

SING YOUR WAY TO BETTER TROMBONE PLAYING

ArkMEA Clinic at the Arkansas Music Conference
Friday, February 17, 2017

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Disclaimer

We live in a time when more information on how to play and teach our instruments is at our fingertips than ever before. This can be wonderfully helpful, but also risky. Remember CAVEAT EMPTOR (buyer beware) and be careful what information you choose to listen to. If you have any questions about the materials presented today, please don't hesitate to call me or send an email. I would love to hear from you!

It Starts with One Note!

I hear many high school and junior high school aged trombonists each year as I visit schools across Arkansas. Many are really great players for their age, but I think that the biggest thing holding back their improvement is their coordination – and that means much more than just a fast slide!

You can prescribe Arban exercises until you're blue in the face, and if the root issue of coordination isn't addressed, the countless repetitions of the exercise will reinforce and engrain the bad habits, rather than improve the student's playing.

Do you want your trombones to be able to play a clean Rolling Thunder together as a section? You can't worry about how fast their slides and double-tongues are moving until they can breathe in time AND have total control over each note start.

Today's clinic may feel like a step back in terms of technique, but I believe that if you can incorporate this approach into your teaching (i.e. doing simple things really, really well) it will reap big rewards down the road.

SINGING

With the Voice

As instrumentalists, there is a real tendency to hide behind our instrument. Maybe we feel like we don't have a pretty singing voice. Maybe we worry that we can't sing well on pitch. The more loudly and proudly we sing our passages, the better chance we have of being able to play them well! If you can't hear the note, you have to depend on the instrument to tell you if you're right, and that is a risky scenario!!!

With the Mouthpiece

There seem to be two, or perhaps three, camps on this issue. Some believe that playing the mouthpiece alone is a great thing, and others are totally against it. I agree with both, depending on a few key factors.

- If you're buzzing the mouthpiece for half an hour a day, you may be doing more harm than good.
- If you interface with the mouthpiece in a completely different manner than do when you play, you may be doing more harm than good.
- If you don't have some form of pitch reference at hand when you're buzzing, you may be doing more harm than good.

Create the Practice Circle

I tend to use buzzing, or as I like to call it "mouthpiece playing," as a diagnostic tool and part of a three step process of singing, buzzing, and playing. Doing these in conjunction with each other is crucial to the success of mouthpiece playing as a tool in your teaching and playing arsenal.

1. Always begin with playing.
2. Sing the passage slowly, loudly, and do your best to "lock in" the intervals.
3. Play on the mouthpiece with the same level of care as when you sing, only articulating the first note of the passage. If the buzz stops, it means that you need to fuel the lips with more air!
4. Sing the passage again.
5. Play the passage on the instrument again.

PLAY SING BUZZ SING PLAY

Taking the notes of the basic, Remington three-note slur, I have students PLAY the note, then SING the note on pitch, then BUZZ the note on the mouthpiece, then SING the note again, and closing by PLAYING the note one more time on the instrument. This ear training exercise really centers the sound on each note and forces the student to not use the instrument as a “pitch approximator.” The trombone will respond to whatever information you put into it. Good information in = good sounds out!

PLAY SING BUZZ SING PLAY

Repeat Above Pattern on F and low Bb

6

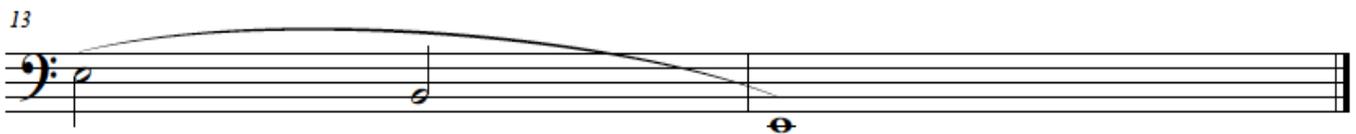
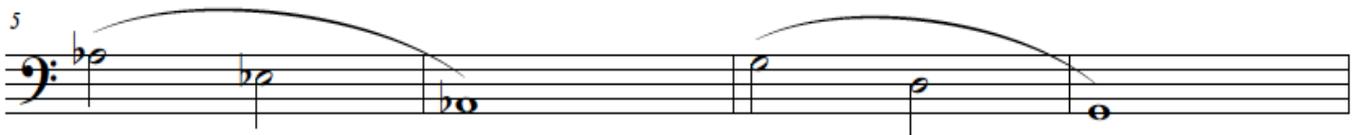
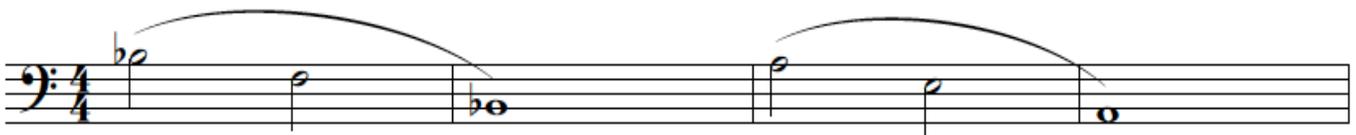
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THREE NOTE SLUR

Now that each of the three notes are centered, they can be strung together into the three note slur pattern. In my opinion, the three-note slur pattern is the foundation to great sound and the beginnings of flexibility between registers on the instrument. While they can be played as a set from 1st to 7th position without a break, there is also great benefit to following the PLAY SING BUZZ SING PLAY pattern for each position set. It takes time, but the benefits are worth the investment!!!

A few points to remember:

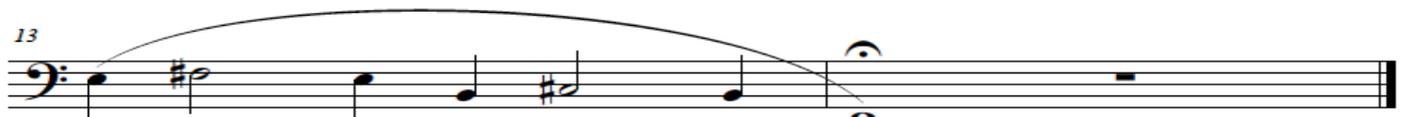
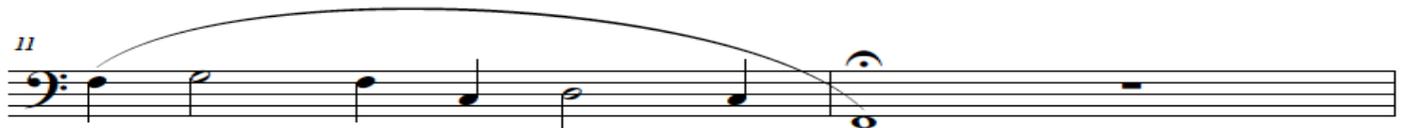
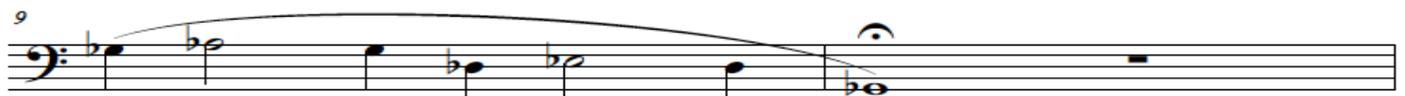
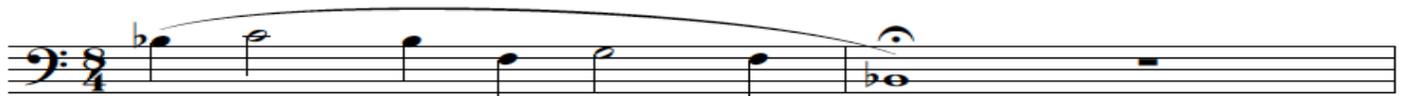
1. Create variations in dynamics from day to day. Don't get into the *mezzopiano* warmup rut!
2. Only tongue the first note of each group of three. True legato is mastered when we release the air and stop using the DAH tongue as a crutch!
3. When three-note slurs become easy, expand out in both directions, both high and low.



ADDING THE SLIDE

By breaking down the playing process into smaller parts, a teacher can better diagnose where the student is struggling. Is it the air? Is it moving between partials in one position? Or is it the movement of the slide? The Stamp exercise below takes the three-note slur from the previous page and adds an upper neighbor tone to each note of the slur pattern.

1. Breathe easy. If you cannot make it through a set of slurred notes without a breath, take the breath you need, repeat the last note you played before the breath, and then continue to the end of the phrase.
2. Again, the PLAY SING BUZZ SING PLAY pattern is great for this exercise, as well!



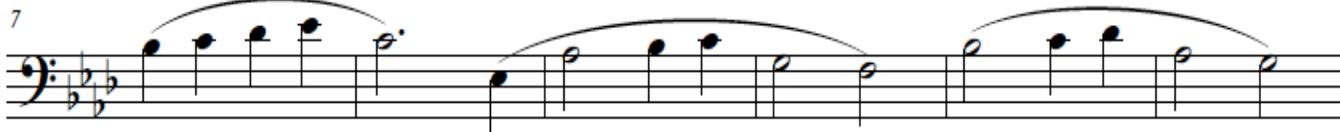
PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

(*bel canto/bel suono* singing and playing)

I have been a big fan of the Bordogni/Rochut books since I started playing, and I'm thankful that Mr. Rochut found these great vocalises and made them available to trombonists everywhere. They are great pieces of music for trombonists beyond a certain playing level, but I often hear younger students really struggling with this material. This struggling often leads to legato that is over-tongued and less lyrical. As an alternative, the 55 Phrasing Studies by Jaroslav Cimerá is similar in nature to Bordogni/Rochut, but shorter in length and less demanding in terms of technique and range. The Cimerá 55 Phrasing Studies will set up the student who can't quite manage the Bordogni/Rochut. (recently back in print via Cherry Classics Publishing <https://cherryclassics.com>)

*** Cimerá #1 below is reproduced with the permission of the publisher ***

Andante ♩ = 76



In addition, students can work on range development in a practical and safe way using these etudes. If the student thought of Cimera #1 “in tenor clef,” the starting note would be E flat:

Andante ♩ = 76

7

13

19

This works for the low register, too! The following configuration is “tenor clef down one octave.”

Andante ♩ = 76

7

13

19

If the tune is firmly established in the student's head, and they begin to work on the transposed study as a SONG, in my experience, they are less likely to strain and do strange things to "squeak" the notes out. These exercises can be transposed into new keys and registers until the student is playing these etudes up and down one octave, an octave and a half, two octaves, etc. As long as the focus stays on SONG and PHRASE, you will be surprised at how quickly the range comes along.

WRAP UP

The trombone has the ability to provide warmth, beauty, and balance to your ensemble sound by filling out the important "middle voice" of the group. When a trombone section gets "the hand" from the conductor, it is rarely an issue of volume as much as it is an issue of timbre. By adopting the principles illustrated above, students will start to gravitate from the idea of "shouting" through the instrument to a more refined, round, and blendable sound. *Good luck*, and if I can be of any help, please don't hesitate to reach out. I am always interested in working with students, and would love the chance to work with yours!

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