

Recruit, Retain and Train Your Low Brass Section

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I. Low brass are crucial for intonation, balance and tone color.

- A. Francis McBeth, *Effective Performance of Band Music*, “Most pitch problems are balance problems.” Therefore, improving balance can improve intonation.
- B. Chord structure determined by the lowest notes.
- C. All notes of a major chord are contained within the harmonic series of the lower notes, so a strong low brass presence will stabilize all other sounds.
- D. Loud dynamic levels generated by the low sounds (just like an audio system).

II. Recruiting Strategies for Low Brass:

A. Just ask!

- 1. Make students aware of instrumentation needs, and invite them to try something new to help the band sound better.
- 2. Create an application process for those who want to try a new instrument:
 - to get parents on board
 - set short-term goals
 - timetable for a final decision.
 - See authors interview with Ami Custodia on this topic in the July 2007 edition of the *Instrumentalist*.

B. Recruit players with a high probability of success:

- 1. Self-disciplined, intrinsically motivated.
- 2. Physical characteristics:
 - Relatively little curve of jaw (adequate playing surface)
 - Relatively full lips.
 - Tall students often have better lung capacity.
 - Ability (and willingness) to carry the instrument.
- 3. Utilize “5 minute test drives” to look for students with natural ability
- 4. Invite competent players from other instruments to try low brass, not the worst players.

C. Give the students equipment that works!

- 1. Broken instruments will make learning a new instrument even harder.
- 2. Valves or slides that don't work send a message to the student that their part is not important.
- 3. Instruments covered in mold or corrosion, not to mention those that smell like old gym socks, discourage students from wanting to learn.

D. Seek out players outside your program:

- 1. Identify students who played in feeder programs but are not enrolled in band.
- 2. Ask current students to recommend friends who have a background in music, but not necessarily band, or who have expressed interest in band.

3. Ask counselors to help identify students with good academic records but who are minimally involved in school activities.
 4. Seek out friends or siblings of current band members.
- E. Support players on new instruments:
1. A method book and a fingering chart are not enough!
 2. Schedule weekly training sessions with director to assess progress.
 3. Schedule and monitor more frequent sessions with peer tutors.
 4. Use flashcards/software to assure notation fluency and fingerings/slide positions.
 5. Encourage characteristic tone quality from first lesson.
 6. Reward small achievements but encourage rapid growth, using phrases like these:
 - “It’s not how long you have been playing, but how well you play”
 - “Keep working, we need you to make our band better TODAY”
 - “Build on what you already know to learn this instrument”
- F. Warnings:
1. Be sensitive to cultural norms and expectations regarding gender-appropriate instrument selections.
 2. Be sensitive to parental expectations regarding playing an instrument the family already owns, following in parents/grandparents musical footsteps, etc.

III. Retention Strategies:

A. Raise performance expectations:

1. Technique: equal to any other brass (potentially).
 - Method books or unison scale studies played by full ensemble can encourage technical development.
 - Choose literature that provides challenging moments for low brass or features them.
 - Utilize low brass soloists: students, professionals, or both to demonstrate that technical proficiency is possible.
2. Encourage characteristic tone quality. Tone should be open, resonant and full, not fuzzy, indistinct or inaudible.
3. Encourage range development:
 - Trombone or Euphonium: E below the bass clef staff to Bb above middle C (Range required by many All-State Etudes).
 - Tuba: EE an octave below the bass clef staff to Bb below middle C (Range required by many All-State etudes).
 - Trombones with an F attachment can play substantially lower, as can tuba and euphonium players with a fourth valve.
4. Encourage low range development to promote air flow and an open throat and oral cavity, both of which will improve overall tone quality. Make low range proficiency a point of pride for low brass players.
 - For tubas, assign best players to the lower part in octave splits.
 - Assign scales that require low range proficiency (two octaves for F, E, G or Gb).
 - Assign supplemental drills or exercises that require low range.
5. Encourage students to audition for the District Honor Bands, the All-State Band, and to participate in Solo and Ensemble Festival.

B. Prioritize low brass at least once during each rehearsal. For instance:

1. Tune band from the bottom up once in a while.
 2. Hold all instruments playing the root of the chord accountable for being in tune, including low brass, low reeds, string bass and timpani
 3. Test technical proficiency of difficult passages during class, via recorded tests, or Smart Music Assessments. Demonstrate to your low brass players that they are accountable for their part, just like everyone else.
- C. Cultivate pride and a positive identity for the low brass.
1. Letter jacket pins, t-shirts, sweatshirts, ballcaps, etc.
 2. Goofy slogans, nick-names, etc.
 - “I tuba, therefore I am”
 - “Slide Kings”
 - “Euphonium = Beautiful, baby, just beautiful”
 3. Create Awards to recognize low brass players (suggestions below)
 - “Harvey Phillips” award for outstanding tuba player
 - “Slide Hampton” award for outstanding trombone player
- D. Use Recordings of professional players to inspire and educate your students. One of the best labels for low brass artists is Summit Records. You can find recordings from many of the artists listed below at www.summitrecords.com.
1. Trombone: Sarah Morrow, Ken and Harry Watters, Joe Alessi, Larry Zalkind, Bob McChesney, Mark Lawrence, Ralph Sauer, Christian Lindberg, Michael Davis, Slide Hampton, JJ Johnson, and many others.
 2. Euphonium: Michael Colburn, Brian Bowman, Steven Mead, David Childs, Rich Matteson, Demondre Thurman, Matt Tropman, Jennifer Jester, and professional tuba-euphonium quartets like Sotto Voce.
 3. Tuba: Sam Pilafian, Dan Perantoni, Pat Sheridan, Deanna Swoboda, Eugene Pokorny, Jim Self, Floyd Cooley, Scott Mendoker, and Velvet Brown.
 4. Ensembles that make prominent use of low brass such as the Summit Brass Ensemble, Boston Brass, Empire Brass Quintet, Canadian Brass Quintet, etc.
- E. Low Brass Extras:
1. TubaChristmas celebrations for tuba and euphonium players. Find out when and where the nearest group will meet at www.tubachristmas.com.
 2. Find out about all things trombone via the International Trombone Association, on the web at www.ita-web.org.
 3. Formerly known as TUBA, the International Tuba and Euphonium Association can be found on the web at www.iteaonline.org.
 4. Regional or national workshops, clinics or symposia sponsored by either of the organizations above as well military bands and universities.

IV. Method Book recommendations:

A. Trombone and Euphonium:

1. Arban’s Famous Method for Trombone, edited by Randall and Mantia.
2. Melodious Etudes for Trombone, Book 1, selected from the vocalises of Marco Bordogni, edited by Joannes Rochut.

B. Tuba:

1. Arban’s Complete Method for Tuba, edited by Jerry Young and Wes Jacobs.
2. 70 Studies for BBb Tuba, Book I, by Vladislav Blazhevich, published by Robert King Music.

3. First (and Second) Book of Practical Studies by Robert Getchell, edited by Nilo Hovey.
4. Method for BBb Tuba, Volume 1 by Walter Beeler. An old-school classic, that provides appropriate challenges for tuba players, especially in the low range. It progresses more quickly than most, making it ideal for older students switching to tuba.

V. Other training aids:

- A. Full Band: **The Band Boot Camp** by Thomas Bough, available directly from the author. This supplemental method book incorporates training for brass instruments into the context of a full ensemble warm-up.
- B. Low Brass Training Aids:
 1. The Brass Gym by Sam Pilafian and Patrick Sheridan, available from the author at www.patricksheridan.com.
 2. Mixed low brass ensemble music available from Norlan Bewley, an active performer, artist and teacher. Visit www.norlanbewley.com for more info.
 3. The Breathing Gym, workbook and DVD, to improve breathing for all wind instruments, by Sam Pilafian and Patrick Sheridan, available from the author at www.patricksheridan.com.
 4. Euphonium artist and entrepreneurial musician Jennifer Jester at <http://www.jenniferjester.com>.
- C. Tuba and euphonium stands
 1. Tuba tripod stands are very helpful
 - Protects the instrument
 - Promotes good embouchure and posture by placing the instrument in the ideal playing position.
 - Reduces neck and shoulder tension in player
 - Increases resonance and tone quality of the instrument
 - Better for the player ergonomically
 - Recommend the BBC Tuba Rest from the Baltimore Brass Company at <http://www.baltimorebrass.net> for about \$80. Similar products available from Woodwind and Brasswind.
 2. Euphonium stands helpful as well
 - Promotes good embouchure and posture by holding the instrument in the ideal playing position.
 - Commercial stands are useful but expensive
 - Make your own by rolling up a black towel and securing it with electrical tape.