

There are no shortcuts to achieving consistently excellent results when playing an instrument, but the following information is designed to eliminate lots of wasted effort. Guidelines for the formation of healthy practice habits are covered along with ideas for how to stay positive when conditions are stressful.

MUSICAL AND BRASS PLAYING INSIGHTS BASED ON MY EXPERIENCE IN THE CHICAGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

By John Hagstrom

Internal Musical Voice

This is the mental image of what you would like to sound like. One of the primary concepts behind the teaching of Arnold Jacobs (CSO Principal Tubist 1944-1988) is to first imagine what you would sound like if you could play a particular piece of music better than you or anyone else has ever heard it played before. This requires more intense mental envisioning because the player is combining the ability to *imitate* the best of what they have heard before with the *imagination* to improve those sounds. This is artistic ownership, and it begins when your image of what will sound better is not just an *imitation* of what you have heard before, but also something you have created *yourself*.

- **Image intensity is as important as image quality:** This means that the intensity of the musical voice in your mind must be *stronger* than what may or may not come out of your instrument. It is not enough to let your musical image be triggered by the first notes you play. Proficiency in this area allows a player to be much less dependent on the physical sensations of playing, and gives them more freedom to interact with other musicians.
- **Rules for improvement:** The first step is to be aware of what improvements you are looking for. You must also have the intensity of concentration to sustain that concept as you make repeated attempts. When you are able to recreate your success over and over again, new habits begin to form, but they are crude at first! It takes most people a *year or more* to master a new habit. Mastery is what is needed to be professionally competent and competitive. It is when you can perform a given task consistently well under pressure without having a second chance.

Tone production

Think about air: The biggest misunderstanding many players have about the way air is used for trumpet playing is that we are blowing huge *quantities* of air through the instrument in the way that the trombones and tuba do. This is false, but it is not hard to see how this misconception could begin. Everyone has been told at one time or another in their training to use more air support, and this idea is often simplified into the phrase "*Use more air!*" At first our sense of what it feels like to use more air is rather crude, but our efforts in that direction do seem to help us improve. A young player may improperly conclude that it was the *quantity* of air that made all of the difference, when it really was the *immediacy and compression* of the air that were responsible for the improvements. The trumpets are often blowing much *harder* than the trombones and tuba, but much less air **quantity** actually goes into the trumpet, especially in the high register.

The goal of efficient high brass tone production is to have the action of the air at the *beginning* of the tone generating process. Combined with a strong and healthy mental image of what the player is trying to sound like, the lips and tongue will gradually begin to react in balance with the air to create the desired sound.

Articulation must be a *reaction* to the air: A good analogy is to think of a baseball catcher. The catcher's job is to react to the pitcher's action by closing his glove at just the right instant. His action at the moment of impact is relatively small, but this is because he has put his body in a position of being able to resist the energy of the ball without losing his balance. This position has come about because of his prior experience (and likely initial failure) catching the pitch. He is reacting to his prior experience, but also to the action of the moment. This is a good way to think of the action of the tongue and the lips as they react to the air, and it also explains the reason why it is so effective to slur a musical passage before your attempt to articulate it. You are insuring the consistency you create comes through keeping your air action *constant*. There are many ways to misunderstand this concept, and those misunderstandings result in the majority of what prevents people with otherwise strong musical images from improving toward their potential.

Volume: The key to this is *balance*. Do not blow harder or softer than you can actively resist and balance with your tongue position and your embouchure. When you do find an efficient balance, it is better to play for longer periods at about 80% of your maximum or minimum volume, making sure to evenly sustain every note. The goal is to spend more time at a lower volume that is still high enough to tire you without the risk of injury. Make sure to always let the energy of the air start the sound, whether you are articulating or not. Remember also that effort and strength is required to play softly with musical energy. Work to find how you can play extreme dynamics with control and not force.

Range: Many people are told that mouthpiece pressure in the high register is to be avoided at all costs. However, high loud percussive brass playing does require a substantial amount of mouthpiece pressure. How much is too much? If your lip is getting cut or is in pain, it's too much. It is usually the *sudden* changes in mouthpiece pressure that do the most harm. If you can keep the pressure you use fairly constant in all registers, you are close to a balanced and healthy amount. Tongue position is also vital to increasing one's range upward *and* downward. If you can whistle a scale and be conscious of your tongue position changing, you can begin to get the idea of how your tongue needs to focus the space in your mouth to get the best sound and ease for high register playing. It is important to note the way your tongue position forms and changes is also a *reaction* to the air.

Personal satisfaction

The following are the main concepts behind my enjoyment and satisfaction as a Chicago Symphony member:

Learn from the experience of others and bring out their best: You can learn something from everyone. In some cases it's how *not* to play, or what certain habits can lead to. Whatever your opinion of how your colleagues play or act, it is vital to behave in a way that brings out their best for the sake of the group and the music. This really does give you more enjoyment than just saying whatever you think. Bringing people together feels better than getting your own way.

Enjoy a unified effort: I get enjoyment out of reinforcing and magnifying the choices of others. The brass section in the Chicago Symphony has demonstrated over many years how the whole can be greater than the sum of the parts. One of the most attractive qualities about listening to the orchestra is that it has a collective unity of style and sound.

Remember that no one is invisible: We all have been guilty of being critical of others as though we had never made a mistake ourselves. The current climate of our culture encourages everyone to have an opinion and share it openly, whatever it may be. Many times the result of someone's stage fright is the realization that they will be held to the same impossible standards to which they hold others. When you start to support others for the best they have to offer, chances are you'll feel better about yourself too.