Clasax Victoria Podcast

Episode 9 - Sara Beale

Show notes

Sara Beale - https://www.melbournesaxophone.com/summer-academy-artists
Axes Saxophone Quartet - https://shannonebeling.com/axes-quartet/
Axes Saxophone Quartet - https://www.nielsbijl.com.au/axes
Tarko Sibbel - https://www.themelbournesaxophonequartet.au/tarko-sibbel
Michael Jamieson - https://sounz.org.nz/contributors/1798
Joan Marti-Frasquier - https://joanmf.com/
Pimpin' by Jacob TV - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRI1obuj1ks
Wind Fire Music Festival - https://musicatthebasilica.org.au/music-festival/
Tickets for Axes Quartet at Wind Fire Music Festival - https://www.trybooking.com/au/event/1567522

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Interview Transcript between Brendan Toohey and Sara Beale:

BT: Hello and welcome. You're listening to episode nine of the Clasax Victoria podcast. I'm your host Brendan Toohey and today, I'm very fortunate and happy and lucky to be chatting with a phenomenal saxophone specialist, Sarah Beale. Sarah, welcome.
SB: Thanks Brendan.
BT: Thank you so much for doing this and coming on the show. I've wanted to talk to you for a long time, so it's great that we can finally get together and do this.
SB: Thank you.
BT: So, for those watching and listening, who perhaps don't know, would you like to just briefly introduce yourself? And then I'll ask you some questions.
SB: Yeah, sure. I'm Sara Beale obviously. I'm very passionate about the baritone saxophone. So that's, playing the baritone is what I love to do most. Apart from that, I also love to teach. So, I'm the learning and teaching leader at the South Gippsland School's music program and yeah, it's a job that I love.
BT: Fantastic. So that's based down in ... where abouts is that?
SB: In South Gippsland.
BT: Yep, yep.
SB: So, I help take care of the five government schools down there. Yeah.
BT: Oh, right. Excellent. Fantastic. So yeah, you and I, for those watching and listening who don't realize, we've only actually just met, because you've been, sort of, what's the word, on my radar? Like we've been friends on Facebook a little while. Occasionally I'll see like you'll be doing a concert or something and I always want to go to the concert. And we just recently spoke with Neils Bijl and he called you one of the best baritone saxophone players in Australia.
SB: Wow.
BT: And that's a direct quote. You can quote me on that. And so when he said that I knew, okay, we just have to get you on the show and then ask you all about the baritone. Did you always like, did you start learning on the baritone? How did that come about?
SB: Look, I started playing alto saxophone actually and I grew up in Warrigal. I was drawn to the saxophone probably because of Lisa Simpson, I guess. and my primary school music teacher, Mr. C who was an amazing saxophonist so I thought I'd like to play that instrument. But, in Warrigal at the time, the brass band was a really big thing and all my friends played in the brass band, so I thought I'd like to do that. And I tried cornet for a bit and then I fell in love with the tuba and that kind of started my love affair with bass lines and the power of being the root note in the chord.
BT: Anchoring the section, or the whole ensemble.
SB: Exactly, and whilst I loved brass, saxophone was always my passion and then I had an opportunity through Melbourne Youth Music to have a try the baritone sax and I just fell in love with it and then I went to university and my saxophone teacher was Ian Godfrey and he said to me I think my first saxophone lesson he said, 'have you thought about doing baritone?' and yeah and I just said, 'oh yes I'd like to know more' and so I think I rang up my parents that night and said oh, mum and dad I've got a favour to ask, could you please buy me a baritone?
BT: Oh, nice.
SB: So, they said yes.
BT: Excellent, so what was it specifically about the baritone was it the sound or just the feeling when you play it? Like what drew you to it?
SB: I guess it's role, it's role in the ensemble. Yeah playing, being the foundation I guess was really appealing and the sound I guess I love the sound of the baritone but that's something that I guess grew on me a little bit. The thing I found very difficult in those first couple of years of university was trying to make a nice, characteristic baritone sound. Like something that wasn't sort of, you know, too edgy or reedy sounding like I really want to play with a lot of warmth and richness and, yeah, trying to find that.
BT: So, would you say it's more of a classical sound rather than like a jazz, big band kind of sound?
SB: Yeah, definitely.
BT: Yeah.
SB: I would like to, I would like to imagine that I'm super versatile, but with classical saxophone, that's

my main passion and I love playing in quartet but yeah, look in Gippsland I dabble playing with like funk and soul groups and that kind of thing so I do do a little bit of jazz here and there.
BT: Yeah, fantastic. I think it's not very uncommon for particularly bari sex players to have, you know, their classical set up their classical mouthpiece and classical roots and then they also got a jazz set up which might be some some metal mouthpiece or something. Do you have different setups for things like that? Or no?
SB: Well, do you know I've only just I've recently bought like a Myer mouthpiece for my baritone but up until yeah this year actually I've just used my Selmer D and just tried to adjust actually yeah a friend that I played with at uni, Tarko Sibbel, who's amazing at, he's so versatile with he's sound and he used to make a fantastic jazz sound on a classical set up and I thought oh ok, well I don't need to buy more gear I'll just try and do that but I succumbed this year.
BT: I think that's a very good point and I want to emphasize this for the listeners. If you have a flexible setup, you know, for classical playing in particular, you can kind of do everything with that setup. Sound concept is very sort of internal. It's the player that makes the sound. If you've got a really good classical setup, you should be able to do both. Sometimes it's not always the true in reverse. If you've got a crazy tip opening jazz mouthpiece, you might find it difficult to make a good classical sound, but certainly having a good classical setup, that can do whatever versatility. You should be able to do pretty much anything you can think of. So yeah, that's a good point. And what about reeds? Same thing I assume? You just use the same thing?
SB: Yeah, look, I suppose I play relatively soft reads, so I play Van Doren 3.
Mostly, but I also use the Legere Signature Series most of the time for practice anyway.
And then if I have concerts, I'll go back to the cane.
BT: Yeah, fantastic. So, you mentioned that you started on alto first. And you also mentioned that at first you found it a little bit difficult to go to baritone saxophone. Can you talk a little bit about that kind of transition? Do you have any thoughts about why that is or what might help other young students going through the similar transition?
SB: I think. Look, lots of listening and that was hard when I was in my undergrad years because there weren't lots of recordings around and sort of sourcing things was, you know, it was quite a mission.
And yeah, I remember going over to friend's places and actually that's an aside, but that's how I first was introduced to Neils. My friend said, 'Oh, you're never going to believe this classical tenor sounds, you have to listen to this. This is the Aurelia quartet.'
BT: Oh yeah.
SB: You know, I heard Neils playing and I thought, 'Oh wow, oh, I'd love to play like that one day.' So, yeah.
BT: and now you've played with him heaps.
SB: I know!
BT: He's a good friend.
SB: I'm very, very lucky.
BT: Did you ever do any tenor playing?
SB: Recently, last year I played with OV and played some tenor for that, which was great,
great experience.
BT: Romeo and Juliet or something similar?
SB: No, no.
BT: Lieutenant Kije?
SB: Glass works, actually, yeah. So, we were playing lots of very fast ...
BT: Noodle-y, phasing, sort of, minimalist stuff.
SB: Yeah, exactly.
BT: Excellent, excellent. Cause I wonder about, you know, starting to learn on alto, and if a student is interested in playing the baritone, try the tenor, because it's in the middle and then maybe work your way up to baritone, but that's interesting that you kind of leap-froged that.
SB: I went the other way around.
BT: Yeah.

SB: Coming to tenor from baritone, it feels like a very different beast, yeah. So, I'm not sure if that's like you find yourself.
BT: Well, I started, well, started on clarinet, but then I did soprano saxophone for a little bit at school because it was kind of like the gold looking clarinet, you know? And then I did tenor and then I did alto and then I did baritone so I'm all over the shop really.
SB: Well, yeah.
BT: But I liked I liked the tenor a lot.
SB: Yes.
BT: I mean, I like all of them now, but yeah, that was my journey with it. So, do you have any advice for say young students if they want to get into playing the baritone? I mean, you mentioned listening, anything sort of on the technical side that they should be aware of? Is it different in terms of the embouchure or the tongue position or anything to alto? Or is it just trial and error? You just experiment?
SB: I think, yeah, look, trial and error. I think. Hmm, making sure that you're tonguing on the tip of the reed. That comes to mind, but also, I think just thinking about always trying to play with your best sound, I think that's, that's the key. And, and look, and I guess everything's more open, right? Like, not as, not as tight an embouchure, yeah.
BT: It's such a big mouthpiece at first. I find a lot of students struggle to, they're not used to putting so much mouthpiece in, so much read vibrating.
SB: Exactly.
BT: Just opening up and, yeah, letting it honk away, do its thing. So, tell us a little bit more about your playing in quartets. You've done a lot of, sort of, chamber music concerts and things like that?
SB: Yes, yes. I guess my passion for quartets began in my undergrad years. I was lucky. I had some friends who were a couple of years older and they needed a baritone player because their baritone player was going to go off and do other things. So, I got lucky. So, I was in a quartet with Michael Lichnovsky, Georgia Parry and Heather Tyas, and we used to rehearse a lot and organized our own concerts and we made a CD, and then Michael had this plan. He said, "Let's go to the sax congress in the United States." And I thought, "Oh, wow, what's that?" So, we kept practicing and saved up and went to the States and played there and it was just such a wonderful experience and seeing all of the players from around the world really blew my mind. I guess it was in a time maybe just people now, I see a lot of younger players have finished their undergraduate degree and go overseas to study and it wasn't so common when I went through university and I think I remember very distinctly when Barry Cockroft came back and he was, I guess probably the first one of our generation to go across and he came back and was such an amazing player, I thought. It really opened my mind and I guess I saw saxophone quartet as a great vehicle for baritone because it provides such an important role. I mean, you're the foundation of the sound, but you're also playing beautiful melodies. The saxophone quartet, it's just a beautiful combination of voices.
BT: So, in the saxophone quartet, are you trying to sound like the others, or are they trying to sound like you, or you're trying to sound different? Or are you kind of just let your beautiful sounds meld together sort of on their own?
SB: I think, I don't know, it's something that, it's something that I mean, we talk about a lot now, you know, playing with Niels, and Michael and Shannon at the moment. And yeah, we talk about the sound that we want to make. I guess that we try and blend with each other, yeah.
BT: I remember asking Niels the same question.
Are you trying to play the tenor, like it's an alto, or like it's a soprano or a baritone?
And he kind of said, 'I think so?' It's something you really think about until you're asked about it and then you go, oh yeah. I guess so. Kind of? Or not.
SB: Yeah, I guess it's just trying to be sensitive to what everybody else is doing but not necessarily, I suppose, considering what saxophone they're on I think.
BT: I think you mentioned it before, it's more about the role that you play than the sound itself. So, more about the balance of, you know, that pyramid of sound, rather than (which instrument). Yeah, interesting. So, what about teaching? You've done a lot of teaching. Have you found like students

struggle with anything in particular with the baritone or saxophone in general? Are there things in your teaching that you focus on or?
SB: Wow.
BT: Sorry, such a loaded question.
SB: No, yeah. I've heard this. Yes, so many things like it through my mind, but I look I've been teaching for a long time now and mainly instrumental music and mainly saxophone and a little bit of clarinet. The thing that I hope for most is that students develop a love and curiosity that is driven by themselves and I find probably most of the time I feel like I'm leading students a lot. But you know every now and then you get someone who's super curious and will just go and they'll find their passion and I love that. I love when a student finds something that interests them and you can help them go on a deep dive and yeah when they become self-motivated, I guess that's what I'm that's what my hope is. And perhaps the other thing that I try and focus on a little bit is establishing good inner pulse and counting because I think early on that's something I missed out on I was as a young person I was taught a lot by ear, well taught rhythms by ear anyway and my teacher would play something and I just copy it straight away because I had kind of good aural skills but then later on when I'm faced with complex rhythms on a page can be really intimidating and I don't think I really understood rhythm particularly well until perhaps my start of my master's study. It was actually my accompanist that really helped me with that. So, yeah it's, I think that's important and that's what I try to do with my students.
BT: It's interesting how our own experiences, you know, as a student, like, you know, if I struggle with something in particular, I really make sure to focus on that particular aspect with the students, so yeah, rhythm is such a big one, so that's very common, yeah, as students. Let's talk a little bit about baritone saxophone repertoire. So, I mean, I'm less familiar with the baritone saxophone repertoire. Is there a large repertoire? Are you kind of poaching from other instruments? Or playing alto sax repertoire? What's the story?
SB: Well, look, it's interesting. So, when I studied a uni, Ian Godfrey did a thesis on baritone sax repertoire, and so he looks through his list and said try this, and I think at the time he had over about 400 works that he'd found. But I caught up with Michael Jamieson earlier in the year from New Zealand, and he's doing a similar study, and I was asking him how many works he'd found,
and he said the list is well over a thousand now. So that's pretty amazing. Yeah, But there's another fellow whose name escapes me from Europe, but he has... Oh, and you probably know his name.
BT: That's okay. We can put it up on the screen afterwards when you remember.
SB: Thank you. But he's, yeah, he's got a baritone newsletter and puts out new works every so often. So, yeah, I always have a look and see what's out there. But yeah, look, I mean, first and foremost, I want to play beautiful music. So, whether it's a transcription or not, I'll still play transcriptions, but of course, I would rather play something that was written especially for the baritone.
BT: Do you have any favourite baritone saxophone works?
SB: Do you know, I, we did, we did a concert last year. We, Axes saxophone quartet, a program of Jacob TV's works. And I played, one of his baritone works called 'Pimpin' which was so fun, I loved playing that.
BT: Awesome, ok great. Maybe I'll have to try and, like, find a recording or something, and put it, edit it in.
SB: Absolutely.
BT: Excellent, great. So, do you have any gigs coming up that you want to plug or?
SB: Well, Axes saxophone quartet, we're playing in the Wind Fire chamber series in Geelong coming up in October.
BT: Great.
SB: Which will be fantastic, and then in September we're also going to be playing in Bendigo at a winery up there.
BT: Lovely.
SB: So that'll be fun.
BT: Interesting. I'll definitely have to get all the details off you and pop it in the show notes. Try and get along to some of these concerts, folks, if you can. So, I wanted to ask you one more thing. When you're playing the baritone saxophone, are you thinking more so about the role rather than the sound or the

repertoire? Are you thinking of phrasing things a certain way? I suppose it depends on what piece you're playing. Yeah, I'm curious to know what makes like a saxophone, a baritone saxophone specialist, you know, tick when you're playing.
SB: Oh, gee. I think, like to be honest with you, so many things are going through my mind all at once. It's really hard to be specific and sometimes I find it even hard to find the words to describe what I'm thinking when I'm playing.
BT: I know what you mean.
SB: Yeah, but yeah, definitely. I'm thinking about trying to create beautiful lines even if I have a bass line. Yeah, phrasing with the other players and blending my sound.
BT: Would you say that the saxophone quartet is sort of your main ensemble of interest? That's really your calling?
SB: Absolutely, yeah and I do look I love playing with other people I think that's my thing. But yeah, yeah definitely I do love wind band though.
BT: Oh, yeah? Do you want to tell us a little bit about your wind band experience?
SB: So I think my first wind band experience was Border Music Camp in my 1894 but that's the first time I played in a full, a full wind band and just you know the power the rich harmonies and music of Percy Grainger I just love how he writes for saxophone and I guess that's the first time I experienced that yeah and then got involved with well, Melbourne Youth Music as it was known then but playing in their Saturday ensemble so make the trip up from Gippsland to Melbourne High School to play.
BT: Grainger sometimes writes for the bass saxophone as well.
SB: Yes!
BT: Have you ever done any bass saxophone stuff?
SB: Oh, I haven't played bass but yeah look in saxophone ensembles at university, yeah.
BT: We've actually got one in our Clasax saxophone ensemble we've got oh yeah Barrie Kenny who plays bass sax which is awesome, a lot of fun yeah.
SB: Do you ever do any Grainger?
BT: Look, I'm sure they have done in the past I'm actually playing baritone for them at the moment, I sit next to Barrie on bass so yeah it's a fun role again and I get to honk it out. Yeah, that's fantastic. Well, Sara thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with us um you've already mentioned a few concerts you want to plug. Is there anything else that you want to mention as a sort of parting thought for any listeners any advice for students or anything like that?
SB: I think, perhaps the most important thing is that in order to be a great player I think, I think you just have to work hard and I think often students think oh maybe I need this talent or, I've got to, you know, and it's not that. It's you put in the time and you become good. So, I guess that's the thing, just work hard.
BT: How many hours a day? Practice?
SB: Oh, not enough now. Look, I'm happy now if I get in an hour each day but yeah. Yeah, and I think, you know, when I was a student, I was always trying to look for the most efficient way to practice, but yeah, I think as long as you can get the golden hour in, everything's okay.
BT: Do you recommend for students that they practice a little bit on alto and a little bit on baritone or any of the other family?
SB: Look, I don't unless I have a gig coming up, but ...
BT: You just practice whatever you need, whatever you're working on at the moment.
SB: Yeah, absolutely. I suppose I, yeah, I just, I just play baritone.
BT: Yeah, that's interesting. Yeah, you can, you know, forge your own path as a baritone specialist, you know, or tenor specialist or whatever, rather than doing everything. Like a jack of all trades.
SB: Yeah. Well, do you know, like this is an interesting conversation that I had with Niels, and he said very much in Europe, you're a student of saxophones and it's all saxophones.
BT: Okay.
SB: And yeah, and I guess he opened my mind in a lot of ways to playing other saxophones. And I have, like, I even, I played soprano for the first time in a, in a couple of years ago. Yeah, I had to go ...
BT: How was that experience?
SB: Very strange.

BT: I'll bet it was, going from baritone to soprano.
SB: Yeah, well, this was actually, this was with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, we did An American in Paris and we did the arrangement, you know, where you have to, well, I had to play baritone, alto and soprano. Yeah.
BT: Wow, amazing.
SB: Yeah.
BT: That would have been cool.
SB: That was very fun.
BT: Excellent. Oh, thank you again so much for sharing your thoughts. So folks, there you go. You've heard it from the horse's mouth. You can forge your own path as a baritone specialist. You don't necessarily have to play all of them, but it's, it's good experience if you have the opportunity to. Make sure that you like this video, subscribe, all that jazz. Make sure that you comment who you want to see on the podcast next. If you have any questions or anything like that. Again, thanks for listening or watching. I'm your host, Brendan Toohey, and we'll see you in the next episode. Thanks. Bye.

END TRANSCRIPT