

Polish Your Brass!

Achieving a Golden Brass Section Sound

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The key to a strong brass section is the ability to work as a team. In this workshop, we give you tips and practical suggestions to create a cohesive brass sound within your ensemble. Teaching students the importance of their role and making each brass player feel valued can help support the ensemble as a whole. Please reach out to us with any questions!

Breathing

- Cultivate a group approach to breathing
 - Breathing together will help your brass section play as a unit
 - Breathe in time, being careful not to rush the breath
 - *Encourage students to write in when the breath occurs into their music so it's the same every time*
- Breaths for the different brass instruments and even different registers of each instrument will need to be unique to optimize airflow, but timing can be the same
 - Examples:
 - Trumpet upper register entrance = “heee” breath
 - Consider how each instrument has a different flow rate and therefore the breaths need to be tailored to the instrument/register
- Group breathing exercise
 - Pick a vowel sound (HOH, HAH, HOO, HAY, HEE) and breathe in time, then let the air out naturally with that same vowel shape
 - You will see that the higher flow rate breaths will result in the air being expelled faster (ideal for low brass playing) , while the lower flow rate breaths (high compression) will yield a longer airstream (ideal for high brass playing)
- Regardless of the type of breath the players take, the brass section needs to breathe together to achieve a well-timed entrance



What's my role in the brass section?

(Costello: Look Abbott, if you're the coach, you must know all the players!)

- To be the chameleons of the ensemble
 - Sometimes leading, sometimes providing support
 - Have a uniform timbre that can blend, or can play singularly as strong solo voices
- To play in tune with everyone, sometimes leading the pitch center, sometimes supporting the pitch center
- What is MY job?
 - **Who's on first?**
 - 1st trumpet, 1st horn, 1st trombone – lead, tune to each other and tuba/ tune to 1st clarinet, oboe, flute; establish style such as *dynamics*, *articulation*, *breaths* for the rest of the section
 - Must establish all fundamental “core” sound of the section
 - **What's on second?**
 - 2nd trumpet, 2nd horn, 2nd trombone – play in tune with 1st player, match everything, support volume (sometimes plays up dynamic to support without overplaying)
 - Continues the style, articulation and sound concept of the 1st players to pass along to the rest of the section
 - **I don't know is on third?**
 - 3rd trumpets, 3rd horns, 3rd trombones – play in tune with 1st and 2nd players, match everything providing strength to the mid to low tessitura
 - **Gotta catcher?**
 - 4th trumpets (if applicable), 4th horns, TUBA – provide solid and in-tune fundamental of pitch and tone; often TONIC or the root of chords
 - Must match all other low voices in the ensemble such as bassoon, low sax, and bass clarinet
 - In some cases must play a little louder than the others because low notes inherently don't sound as loud as high notes

*****What everyone must do together:*** Decide who will breathe where (principal gets first dibs), what fingerings should be used for problematic notes and pitch problems, focus sound and dynamics so that the brass section is cohesive and blending, play in tune (follow the principal – even if they're not where you think they should be)

Balance

- Lowest voice of the section should be “driving the bus”
 - Cultivate a sense of importance amongst your low brass players
 - Make them aware that they are crucial to phrasing, volume, tuning, and style, among other things.
 - Everyone else in the section must listen down
- Principal players should “coast” on top of the low and mid voices, never pushing their sound. Think “icing on the cake.”
 - Middle voices provide the core of the section’s sound
- Crescendos should be led by low brass. Imagine a wave cresting, then crashing over and *through* the arrival point.

Intonation

- Most brass intonation problems are caused by players forcing their sound
 - Forcing the sound tends to exacerbate the common intonation tendencies
 - The secret to establishing good intonation is creating an easy response on the instrument
 - To find the right air/lip tension balance, have your students practice **air attacks**
 - Once the students are comfortable with easy response, they will be less likely to force
- *See the instrument-specific tips for quick intonation fixes on pgs. 4-8*
- “**1-5-1-5-3**” exercise can help students practice tuning and balancing chords

Articulation

- Marcato (> > > >)
 - Full length notes with explosive fronts and a tapered end
 - Work on achieving a balance between tongue and the air behind it.
 - Danger of over-articulating, which pushes down the pitch
 - If over-articulating or over-blowing is plaguing your brass players, encourage better embouchure support and a more compact airstream
- Staccato (. . . .)
 - Separated, buoyant, and light notes with clear fronts and resonant ends
 - Try to avoid using the term “short” when referring to staccato notes. Students tend to clip the end of the notes, killing the desired lightness
 - Emphasize a lighter articulation than marcato
- Legato (- - - -)
 - Smooth, connected, but still with defined fronts
 - Biggest mistake with legato passages is lacking clarity on the fronts of notes
 - Think the same clarity of articulation from staccato, but with full length.

Instrument-Specific Tips for Quick Results

Trumpet

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- **Push lips out into the mouthpiece for a rich sound!**
 - Benefits:
 - Creates more cushion for enhanced endurance
 - Keeps the aperture small to prevent overblowing and assists compression for higher notes
 - Results in a full tone with good projection
 - Instruction:
 - Bottom lip should receive the vast majority of the mouthpiece pressure.
 - Bottom lip needs to be pushed up and into the mouthpiece cup
 - “Smiling” spreads the embouchure and instead, students need to see their corners moving inwards towards the center of the embouchure
 - This shape to the embouchure can be reinforced by mouthpiece buzzing and lip bends
- **Speed up the air!**
 - Most players play with a tongue position that is too low/too far back
 - Consider a “heee” breath to create healthy air compression on the inhalation
 - Have trumpet students practice loads of breath attacks. Be patient with the production of tone at first. Think of the air going first, then the lips come around the airstream to start the tone
 - Lack of airspeed generated by tongue position is the leading cause of players using excessive throat tension (as an alternative way to compress the air)
- **Trumpet intonation can make or break the ensemble**
 - Because the trumpet section often overblows and tends to dominate the brass sound of young ensembles, understanding and teaching about trumpet intonation tendencies is paramount
 - Lower notes such as C-sharp, D, E-flat, and E tend to be very sharp (use valve slides to correct pitch), while the upper octave of each of those notes are flat
 - The trumpet section intonation is therefore compressed, making the 1st trumpet players sound flat
 - To compensate, 1st trumpet players push on their sound even more
 - Encourage players to lengthen their valve slides (1st and 3rd)
 - If slides are stuck, I recommend trying to permanently set the 3rd slide out about 1 centimeter
 - Almost all notes involving 1st valve will be sharp except 4th line D

Horn

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*These 3 fundamentals can be seen from the podium or while walking through the band, and can be adjusted at any time.

- **Posture check**

- Right hand cupped with fingers straight and the thumb beside the index finger (just like a beauty pageant wave!)



- Place the hand in the bell about 2 o'clock



- Sit up straight - the bell can rest on the leg, or off the leg, depending on height of the player. The key is to keep the sound from 'blowing' into the the body of the player. Point the bell behind the body on the right side by swinging the right leg out to the side. (TIP: use books or blocks under the right foot to raise the leg if needed!)



- **Mouthpiece placement check**

- The MOST important tip: the mouthpiece should be $\frac{2}{3}$ on the upper lip, $\frac{1}{3}$ on the lower lip



- **Buzzing and producing sound check**

- The best way to help your horn players get a strong, low-pressure buzz is to implement analogies like:
 - Pretend like you're spitting a seed
 - Say "MMM" and then "PUH" (like the word 'put')
 - Put your lips together and buzz like a motor boat
 - Have just enough pressure to create a good "seal" and aim the airstream beyond the horn like a garden hose
 - Aim the garden hose at the floor (vowel shape "eee") for higher notes, and pretend like you've eaten hot lasagna (vowel shape "aww") for lower notes all while spitting the seed!
 - Always remember to keep the mouthpiece where the mouthpiece is $\frac{2}{3}$ upper lip, $\frac{1}{3}$ lower lip
- Have your horn students mouthpiece buzz rollercoasters and easy songs like Hot Cross Buns, 3 Blind Mice, and Happy Birthday
- Encourage all mouthpiece buzzing to have minimal pressure by holding the shank with only 2 fingers like the image above! Look for a flat chin and engaged corners (no puffy cheeks!).

****Bonus Tip**** if there are any difficulties such as braces, extreme embouchure adjustments needed, super advanced students for example, seek out a horn teacher to help you!

Trombone

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- **Producing a clear characteristic trombone tone**
 - Use a conversational breath, one that after an “in-time” inhalation, the stomach muscles control the diaphragm through the exhale.
 - Avoid breathing by pulling the “corners” of the mouth back. When the mouthpiece is placed on the stretched corners, the muscles in the center of the mouth lose strength.
 - Air should not be controlled in the back of the throat or back of the tongue. Blow freely.
 - Air should not be directed toward the back of the tongue but rather to the lips and tip of the tongue.
 - To avoid a very tight/small sound, ensure the mouthpiece is not pressed against the top lip.
 - Holding the head high and angling the instrument down slightly can improve the quality of the sound and reduce lip tension.
 - Like when whistling, the lips do not move, pull back, or tighten. A player who can whistle already can understand the process of syllables within the oral cavity to achieve accurate pitch placement.
- **Achieving a precise, accurate articulation**
 - Most tonguing problems arise when the air stream is held in the back of the “throat.”
 - Although the syllable “tah” is often suggested, not only does the position of the tongue curl up and restrict the airflow, but also the tongue loses its flexibility.
 - Using the syllable “tu” allows the air to flow forward to the tip of the tongue.
 - Do not place the tip of the tongue where the teeth and gums meet but rather, the tongue should touch the back of the teeth.
 - On the trombone, the syllables suggested are “tu” for middle, “tow” for low, and “tee” for the upper registers.
 - This is usually a concept learned easily by a student who can whistle.
 - Most controversial is the concept of “legato tongue.” The fact is that only the tongue can separate notes.
 - To achieve a consistent connection of notes, use a continuous air stream to connect the notes. The tongue continues to use the “tu” or “du” syllable so that it interrupts the air stream slightly but does not shape it or break into it.
 - The syllable “la” creates an undesirable “wah-wah” sound.
- **Posture and effective trombone tuning**
 - The trombonist should sit so that the upper torso does not touch the back of the chair.
 - The entire torso acts as a “shock absorber” when a player is moving the slide rapidly.
 - This allows the trombone also to be held still so the mouthpiece does not move. Likewise, the trombone slide should not move up and down when moving to extended positions.

- When the back is away from the chair and the shoulder is relaxed, 5th, 6th, and 7th positions become consistently accurate.
 - Even a very small student can easily reach 7th position by using this approach.
- Posture and hand position dramatically affect the tuning.
 - The shoulder must not be tight, the fingers should not hold the slide in a tight grip, and the elbow must be relaxed.
 - The hand position, shoulder, and arm work together to ensure the slide can move quickly.
 - The fingers need to be trained to move according to the ear for effective tuning.
 - Although adjusted positions should be taught, they should never overrule the ear. The hand and slide must “listen” to the ear. “Eyes cannot hear.”

Tuba

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- **Breathe in style**

- Take in air the way you want it to come out.
- Always try to fill up completely when taking in air.
- Match the intensity of the breath to the dynamics and style.
- Think of the breath as the true beginning of the note and not just when the sound starts.
- Air is always moving in or out and is never held or stopped.

- **Make the whole mouthpiece vibrate**

- Think of the mouthpiece as a cup and fill it up with buzzing.
- Avoid thinking of your lips as only buzzing *inside* the mouthpiece.
- Try to make your buzzing transfer from your lips to the metal of the mouthpiece.
- Start the buzz then keep it vibrating as much as you can.
- Strong articulations require a burst of vibration at the beginning in order to “kickstart” the sound.

- **Blow out the candle**

- The shape of the mouth when playing should be similar to blowing out a candle.
- Neutral/Low corners of the mouth, firm cheeks with no puffing, and lips in a “nozzle” shape.
- Tongue should be low to make one, unrestricted column of air.
- Blow the air full enough to extinguish a candle 18 feet away.
- Think of using the syllable “TOH” when forming the lips and tongue.

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