

Upside-down Trumpet: *Counter-intuitive aspects of brass playing*

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Description

While brass playing is best approached musically and intuitively, there are a few aspects of playing that can be counter-intuitive to learn and teach. This clinic will address common misconceptions that confound trumpeters at all skill levels.

Introduction

- This is a trumpet clinic, but the concepts are applicable to all brass instruments
- This clinic is designed for students and teachers of all ability levels. Simple concepts and exercises + advanced follow-ups
- Time for questions + general trumpet talk at the end

Right-side up: Intuitive brass playing

- Intuitive: “able to be understood without reasoning or explanation; instinctive.” In technology: easy to understand.
- Intuitive brass playing: we play by song (our musical goal) and wind (our effective, musical airstream), as taught by the “Chicago School” of Jacobs, Cichowicz, Herseth
- Our practice can be intuitive as well, building complex actions from simple ones and working off + on the instrument



Use your “translator”

- Keep in mind our goal of always returning to a place of easy, natural playing focused on a musical goal.
- Step 1: Hear the (spoken) advice or see the visual information (eg: printed music)
- Step 2: Absorb and understand the information
- Step 3: **Translate** the information into sound. Hear the desired result **as sound** as part of a richly-detailed musical whole
- Step 4: Sing your sound concept through the instrument

Part 2: Range

Misconception #1: blowing “harder” = higher notes

- **Reality:** higher notes require faster air, but ultimately a smaller volume of air than lower notes
- **Why does this happen?**
 - Early experiences and instruction
 - It “works” but only to a limited extent
- **Demonstration exercises**
 - “The flag”
 - Hand on stomach or timing notes
 - Observation: different ranges and brass instruments
- **Correction exercises**
 - The “imaginary candle” and distance exercises
 - “Channeling” air
 - Whistling and other vowel exercises

Part 2: Range

Misconception #2: / am buzzing higher notes

- **Reality:** the lips buzz themselves under the right circumstances
- **Why does this happen?**
 - We’re “Doers”
 - It also “Works” to a very limited degree
 - Related to the issue of “smiling”
- **Demonstration exercises**
 - Seeing is believing
 - Learn about properties of sound. Are you consciously and deliberately flapping your lips 440 times a second to play that tuning note?
 - Embouchure as “steering wheel” rather than gas/brakes/engine
- **Correction exercises**
 - Best range development: progressive, unforced, musical, begins in middle
 - Learn to use corners: identify corners, tone bending, pedals, etc.

Part 2: Range

Misconception #3: "high" notes

- **Reality:** if we want to get technical, it's "faster vibrations"
- **Why does this happen?**
 - This is an almost universal and very old idea. It's unlikely to change any time soon! The issue is confusing the visual idea of "height" with the kinaesthetic idea of playing.
- **Demonstration exercises**
 - Play ascending/descending, or especially intervallic exercises and observe. Are you playing the pitches with air/ears, or with your eyebrows/neck/shoulders/head?
- **Correction exercises**
 - Start with the advice "Think up as you go down, think down as you go up" (James Stamp)
 - Associate hand gestures or visual references with registers and motion
 - Get away from the visual: play by ear

Part 3: Volume

Misconception: harder = louder

- **Reality:** resonance is far more important than force to achieve projection and a wide dynamic range
- **Why does this happen?**
 - Again, it "Works" to a very limited extent
 - Use of words like "louder" and "harder"
 - Lack of concept of sound or unmusical focus
 - Difficulty distinguishing sounds behind vs. in front of the instrument
- **Demonstration and correction exercises**
 - Hear the difference live, not on recordings
 - Address concept of sound from many different directions
 - Qualitatively: get a student to describe live/recorded tone
 - Scientifically: to an age-appropriate extent, explain concepts like harmonics, resonance, overtones
 - Observationally: have students imitate and listen

Part 4: Articulation

Misconception: our *attack* is all about the *tongue*

- **Reality:** articulation is all about the air, and the tongue does not start the note or make the sound for us.
- **Why does this happen?**
 - Terminology: "attack," "short" notes, etc.
 - Neglect of big ideas (air, tone) for smaller ones (tonguing)
 - Neglect of "response" as a fundamental concept
- **Demonstration and correction exercises**
 - Practice off and on the instrument
 - Take the tongue away: try breath and "poo" attacks
 - Emphasize articulation as a *release* of air + sound rather than an attack
 - Best articulation practice: slow-to-fast(-to-multiple), slur-to-tongue

Part 5: Technique

Misconception: faster, Faster, FASTER

- **Reality:** "Speed is a byproduct of accuracy" (Scott Belck)
- **Why does this happen?**
 - Well-intentioned instruction: increase speed incrementally over time
 - Belief that playing naturally improves with repetition
 - Focus on "survival" over quality
- **Demonstration and correction exercises**
 - Record students
 - Have students perform *verrrrrrry slowwwwwwwly* (*not: very..... slowly*)
 - Emphasize focus and precision in multiple ways
 - Sense of pulse and subdivision
 - Musical and pitch clarity (sing, buzz, conduct, etc.)
 - Ergonomic playing: proper hand position, quick and definitive valves
 - Best technical practice: diagnostic, creative, varied

Part 6: Conclusion + Questions

- Brass playing is generally intuitive!
- Use suggestions/adjustments to return to easy, natural, musical playing
- Avoid “paralysis by analysis”
- Questions?
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