

- Slap Tongue (saxophone pizzicato)

Slap tongue is a versatile and interesting effect that is available in four varieties:

1. "melodic" slap or pizzicato (clearly pitched): melodic "plucking" sound entire keyed range of horn (but not altissimo)  
Maximum tempo: 240 beats per minute  
Possible from *p* to *f* dynamics
2. "slap tone" (clearly pitched): melodic slap attack followed by normal tone  
Maximum tempo: 200 beats per minute  
Possible from *p* to *f* dynamics
3. "woodblock" slap (unpitched): soft, dry percussive sound  
Maximum tempo: 200 beats per minute  
Possible from *p* to *mf* dynamics
4. "explosive" slap or "open" slap (unpitched): loud percussive sound  
Maximum tempo: 70 beats per minute  
Possible from *mf* to *ff* dynamics

Not all saxophonists know how to slap tongue but an increasing number are learning the technique. The "melodic" slap and "slap tone" are produced by holding the tongue against about 1/3 to 1/2 of the tip end of the reed surface – a centimeter or so – and creating a suction-cup effect between tongue and reed. This is accomplished by pulling the middle of the tongue slightly away from the reed while keeping the edges and tip of the tongue sealed tight against it. The tongue is then quickly released by pushing it forward and downward away from the reed, creating suction between the tongue and the reed; this tongue motion is accompanied by sudden slight impulse of air. The release of the suction between tongue and reed creates the "slap" sound, and the impulse of air helps it to resonate and be heard as a specific pitch. Almost no air from the lungs actually enters the mouthpiece, however, unless the "slap tone" effect is desired. Without the

mouthpiece in the mouth, the slap tonguing technique can be simulated by placing the tongue against the roof of the mouth (just behind the front teeth) instead of placing it against the reed. When done correctly, the result sounds and feels rather like forcefully producing a sound midway between "t!" and "th!"

The “woodblock” non-pitched slap is created in the same way, only without the air impulse that provides resonance for any specific pitch. The “explosive” or “open” slap is just like the woodblock slap, only the mouth is opened as the slap is produced; this may be accompanied by a sudden burst of air from the lungs for added volume, although no air should enter the mouthpiece.

Slap tongue notation has become fairly standardized: usually a small “+” symbol is written in the same place a staccato or tenuto marking would be: directly over the note(s) to be slapped. A common alternative is to use an “x” notehead. It helps to write "(slap tongue)" by the first such indication so the player is clear about what is meant by the symbol, since this notation is not yet universal. It will usually be assumed that melodic “pizzicato” slap is intended unless one of the other types is specified instead.

Slap tongue is fatiguing for most players if used for more than about 30 seconds continuously. It is relatively easy to switch rapidly between slapped notes and normal tones. Slap tongue is especially effective on low saxophones because it is easier to execute on larger reeds, and their greater bore size resonates the sound in a way that is remarkably like pizzicato on a cello. It is more difficult on saxophones, above the alto, but its sound on soprano and soprano is quite effective when executed well.

The image shows musical notation for Saxophone in 4/4 time, demonstrating four types of slap tongue. The notation is divided into two staves. The first staff shows three measures: 1. An "open" slap marked with a large 'x' and *ff*. 2. A "woodblock" slap marked with 'x' noteheads and *p*. 3. A "slap tongue" marked with '+' noteheads and *mp*. The second staff shows two measures: 1. A melodic line with '+' noteheads. 2. A "slap tone" marked with '+' noteheads and *mf*.

Musical Example 4.10: Four types of slap tongue. The same passage is recorded on three different saxophones: soprano, tenor and bass, CD track 85. (N.B. Musical Examples 3.24-3.26 also demonstrate “pizz” slap usage in an ensemble setting).