure continued positive interactions, and to protect the interests of all.

This section set out standards of desired, and unacceptable, conduct on behalf of group members.

Communication Etiquette - Email

The MSE email distribution list must be used by the M.D., Chairman and Secretary only.

All emails intended for group consumption are to be provided to either of the above for distribution.

When replying to a distributed email (i.e. sent to multiple members of the group), members should reply only to the sender unless specifically asked to do otherwise.

These rules are commonly adopted by bands to limit hits to individual email accounts, and avoid confusion from different versions of the same message etc.

Public forums and Social Networking sites

The Use of public forums (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) for the purpose of discussing MSE matters (whether explicitly referenced or not) is expressly prohibited.

Forum posts, if used constructively, can be harmless and a source of fun. However, they can also be used to exert pressure on individuals, and this is a long-running problem for schools where students have used them as a form of bullying - often with catastrophic effects. Such posts commonly do not refer directly to a subject or individual, but instead refer by implication. This behaviour has no place in the MSE.

Handling of Complaints / Queries

Should any member of the ensemble have a complaint and query on any matter, this should be addressed in the first instance to an appropriate member of the committee, in person - and preferably confirmed by email. Where appropriate the committee member will forward the item to the committee as a whole, for consideration either at the next session or in more urgent cases, via the chairman who will decide what action to take.

Behaviour at Rehearsal Sessions

Whilst a certain amount of banter is regarded as positive, and is part and parcel of a fun rehearsal environment, the primary purpose of these sessions is to help band members to improve their playing individually and as a group. Therefore, all are asked to keep chatter to a minimum during rehearsal sessions. A coffee break is built into our sessions to allow for informal socialising, swapping of info etc.

When the leader is addressing the band or facilitating musical practice, members are particularly requested not to talk as this hampers the learning process and can be frustrating to all.

Negative or Disruptive Behaviour

For the most part, the leader will deal with minor incidents with good humour, or a reminder to behave in a polite and constructive manner. However, if the leader feels that an individual's behaviour will significantly disrupt a session, the individual concerned may be asked to leave the session. Failure to do so may result in a longer exclusion or dismissal from the group.

Serious or repeated incidents of this nature will lead to longer exclusions and ultimately a member may be asked to leave the group permanently.

Generally, serious instances will be referred to the committee for advice, but the M.D. or session leader retains the right to bar any individual from a session or sessions if he or she feels that their behaviour is detrimental to the group.

The M.S.E **CALL** to action !

Check

Before you play scan through each piece looking for instructions (and any changes) ...

- **Time Signature**
- **Tempo**
- **Key Signature**
- **Flow** (repeats, go-to directions such as D.C. or D.S. al Segno)
- **Highlights** (rits, pauses, hairpins etc.)

Assess

Assess the mood of the piece, to inform how you should 'flavour' your performance.

Look particularly at the performance instructions at the beginning of the piece, such as the overall musical character and timing (e.g. Cantabile, 108 bpm). Also consider whether you should play smoothly or staccato, boldly or sweetly etc. - as this makes a huge difference to the outcome.

Places to look : Title, Composer and Arranger, Style and Playing instructions.

Think forward to how you can improve on your interpretation of the composer and arranger's intentions - and if in doubt ask the music director.

Look

Look at the leader at the start, regularly as you play, and as you end each piece

Before you start to play, make sure you have the first few notes of your music memorised, then Look at the leader to ensure you start at the right time and have picked up on the musical tempo correctly. Tap your feet to the tempo-count to make sure you stay with the beat.

Look at the leader regularly (at least once every four bars) to check that you're keeping the tempo, and that you see the leader's instructions and gestures as the piece progresses. Whenever you encounter a rit. rall or other tempo change, again make a point of looking at the leader so that the band plays the change together.

Finally, **always look at the leader shortly before the end of a piece**, to ensure that you keep to the indicated tempo (there's often a slowing of the pace at the end). Again, you should **memorise the closing notes** to ensure you have free concentration to look at the leader. Make sure you stop your sound cleanly, when the leader indicates.

Listen

Listen continually as you play

... not only to your own playing, but also to that of the other players, as this helps you keep in time, in tune, and in balance with the other musicians. Pay particular attention to your dynamic levels, depending on whether you have a lead or supporting role within the piece. If you don't know whether you're playing the lead or a supporting line, ask the leader. If in doubt when playing a piece, look at the leader - he may well be trying to catch your attention if he's noticed a problem - and also may be able to help you resolve it.