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CLINIC

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THE TWO TRIAL RULE

BY FRANK G. CAMPOS

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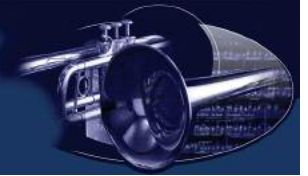
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Clinic addresses a wide variety of teaching and playing issues. Ideas and suggestions should be directed to: Frank G. Campos, Clinic Editor, Whalen Center for Music, Ithaca College, Ithaca, NY 14850 USA; clinic@trumpetguild.org

THE TWO TRIAL RULE

BY FRANK G. CAMPOS

Artistic skill is learned behavior. We acquire it through repetition. Even so-called “natural” performers use endless repetition to master the right way to play. We rely on automatic, unconscious habits to make music because it is impossible to consciously control all aspects of performance. Some of our performance habits are beneficial, and others are not so beneficial. Practice is the task of making the best performance behaviors automatic.

Whether it is swinging a golf club or playing the trumpet, our first attempt to do something new is especially important because we are establishing the habit, the groove, the pathway for a new skill. How do we know how to do it correctly the first time? We don't. It may take a lot of trial and error to determine that, and for complex skills like playing a musical instrument, it takes years to hone and refine the way we use our bodies to perform. When we begin our training as young musicians, there may seem to be many ways to play correctly, but the more our skill improves, the more it becomes obvious that for each player, there is a way of doing it that will take us to the highest level of skill, and there is an entire sea of possible approaches that will not. That is why it is so vitally important to have a fine player nearby when we are learning; there is no substitute for actually hearing and seeing the right way in action.

Unlearning bad habits is one of the most pressing matters for young musicians. Why do we bother to learn things incorrectly? Why don't we do it correctly from the beginning? A certain approach may seem right in the beginning because we appear to be getting the results we want, but over time, any inherent limitations will become clear to us. For example, forcing the trumpet mouthpiece against the embouchure helps some players to squeak out notes in the upper register, but the technique of forcing the tone has definite drawbacks including the potential to cause injury to the embouchure. Smashing the soft lip tissue between the teeth and the mouthpiece will help produce high notes temporarily, but anyone who aspires to a better than a mediocre level of performance will have to learn to use the air, oral cavity and embouchure to play high notes properly, without undue forcing.

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If you had several keys to a door but did not know which one opened it, you would have no choice but to try each one in turn. This is trial and error. Some musicians keep trying the same key repeatedly, even when trial after trial has shown that it is not the right key. For example, many musicians develop the habit of quickly repeating an error over and over with the hope that mere repetition will solve the problem. Former world-class athlete and author Dan Millman (1999) says, “Every time you let yourself practice a movement incorrectly, you're getting better at doing it incorrectly. A fundamental rule

of learning, then, is not to make the same error twice.”¹ He goes on, “By making each attempt different, you explore and experiment while honing in on the straight path, the optimal movement, and avoid grooving bad habits.” Millman is suggesting that when we notice that our efforts are not producing results, instead of doing it the same way repeatedly, we need to experiment with new ideas to see if they produce better results.

Imagine a young trumpet player practicing his music. He has been working on a difficult passage for a week but he has not been able to play it correctly yet. He is determined to learn it, so he takes a big breath and attempts to play it. It goes quite badly. He takes another try but crashes again. Two tries and it still sounds awful—what does he do then?

Like so many of us, he will try it again and again and again, with virtually every trial just as unsuccessful as the first. He makes no adjustments or changes to his approach, just bangs it out without really thinking or listening. If he plays it ten times in a row incorrectly, what has he accomplished? He has spent one hundred percent of his practice time playing it wrong, and he has just taken a big step in the direction of making his bad playing habitual and automatic.

In order to maximize our limited playing time and make it pay the largest dividends in the future, our time must be invested wisely. If you only have time to play a certain passage ten times, then make them ten perfect trials. If you do that, you will be reinforcing the right way completely, which is ideal. How do you play a difficult passage perfectly, ten times in a row? Apply the “two trial rule.”

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The two trial rule states that after two unsuccessful tries, you try a different way. If our young trumpeter observes the “two trial rule,” he would modify his approach after two unsuccessful tries. In nearly every situation, the best strategy is to slow the tempo down. When we slow the tempo down, we actually have a chance at playing the passage correctly, and that is exactly what needs to happen. How slowly should we go? Only as slowly as necessary to play it perfectly! In the case of learning very challenging music, the only possible way for us to play it close to perfectly is super slowly.

The difficult thing about the two trial rule is just remembering to use it. You might have six or eight unsuccessful attempts at a hard passage before you notice that you are just wasting your time repeating flawed, unacceptable playing. Upon the moment of noticing, modify your approach and see if you can play it close to perfectly a few times in a row. Noticing that you played the passage poorly twice and halting to re-assess your approach requires being completely aware of what you are doing, and that is a good thing.

Learning to use the two trial rule is just like learning any other habit: from the moment we decide we want to incorporate it into our work, every time we think of it, even after it is too late, we must use it. In time it will become automatic, but only if we stick with it. The benefits of using the two trial rule will be obvious after a while: quicker learning of music, overall improved technique, and noticeable forward progress.

One of my good friends likes to say that we are either going forward or backward, but we never stay in the same place. If you reinforce your very best playing at least 51 percent of the time each day, you will be going forward.

Now imagine if it was 100 percent...

About the author: Frank G. Campos is professor of trumpet at Ithaca College’s Whalen Center of Music. For many years he served as a member of the ITG Board of Directors. Campos is the author of *Trumpet Technique* (2005) published by Oxford University Press.

Endnote

1 Millman, D. *Body Mind Mastery*. Novato, CA: New World Library, 1999.

