

# Siena Jazz University

## Masters Saxophone Class

### Course Synopsis - Ohad Talmor

My Master Saxophone Class at Siena Jazz University is built around a highly individualized approach to teaching. Each student develops a working relationship with their own sound, musical identity, and artistic intentions. The goal is not merely to train performers, but to cultivate whole musicians—instrumentalists who also think as composers, improvisers, historians, listeners, and creative citizens. In this sense, we draw inspiration from historically significant artists such as Thelonious Monk, Wayne Shorter, Ornette Coleman, Duke Ellington, to Nikhil Banerjee or Gyorgy Ligeti whose work demonstrates that a personal voice grows from a deep but flexible relationship to musical tradition.

At the core of the class is an expanded understanding of jazz language. Rather than limiting ourselves to academic conventions or fixed vocabularies, we work toward an *honest reappropriation* of the language—one shaped equally by classic recordings and by the musical realities of today. We value the oral tradition: learning by ear, singing before playing, and internalizing musical materials in a way that makes them expressive rather than mechanical.

A major emphasis is placed on responsibility for one's sound and ideas. Students learn to evaluate what they play—on the saxophone and in composition—with clarity, curiosity, and accountability. No gesture should be gratuitous; every phrase, motive, or structural choice should reflect a grounded connection to one's musicality and to the traditions we study. This responsibility is cultivated through regular self-assessment, guided listening, and transparent, collaborative critique.

#### **The Four Pillars of Musical Experience**

My work is guided by four interdependent “pillars” that shape all musical activity:

- 1 – **Tone**, as in what is the carrier of the Sound
- 2 – **Time**, as in Rhythm
- 3 – **Pitch**, as in the distinct organisation, or not, of pitched sounds
- 4 – the **How**, as in all the elements that are combined in the experience of the making of Music:  
articulation, dynamics, feel, etc.

Because of the essential role of these four dimensions, every facet of the course incorporates deliberate rhythmic practice. Rhythm is not a separate module—it is integrated into tone work, phrasing, improvisation, transcription, composition, and listening.

## **Rhythmic Emphasis**

We will focus on:

- Development of rhythmic vocabulary
- Internal time vs. external pulse
- Phrasing as a rhythmic act
- Odd meters and shifting meters
- Length of phrase as a compositional and improvisational tool
- Use of timers and controlled practice durations to build concentration
- Rhythmic clarity within fast tempos
- Space, breath, and silence

Students learn that rhythmic identity is inseparable from musical identity. Whether playing a Bird blues, composing an original piece, or exploring freer forms, rhythm is always the framework that gives shape to the personal voice.

## **Exploration of Lesser-Studied Traditions**

A key part of the curriculum is exposure to musical lineages that lie outside standard academic jazz pathways but are central to the evolution of the music.

We engage deeply with:

- Ornette Coleman and the harmolodic approach. Dewey Redman, Cecil Taylor especially their blend of raw lyricism and structural freedom
- The AACM tradition (Roscoe Mitchell, Anthony Braxton, Henry Threadgill, Muhal Richard Abrams)
- Free improvisation practices emphasizing sound, gesture, and collective interaction. We will explore American, European as well as other sources of free improvisation cultures & traditions in the world.
- Contemporary extensions of these ideas

These traditions expand our sense of what improvisation can be. They help students question inherited assumptions, embrace a wider sonic palette, and recognize that a personal voice often emerges at the intersection of discipline and experimentation.

This exploration is always connected to craft: freedom is approached not as a rejection of structure, but as the intelligent expansion of it. Students learn how the same Four Pillars operate within freer contexts—how sound, rhythm, pitch, and articulation continue to shape meaning even when traditional harmony or form is absent.

## Practices and Rituals

In every session, we develop **practice rituals** that students carry into their daily musical life. These rituals encourage consistency, mental focus, and patience. They include:

- Beginning each practice day with a personal ritual piece or exercise
- Tone control: Controlled dynamics and tone initiation
- Interval and octave studies
- “Filling every note”: inhabiting the sound fully
- Time-based practice using timers
- Breath and air-column work
- Keeping a practice journal of strengths, weaknesses, and solutions

These rituals structure the student’s growth and create habits that support both technical mastery and artistic freedom.

## Overall Course Goals

By the end of the program, students will have:

- Developed a personal, coherent saxophone sound and musical voice
- Internalized rhythm as a central organizing force in music
- Built a responsible, intentional approach to improvisation
- Strengthened their ear through singing, transcription, and oral learning
- Engaged with classical jazz language AND lesser-studied creative traditions
- Created original compositions connected to their improvisational language
- Established sustainable practice rituals
- Learned to self-assess honestly and constructively
- Engaged deeply with contemporary and historical jazz traditions

The class is ultimately a journey toward **artistic integrity**—a space where each student can expand their musical imagination, strengthen their craft, and contribute meaningfully to the evolving world of jazz.