

A Director's Guide to Trumpet Basics

BY DR. KEITH WINKING

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I come from a musical family and I started playing the trumpet (reluctantly) when I was seven years old. Due to lack of interest for many years and my desire to find “shortcuts” (i.e. not practice), I can safely say that I have personally experienced just about every playing problem that exists.

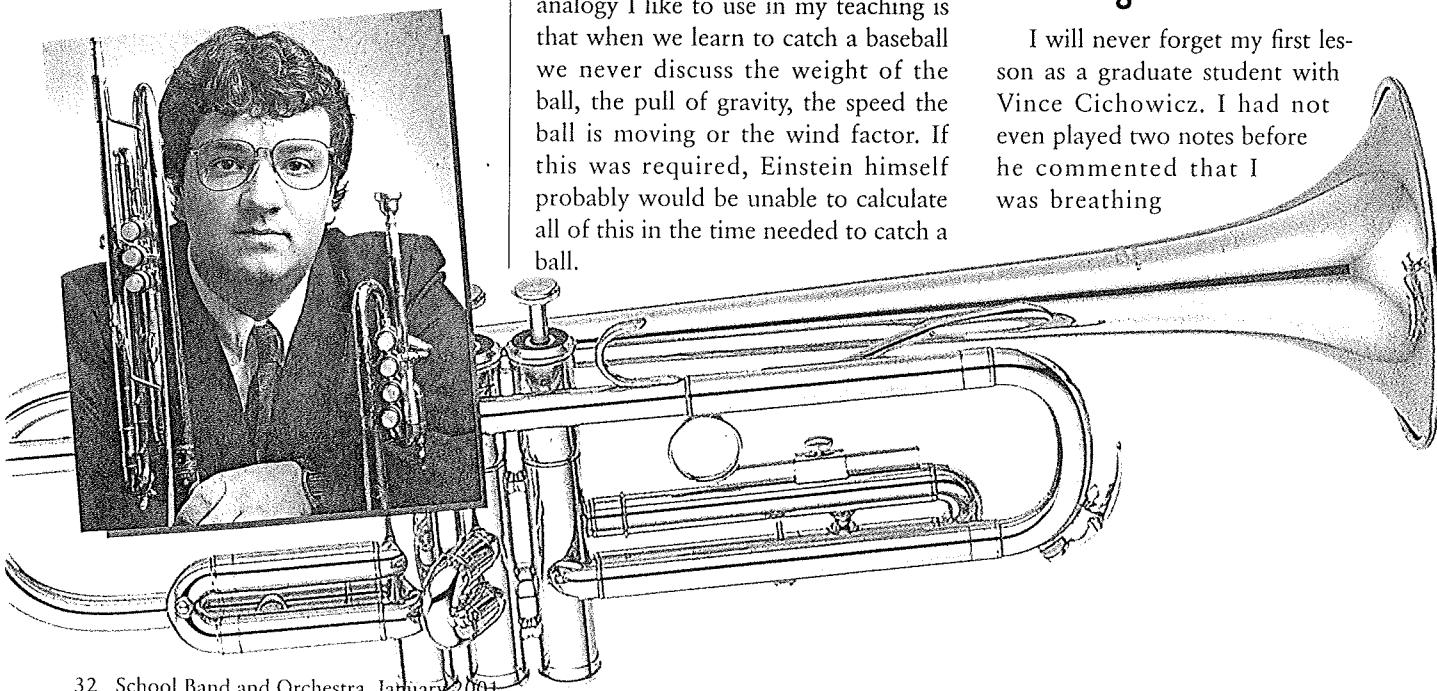
There is an old Chinese saying: “When the student is ready, the teacher will come.” This has been true for me in that even though I had lessons from day one, I did not get serious about the trumpet until my later college years. Then I was fortunate to have some excellent teachers who helped me work through the various problems I had developed.

For years I was told that trumpet playing is 90 percent mental, which I believe to be true, but I also have come to the conclusion that trumpet playing is so easy, that it is hard. An analogy I like to use in my teaching is that when we learn to catch a baseball we never discuss the weight of the ball, the pull of gravity, the speed the ball is moving or the wind factor. If this was required, Einstein himself probably would be unable to calculate all of this in the time needed to catch a ball.

A lot of the problems that develop with players occur when they complicate functions that, if done correctly, are really very natural and quite simple. In order to play the trumpet you have to breathe, tongue, listen, move your fingers and read, and all of these are normal, everyday functions. Technique is nothing more than “the ability to play fast what you can play slowly” (Don “Jake” Jacoby). To develop good technique, you must first learn the language of the instrument.

Breathing

I will never forget my first lesson as a graduate student with Vince Cichowicz. I had not even played two notes before he commented that I was breathing



wrong. At that time I was a chest or upper-body breather, and since this was the way I had always played, it never occurred to me that this was wrong or that it might not be the most efficient way to breathe.

I am currently giving lessons to a graduate student who is a successful middle school band director and though she is not a wind player, she teaches beginning bands at her school. After her first semester of lessons and the discussions about proper breathing, she commented that she now realizes that most of the problems her beginning trumpet players had were related to breathing.

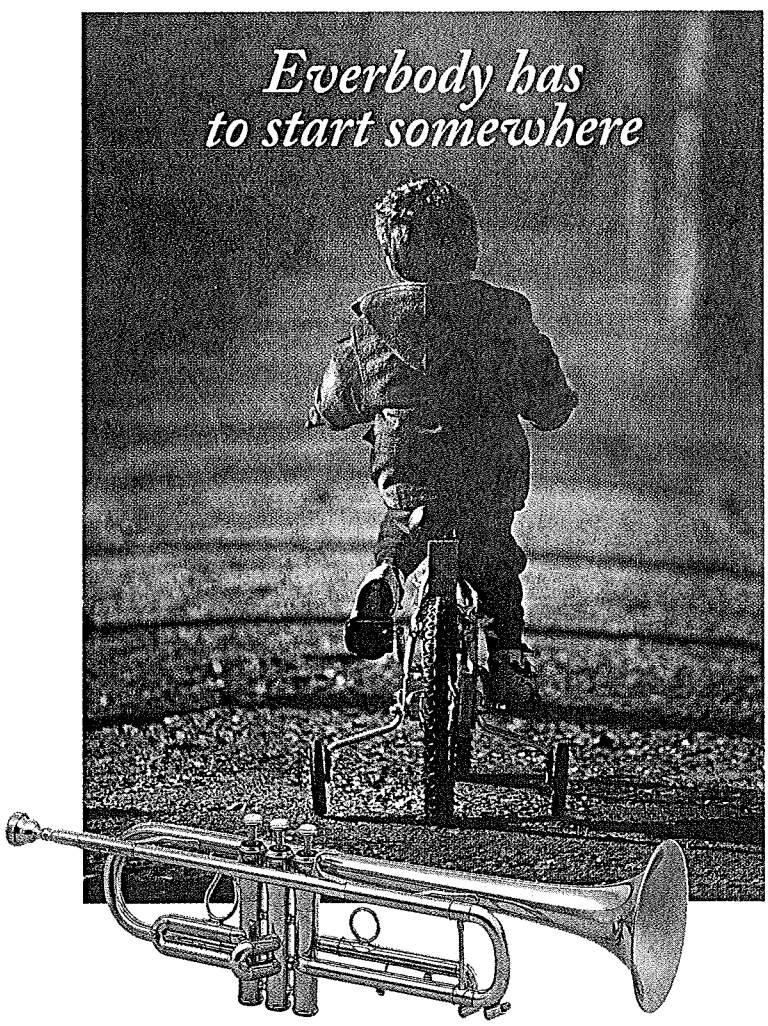
Since the trumpet is part of the "wind" family of instruments, it stands to reason that improved breathing will improve playing. Taking a breath to play should be as natural as your first breath. Although I cannot stress enough the importance of this aspect of playing, too much discussion about this or any other areas of trumpet playing can complicate what is really a very natural function. Babies are not given a lesson on the respiratory system prior to their first breath, so I see no reason to go into great detail about this to students. Good support is air flow, not tension. Think "OH" when you inhale and "HO" when you exhale. One of the most common problems that often occurs with young players is that after they inhale, they will hold their air prior to exhaling, which creates tension in the throat and consequently will hinder the sound. Breathing is a continuous motion, so after inhalation there should be an immediate U-turn of the air to exhale.

For years, I suffered from throat tension while playing and even ruptured my throat at one point. While warming up in my first lesson with Don "Jake" Jacoby, he surprised me when he asked if I suffered from throat tension. I was quite astonished by this question, to say the least, since we had not yet talked about any aspects of my playing and/or problems. When I asked how he knew about my problem, he commented that he could hear it in my sound during my warm-up and that the tension

in my throat was actually caused by having a tight diaphragm. He then asked me to tighten my diaphragm as if he were going to hit me in the stomach and then instructed me to talk while in this position. When I started to speak, I immediately noticed how much tension existed in my throat and then realized that this was the same sensation I had in my throat while playing. Somewhere along the line, I recall hearing that in

order to play well, my diaphragm should be as "hard as a rock," so I had played this way for many years. I had been focusing for years on trying to get my throat more relaxed when, in fact, it was a tight diaphragm causing the tension. An exercise that helped me to work through this problem is to sing, focusing on relaxing the diaphragm and then ensuring this same relaxed sensation is felt in the diaphragm while playing.

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Concept of Sound

The best music teachers your students will ever have are their own ears. A baby learns to talk not after a discussion on how the anatomy works, but by imitating the sounds it hears. Most aspects of trumpet playing can be controlled by thinking of sound, rather than physical feelings. Physical responses are byproducts of artistic goals. Since it is impossible to describe what a beautiful sound is, it

is most important that students be exposed to great sounds so they have a model sound in their ears. I'm sure we have all proclaimed how "music is a language," yet it seems like we forget how languages are truly learned, which is through listening and imitation.

The following are some classical trumpeters whose sounds will serve as good role models and who have made numerous recordings that are readily available: Philip Smith, Maurice

Andre, Thomas Stevens, Nicholas Eklund, Chris Gekker, Hakan Hardenberger, Gerard Schwarz, Wynton Marsalis and Mark Gould.

Tonguing

Tonguing with the trumpet is similar to speech, and there are basically only three sounds used while playing: Tu, Du and Ku. All other sounds are really variations on these. Like a flag in a breeze, without air, there is no movement. I like to compare the tongue to a sprinkler system. The air is like the water with a sprinkler in that it is continuous and all the tongue should do is interrupt the air, not stop it. Practice various types of articulation: legato, staccato, single, double and triple tonguing. Work with a metronome and strive for consistency. Rather than having a lengthy and possibly confusing discussion on the placement of the tongue, it is most important to have a model tonguing sound in students' ears for them to emulate.

Half of all missed notes are first notes. This can be caused by insecurity (not knowing the music), having the wrong pitch in the ears or inadequate air flow. A common problem with many students is that they take a breath and then hesitate before exhaling, thereby creating tension and an explosive attack. The first note sets the tone for the rest of the phrase so a bad first attack affects the rest of the notes in a phrase. Louis Davidson in his *Trumpet Techniques* book states, "A good attack by definition is one in which the note starts freely, without hesitation, without force, with purity of sound, with immediacy and presence, with no hint of a 'hiss,' and obviously, of course, with no trace of a split tone."

Synchronization among the air, fingers, and tongue is crucial. One exercise to work on explosive attacks is to have students practice their attacks without the mouthpiece, working on the timing between the three elements (air, fingers, tongue). Remember, all the tongue does is interrupt the air, so think "release" as opposed to "attack."

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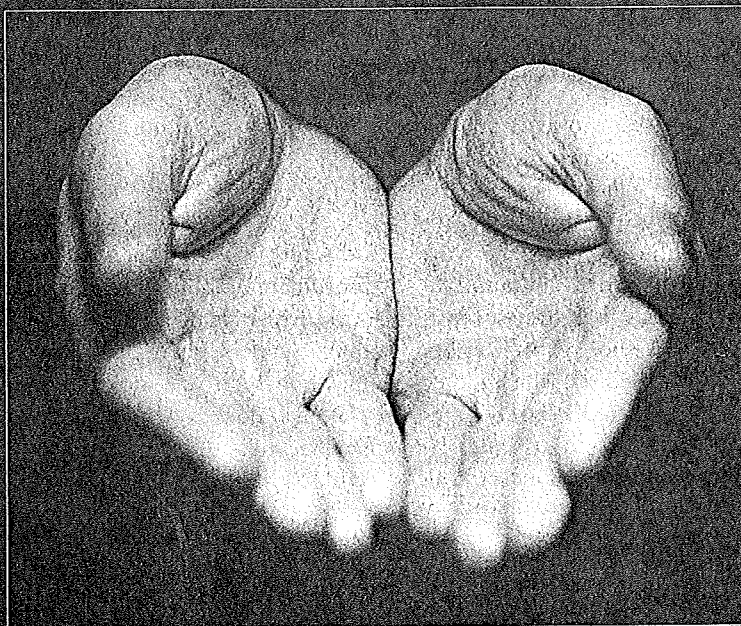
Unevenness in sound or no response while slurring is the result of poor air flow. The key to good slurs is having continuous air flow. I became convinced in my early years that I was incapable of playing a "lip" slur – the changing of notes in the natural harmonic series without the use of valves or tongue – due in great part to my reluctance to practice this since it did not come easy for me. When I first encountered this problem, I recall teachers telling me to "blow more air" to get out the next higher note and at the time all that happened was the note I was on would get louder and sound "blatty." What I was not aware of at the time is that air mass controls volume and air speed controls range. In order to move to the next higher note, you must move *faster* air through the horn – not more air.

I wrote my D.M.A. treatise on the great cornetist/trumpeter Ernest S. Williams, who told students, "Practice the way you want to play, and you will play the way you practiced." I have witnessed numerous bands that use lip slurs as part of their warm-up, yet oftentimes they rush through them. Subsequently, students develop rather sloppy flexibility and have great difficulty during the rehearsal of any music that requires lip slurs. Working to develop consistent lip slurs would be time well spent during band warm-ups. Practicing lip slurs slowly will highlight problems with the air and the first step in fixing any problem is identifying what the problem is. Remember, technique is "the ability to play fast what you can play slowly," so start slow.

Dynamics

Instead of talking about playing louder and softer, I stress projection similarly to speaking at distances. There is no difference in the sound of a voice when either whispering or hollering across a parking lot, yet when students are asked to play different dynamics, their sounds change drastically. Students should use their ears to ensure that their sound does not get

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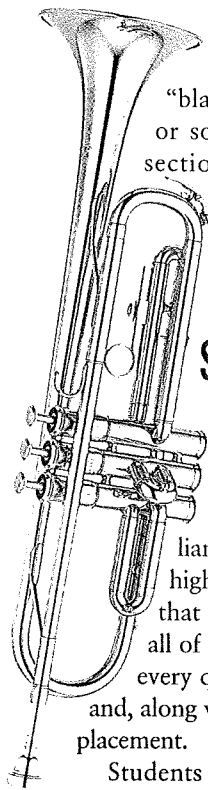


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“blatty” during loud sections or sound pinched during soft sections. I visualize distances while playing dynamics, so while playing loud or soft I pinpoint how far I want my sound to project.

Scales and Chords

This is the foundation of music. “If you cannot play your scales, what can you play?” (Ernest Williams). I was fortunate in my high school music program in that we were required to play all of our major and minor scales every quarter as part of our grade and, along with sight reading, for chair placement.

Students should replace the word “hard” with the word “unfamiliar.” Many years ago, I taught a seventh-grade student. Rather than teach him his Bb concert scale first, which I knew his school band would cover, I first taught him his B concert scale. He actually learned the B concert scale


first and then commented how “hard” it was for him to play his Bb concert. When does something cease to be hard? When it becomes familiar. One scale really is not any “harder” than any other, but when we spend a lot of time in certain keys and ignore others, we become quite familiar with some and uncomfortable with others. Since music is a language, scales and chords are as important to learning the music language as the alphabet is to learning English. Use scales and arpeggios as part of your band’s daily warm-up and if you teach them one new scale a week and reinforce this scale every rehearsal, your band will have no difficulty mastering all the keys.

Range

Young students seem to spend an inordinate amount of time concerned with their range. I have seen many students damage their lips by trying to play too high too soon. Learning to play high does not ensure that you will become a good trumpeter. Don Jacoby said, “High playing is the result of

being a good trumpet player, not the reason for playing.”

I am not really a “lead” trumpeter, yet I can play lead when called upon and my range has steadily increased since high school. Most problems with range are a result of problems in other areas: not enough air, tightness, weak embouchure, and mental state. Range will develop with a logical, progressive approach to practicing. Practice in an artistic manner by adding works that include high and low range playing, not just striving to hit high notes. Remember that air speed controls range, so balance and timing between air compression and finger technique are crucial.

Lou Holtz, legendary football coach, said, “Students will achieve success if they set higher standards/goals for themselves than their teachers have set for them.” I think as educators we need to encourage our students to surpass the goals we set for them and to make sure that the goals we set are high enough that they receive a lifetime of enjoyment from their instruments and music. 

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