

“Strategies for ‘Sound’ Beginning Pedagogy” - Trombone
2:00-2:25 PM Wednesday, July 29, 2015

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“The minute you get away from fundamentals – whether its proper technique, work ethic or mental preparation – the bottom can fall out of your game, your schoolwork, your job, whatever you’re doing.” Michael Jordan

Tone

I believe that the most important element of brass playing is tone quality. The sound a student makes says a lot about their playing “health,” particularly their air support, articulation, and embouchure. In order to make a great sound on the trombone, each player *must have a great sound concept.*

Choose a sound model you would like your trombonists to emulate. I like to use adjectives such as: resonant, colorful, and rich. I avoid adjectives such as: bright or dark. Attaching a connotation of bright=bad or dark=good limits the performer. Sometimes, a bright sound is appropriate!

Breathing is an essential element of tone production. Much has been said and written about breathing. At this stage, *keep it simple* for the students.

- Make your inhale touch your exhale (and your exhale touch your inhale)
- The quality of your inhalation is directly responsible for the sound you make!
 - A tight, shallow breath will result in a small, tight sound, etc.

The number one issue with tone production is the “mushroom” note or TWAH. If the highway speed limit is 70 MPH, and you hit the on ramp at 45 MPH, it is dangerous for everyone! As you merge, you have to move with the flow of traffic. Don’t creep up to that speed slowly with your air.

Many therapies and programs for breathing as they relate to wind instrument playing exist. In order to explain these things succinctly to students, you must have a thorough understanding of how the respiration process in the body actually works.

Articulation

The tongue does not start the sound. Sound starts at the lips, when the air passing across the lips creates vibration. Getting the lips to vibrate easily and at your will is essential to good response and articulation. Adding the tongue *shapes* the beginning of the note.

Easy steps to create an embouchure:

1. Say the letter “M” and hold it. I call this “brass face” or “trombone face.”
2. Place the mouthpiece on the mouth, as close to center as possible.
3. Blow air through the mouthpiece, no buzz.
4. Blow air again, bringing the lips together until a buzz is created.

Following these steps will help the student find the “sweet spot” where the lips respond to the air and vibrate. Over time, they will be able to dial this in for themselves and it will become second nature. This can be done on the mouthpiece alone or on the trombone if you are not a “buzzer.” Then the tongue articulation, whether “tah” or “dah,” can be added, but only after the foundation of the embouchure is established.

Slide Technique

Slide grip: adopting a consistent grip is more important than the grip chosen. I use two fingertips and a thumb, and the thumb never leaves the slide brace. If they grip with the fingertips, and the thumb never leaves the slide brace, they can’t touch the bell to find the position!

I advocate a firm wrist over a floppy wrist, but not a locked or tight wrist. Floppy wrists create the possibility of the fingers and thumb arriving at the position before or after the wrist – this hinders precision placement of the slide.

Slide technique in a nutshell: wait longer, then move faster. The number one culprit of slide technique problems is moving the slide too early! Relax and subdivide. The subdivision will tell you when to move.

I like to use the analogy of a curfew. If your curfew is 11:00 PM, do you come home at 8:30 to watch TV with mom and dad, or do you wait until the last possible moment to walk in the door? Wait until the last minute, and THEN make your move.

Want to learn more? Dig deeper with these resources.

“The Structures and Movement of Breathing” by Barbara Conable

“What Every Musician Needs to Know about the Body” by Barbara Conable

“The Breathing Gym” by Sam Pilafian and Pat Sheridan

Trombone Troubleshooting “The Big Three”

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Scenario #1: The trombone section sound gets to the podium late compared to the rest of the band.

Solution: This is an air speed problem, not a tonguing problem. Playing the notes shorter with a harder tongue will result in less resonant sounds that get to your ears even later than before. If the air is moving freely (inhale touching exhale) the air should be moving fast enough at the beginning of each note. Then a firmer articulation can be used, because the air and tongue will be balanced. Use the “highway entrance ramp” analogy.

Scenario #2: Lots of ‘slide noise’ between the notes.

Solution: This is a slide speed/articulation coordination issue, but we normally only give half of the needed instruction. It’s not just about moving the slide faster – but it’s about waiting until the very end of the note before moving. In short: wait longer, then move faster to the next note. Use the curfew analogy.

Scenario #3: I can’t get my trombones to play with a clean legato. It just sounds dirty!

Solution: Accurate slide technique is more important in legato playing than in faster, detached playing. Students often connect slow playing with a slow slide. In short: shorter notes = fast slide, and slower notes = faster slide.

I am a firm believer that:

- when the tone is supported, resonant, full, and easy, the pitch will improve, and sounds will be easier to blend.
- in order to achieve a supported, resonant, full, and easy sound, there must first be a supported resonant, full, and easy sound in the brain. This comes from listening to great players in person and on recordings!
- like instrument chamber music will help your trombones sound better in the larger band setting.
- a large component of my responsibility as a university teacher is to be available to public school band programs. I am here for you!
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