Brass Tips

by

Stephen Chenette

Practice:

"Anyone who can invent a substitute for practice will make a million dollars." Ed Chenette.

My father, a band conductor, said this back in the 1940s, when a million dollars would have made you Really rich. No one has yet filed a patent application for a practice substitute, so the best that I can offer are some tips that have helped me get the most out of whatever time I put in on my trumpet.

Bad news - Not practicing a brass instrument gets you out of shape quicker than on wood-wind and string instruments. I envy percussionists.

Good news - Five minutes a day is a lot better than no minutes a day.
Better news - Ten minutes a day is three times as good as five minutes a day.
Even better news - Twenty minutes a day is three times as good as ten minutes a day. And so on.
Secret good news - Long tones played while watching television are better than no long tones.

Using a practice mute, or a Harmon mute with the stem removed, isn't nearly as good as playing without a mute, but it can save your marriage or keep you from getting kicked out of your apartment.

More secret good news - You can practice on your mouthpiece while driving. This lets me get in more chop time than I otherwise would. Of course, mouthpiece practice is most helpful when you are sitting in your practice room and paying full attention, but .....

When I do my full mouthpiece routine, I start with single notes, trying to keep the pitch steady. Then repeated notes and tongued scales, trying to hit the pitches right on. (Cracked notes happen when the lips don't play the exact pitch the instrument is set to play.) Maybe some slow-to-fast double and triple tonguing. Then some glissando slurs (see "high register" tips). Finally, and most important, some songs and melodies. Fun, and good for ear training. Maybe play along with your car radio. If you don't know the tunes, improvise.

Warming Up:

A beautiful tone is the most important part of anyone's playing. Spend the first few minutes each day playing with your best tone, gently, at mp or mf, in the middle register. Follow this with songs and some lip slurs. Then a bit of single, double, and triple tonguing. Ten or fifteen minutes of this will keep your basic playing in some kind of shape.

You can maintain your skills (flexibility, tonguing, finger dexterity, range, rhythm, sight reading, etc.), by practicing them once every three days. To improve them takes daily practice.

Another secret - (Trombone players can skip this part.) You can exercise your fingers while resting your chops or watching television. Hold your instrument in playing position. Put the first two valves down, and move the third valve up and down as fast as you can for long as you can, until you feel a slight fatigue or soreness in you forearm. Now hold down the first and third valves and give the middle finger a workout. Then hold down two and three and exercise the 1st finger. Then go back and forth from 1st and 3rd valves to 1st and 2nd. If you are feeling really conscientious, go back and forth from 1st and 3rd to 2nd. Getting each finger tired two or three times a day will keep them fast.

Sluggish fingers give a mushy legato.

"Every stroke of your fingers should be as fast as possible." Ed Chenette

"Your fingers should move as fast when playing a hymn as they do when playing The Flight of the Bumblebee; just not as often." Steve's Corollary.

Ed Chenette always wished that he could invent an octave key for a trumpet, which would have made him a multi-millionaire. (Believe me, I wished this for him, too, but it was not to be.) The finger ring on a trumpet is not an octave key; it is not put there so you can pull on it to add mouthpiece pressure when you go for high notes. You can get more than enough pressure with your left arm! The finger ring is there for when you need to play the trumpet one-handed, to keep your left hand free for turning pages, putting in a mute, or giving a Doc Severinsen type cut-off to your back-up band. Otherwise, the little finger needs to be free to move with the 3rd finger.

High Notes

"There has been more money earned in the staff than above it." Doc Severinsen.

In spite of Doc's comment, "How do I improve my high register?" is the question most often asked by brass players. The one-word answer is, "practice," but I'll try to be a bit more specific.

Higher notes require a combination of greater lip tension and air speed.

1. "The higher you go, the faster you blow." Literally. Research has shown that to play one octave higher on a brass instrument requires doubling one's internal air pressure. Arnold Jacobs advised thinking of blowing faster, rather than harder, since "harder" might trigger unnecessary tension.

A Jacobs exercise that has helped me and my students- Remove the mouthpiece and blow through the lead pipe, starting slow and getting faster. Next, try to blow the same way (quantity and speed) while playing, slurring up a scale for an octave or more. Hold the top note until you begin to run low on air. This is to get you to use faster air and less chop strength in the high

register.

2. Lip slurs, and especially glissando slurs on the mouthpiece (like a slow slide glissando on a trombone) will exercise your lips in a way that facilitates playing in the high register.

3. High notes require more lip strength, and long tones are the quickest way to develop it. My father Made me practice them. I HATED playing long tones, but they work. Here is Ed Chenette's "long tone scale;" 2nd line G, 2nd space A, 1st space F#, 3rd line B, first line E ..... Get the pattern? Keep going up and down until you get to G at the top of the staff and G below the staff. Start each note as softly as possible, crescendo to as loud as possible, then decrescendo back to pp. Rest after each note until your lips feel recovered. The rests are as important as the playing.

Mouthpieces

The second most common brass question is, "What kind of mouthpiece do you use? There are those who believe that brass players haven't paid their dues unless they have a box or two of discarded mouthpieces. I've paid mine. If anyone reading this has found the perfect mouthpiece, will you please tell me?

Every mouthpiece is a compromise. A deep cup favours a full rich sound, and low notes. A shallow cup gives a brighter, thinner sound, and easier high notes. Unless you can afford a screw-rim mouthpiece set with two or more underparts, a standard cup, such as the Vincent Bach "C" mouthpieces have, is a good compromise. When it comes to cup width, one size doesn't fit all, and you can't know what is right for you without trying a variety of sizes. With my students, I get a range of sizes(five or more), from small to big, and have them try each one by starting on a 3rd space C and slurring up a scale to the highest note they can play well. (It's better if they don't know what size mouthpieces they are playing.) Choose the biggest mouthpiece that gives good high notes with a full and easy sound. For me, a good mouthpiece will feel good right away (if it doesn't, don't choose it), rotten after a couple of days, and gradually better, starting in a week or two, as my lips start to adjust. Some people adapt more quickly. Lucky them.

Note to lower brass players; my apologies for this trumpet-specific mouthpiece talk. I hope that you can figure out how to apply it to your own instruments.

Tonguing:

Tonguing is the easiest part of brass playing; we have all been practicing tonguing since we began talking. It is not necessary to learn any special tonguing techniques to play a brass instrument. Just choose a word that gets the tongue to do the right thing, think of saying that word when you start notes, and let the autonomic nervous system take care of the details. For most attacks, use a word starting with T, and for legato attacks, a word starting with D. These consonants must be followed by a vowel, and the best choices for brass playing are: Ta (soft A, as in "ah"), Tu (as in "shoe"), Tee (as in "tea"), Tay (as in "day"), and Toh (as in "toe). All five vowels, plus "ah." Pick a vowel that feels comfortable and gives you a good sound. I actually

think of singing, rather than just saying, Ta Ta Ta, etc., as I play. No vocal cord activity, of course.

Everybody can double tongue, since everybody can say, "Here, kitty kitty kitty." That is double tonguing, but backwards from the way we usually do it. I recommend playing long tones, saying ta ka ta ka, etc., slowly, with continuous blowing, until it feels comfortable. Doing it backwards (ka ta ka ta ka) is wise, as this helps to make the K attacks as strong as the T attacks. Use the same vowel after both the T and the K. After double tonguing on one note starts to feel natural, do it on slow scales, etudes, or tunes. Gradually (over days and weeks) speed it up. The Arban book has a lot of double and triple tongue exercises.

Arban recommended learning triple tonguing first, before double tonguing. I don't agree, since triple tonguing is just a combination of single and double tonguing. Brass players usually use the TTK TTK pattern. Flutists (for reasons known only to themselves) use TKT TKT. My father taught me to use double tonguing in a triplet pattern - TKT KTK TKT KTK. All three ways work just fine. Take your pick.

By the way, letting the autonomic nervous system deal with the mechanics of tongue movement guarantees that your tongue will be relaxed, comfortable, and able to move fast when necessary. To improve your single tonguing speed, here is an exercise from Herbert L. Clarke's *Characteristic Studies*; On a second line G, in 2/4 time, play 16^{th} notes at a fast tempo for 16 measures, or until your breath runs out. Best done with a metronome set at a tempo which you can manage for at least eight measures, but which causes your tongue to slow down a bit before the end. This is a sign that your tongue has gotten tired, and tiring a muscle is a way to make it stronger and faster. You can make up similar exercises using double and triple tonguing.

Dynamics

"Any fool can play loud, but it takes an artist to play soft." Ed Chenette

"A brass player with a good pianissimo will be popular with colleagues and conductors." Steve's Corollary.

Lips must be sensitive to vibrate with a slow air stream, and this doesn't happen without some pianissimo practice. Every day, play a few notes so softly that you barely get a sound, and then play a song very softly, in the middle register. Next, start a long tone at mf, and gradually decrescendo until the lips stop vibrating. Take a small quick breath, and start the note at the softest possible volume. All of this can be done in five minutes or less, although the more the better.

Brass players usually have no problem playing fortissimo.

Instrument Care and Cleaning:

This is a requested topic (thanks, Bill), and more important than we give it credit for. The external finish has very little to do with brass instrument tone quality, but the condition of the insides

matters a lot. Much of the expense of making brass instruments goes to keeping the inside of the tubing perfectly round, and of a consistent size as it goes around all the curves. If we let the tubing collect green crud, we have wasted a lot of money, and the crud is making our sounds duller, softer, and flatter. As a kid, I didn't know that I should be cleaning my trumpet, and when I finally did, I moved up four chairs in my high school band.

Clean your lead pipe and tuning slide with a "snake" every couple of weeks, running water through them while you brush them out. Any music store worth its salt should know what you are talking about if you ask for a cleaning snake. They will have mouthpiece cleaning brushes, too, but for a trumpet mouthpiece, a pipe cleaning brush does just fine.

Depending on how much I am playing, every so often I take my trumpet completely apart, run some warm (not hot) water into a tub, add some mild soap, and let everything except the valves soak for a while. (The valve corks and pads may change size when wet.) Then I run the snake through every inch of tubing (it will go only halfway around the valve slides, so I push it in from both ends of the slide), rinse throughly, and put the trumpet back together. I put on fresh slide grease, being careful that none of it gets inside the tubing.

To clean the valves, I wrap a handkerchief around a pencil, and push it through the valve casing, being careful not to scratch anything. Remove the pencil, and pull the handkerchief back and forth a few times to get rid of old valve oil. Holding each valve by its stem, run the handkerchief through all of the tubes and wipe off the valve itself. Use Kleenex to get the grunge out of the bottom valve caps. Reassemble and apply fresh valve oil.

When the trumpet is reassembled, check to be sure that there is no water hiding in any of the valve slides. Otherwise, you might be in for a surprise at your next rehearsal! I've learned some lessons the hard way.

Stephen Chenette

Steve got a cornet for his 7th birthday, but had no private lessons until he was fifteen. By then, he had acquired lots of bad habits. His first lessons, with Rafael Mendez, got him started on the right track, and Steve went on to study with the principal trumpeters of the New York Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, and Boston Symphony, plus the noted pedagogue, Arnold Jacobs. Steve played in major orchestras for sixteen years, including principal trumpet with the Minneapolis Symphony (now renamed the Minnesota Orchestra), the Boston Pops, Denver Symphony, and St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. He is Professor Emeritus at the Faculty of Music, University of Toronto, where, for twenty-nine years, he was Professor of Trumpet, Head of Brass, and conductor of the Concert Band and Wind Symphony.

Steve will answer brass questions (but not about specific brands of trumpets or mouthpieces). Write to him at brasstips@cba-ontario.ca .