

The Importance of the Tenor Trombonist's Low Register

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“When a great team loses through complacency, it will constantly search for new and more intricate explanations to explain away defeat. After a while it becomes more innovative in thinking up how to lose than thinking up how to win.”

- Pat Riley

INTRODUCTION - Why Is This Important?

- I. It is personal. - Playing in the low register is an issue at the core of my own playing. Despite whatever doubts crept in about sharing my weaknesses as the topic of this lecture, I was convicted that sharing this issue could help others who might be struggling with this area in their own playing. *No one wants to feel like an incomplete player!*
- II. It is in the repertoire. - Solos such as the de Frumerie or Rouse immediately come to mind, but examples can be found in the solos of David, Jacob, Saint-Saens Cavatine, etc.
- III. It promotes general playing “health.” - building a trombone sound and technique up from the bottom is akin to building a home on a solid, concrete foundation. Simply put (in my opinion) - if a player has a great sound and technique, they likely have command of their low register.

THE PROGRESSION FROM BEGINNER TO MUSIC MAJOR

- I. Beginners/Middle School
 - a. The structure of the beginner band class is crucial to the long-term success of a balanced performer. The teacher must have a clear, well thought out pedagogical plan complete with solid teaching methods...not “one liners!”
 - b. Beginner Book weaknesses (and solutions)
 - i. Many only focus on the registers needed for contest music
 - ii. Transpose these exercises into lower keys
 1. Rather than seeing the extremes of ranges, they must focus on their ears to find the notes...which often leads to more progress!
 - c. Chair Tests are more than a seating placement
 - i. If a two octave F major scale is assigned, the “winner” is the one who can hit the high notes of the second octave, simultaneously relegating low notes to second class citizenship.
 - d. The importance of private lessons
- II. High School Band – Region/Area/All State
 - a. Higher/Faster/Louder – all of the same from above, only more of it!
 - b. The continued importance of private lessons
- III. “I don’t know what I want to major in when I get to college...I really liked band and play the trombone well, so I guess I’ll major in music.”
 - a. The potential for disaster for this kind of student is high! The work required for the music major is often unexpected and leads to a soured relationship, rather than having another potential lifelong appreciator and patron of music.

THE CONFLICT

- I. Range Ceilings and Floors
 - a. We cannot be resigned to let our limitations define our playing! For years, I considered the reality of my situation to be permanent. I practiced and practiced, listened to my teachers, and tried my level best to improve, but there were a few things wrong with my approach that took me years to unpack and sort out.
- II. The Proverbial “Brick Wall”
 - a. The “Face Off” with the wall
 - b. Program Music around the wall
 - c. Bargaining or Shortcuts around the wall (mouthpieces, instruments)
 - d. Eventual Submission and New Approaches

Perception of Process vs Actual Process

Much of what we perceive from listening can misdirect us when we are playing. The full and resonant sound of a robust low register often perplexed me. To my ears, it sounded as if the player was moving a ton of air with lots of effort. In reality, what I have come to learn is that only part of this statement is true. While a high volume of air has to be moved to achieve a rich, colorful low register sound, that column of air moves slowly.

I grew up mowing lawns in junior high and high school. The lawn mower had two gear sets: fast and slow. Fast was illustrated with a rabbit, and slow was illustrated with a turtle. As I navigate the registers of the instrument, I do my best to keep this imagery of fast and slow airstream at the forefront of my mind. When a low register note doesn't speak, remembering this concept seems to help.

RESOLVING THE CONFLICT

- I. Prepare Mentally (a must!!!)
 - a. If you constantly beat yourself up about not being able to play well in the low register, you might as well put the horn in the case and go do something else until you are in a more positive, receptive frame of mind.
- II. Prepare Physically
 - a. I am not the picture of health by any means, but I have recently adopted a more active lifestyle, with smarter, sensible food decisions, lots of water each day, and therapies such as *The Breathing Gym*, David Vining's *Breathing Book*, and others.
 - b. Stretch before your session. Simple trunk twists, touching the toes, rolling out the neck. These will make the muscles more pliable and prepared the various motions of playing. Avoid injury at all costs!
- III. Plan Your Work
 - a. Set realistic, attainable goals. What do I want to achieve *today?* *This week?* *This month?* *This semester?* *This year?*
 - b. Consider keeping a practice journal, even if it is completely basic in nature. Keep one column for materials studied, and another for reflections on how you feel about your playing that day. You will notice trends!!!!
- IV. Work Your Plan
 - a. A master craftsman of any skill has sure hands and a clear understanding of the processes required to produce their product. In time, trombonists who practice diligently will maintain this master craftsmanship, which breeds confidence, better sessions, and better playing!

THE PLAN (or my plan, anyway)

- I. Begin with sound concept.
 - a. I try very hard to maintain the *tenor* part of the tenor trombone name. I don't want to sound like a bass trombonist in this register! There is nothing wrong with bass trombone, but I don't play bass trombone.
 - b. Not necessarily trombone sounds. Fritz Wunderlich's 1965 Grammofoon recording of the *Dichterliebe* with Hubert Giesen is one of my favorites!!!
- II. Song Song Song
 - a. When I marry a sound concept to musical interpretation and expression, I think less about my limitations. By transposing simple songs into various keys that reach my limits and keep my brain engaged rather than focusing on the mechanics, I progress faster.
- III. Find "the breaking point"

"We must begin all improvement from a place of high quality."

- James Markey

- a. At some point, we must unpack our playing and sort through it. The only way to improve is to build another solid link in the chain from a place where we KNOW we do well. Various tools are at our disposal, and when used in proper amounts can pay big dividends. If your best sound stops at fourth line bass clef middle F, then that is where you begin the process!
 - i. Mental imagery (these are free!)
 1. Outstretched hands
 2. The dump truck vs the sports car (rabbit vs turtle)
 3. Fogging the mirror
 - ii. Playing exercises

1. Buzzing on the slide tube
 - a. Remove the hand slide
 - b. Buzz major scales starting on D or D flat (depending on which slots better for you) until the notes no longer respond
 - c. Relaxes the entire sound producing system
 - d. You cannot play this way with a tense, tight airstream
2. “Bridge Exercises” - Lip Bends to connect the middle register to the pedal register through the valve
 - a. Sometimes, students are taught to “drop the jaw and let the lips flap” to play pedal notes
 - b. Often, the mouth is too open, causing the lips to not touch, which results in air balls instead of notes
 - i. Start with a second line B flat
 - ii. Bend the pitch down to the valve F
 - iii. When that note is reached, engage the valve
 - iv. Repeat A through C from F to pedal B flat
 - v. Extend into lower positions
3. Mouthpiece buzzing
 - a. I use it sparingly – a couple of minutes at the beginning of my warm up, and as a diagnostic when needed

iii. Actual tools (\$\$\$)

1. Breathing Bag (5 or 6 liter)

- a. Controlled breathing of large volume of air
 - b. Allows me to physically “see” the air
2. Breathing Tube
- a. Smooth air movement
 - b. Use sparingly
3. Incentive Spirometer (Inspirex)
- a. Remove the tube that comes with it, and replace with tubing to fit a mouthpiece shank
 - b. Helps with slow air speed at the beginning of the note

CONCLUSIONS

I know now that I missed out on many great opportunities because I believed that I could never make this part of my playing better.

I know that if I don’t remain diligent in my daily pursuit of my own low register, it *will* recede. This skill, like all others, is not one that I can just check off of the list as “done.”

I am always learning! If you have a great idea or want to talk shop, please drop me an email at bfaske@se.edu.

While the above exercises will aid you conceptually, the recommended etude books below are *musical* examples that you can apply the skills to. The recommended reading will help you with the mental side of improvement.

Recommended Reading:

Daniel Coyle - "The Little Book of Talent" (author of The Talent Code) Bantam Books

Don Greene - "Fight Your Fear and Win," "Audition Success," "Performance Success," etc.

Kenny Werner - "Effortless Mastery"

Recommended Etude Books:

Bordogni ed. Mulcahy - Complete Solfeggi

Jaroslav Cimera - "55 Phrasing Studies" (formerly out of print, new edition by Dr. Cory Mixdorf via Cherry Classics)

Allen Ostrander - "Method for Bass Trombone and F Attachment Tenor"

Allen Ostrander - "The F Attachment and Bass Trombone"

Sam Pilafian and Pat Sheridan "The Breathing Gym" (Focus on Music Limited)

Charles Vernon - "The Singing Trombone" (formerly "A Singing Approach") Atlanta Brass Society Press

David Vining - "The Breathing Book" (Mountain Peak Music)