

Sound Solutions: Troubleshooting the Trumpet Section

Purpose: This clinic is designed to identify and provide solutions for many of the predominant problems often found with middle and high school trumpet players. It will focus primarily on sound, air, and articulation.

SOUND

COMMON PROBLEMS

- Tight, Pinched sound
- Airy, fuzzy tone
- Dull, or excessively bright sound
- Improperly formed embouchure

SOLUTIONS

Tight, Pinched Sound

- Minimize tension. Relax. Stop the squeeze.
- Breathing exercises to promote proper air use and less tension.
- Don't control the air with the lips
- Consider occasional buzzing on trombone mouthpiece

Airy, Fuzzy Tone

- Flatten chin
- Less cheek puffing
- Mouthpiece buzzing with piano or drone
- Focus on centering the pitch

Dull, or Excessively Bright Sound

- Evaluate tension
- Relax as increase volume. Tension causes the brittle, blatty sound.
- Focus on proper use of air

Improperly Formed Embouchure

- The upper lip not staying inside the mouthpiece cup/rim
- Too much upper or lower lip inside mouthpiece – the ratio is off
- The corners moving or creating a “smile.” The corners should remain set and in place.

- Curling in of lower lip
- Rolling the chin – or bunching the chin

Proper Embouchure Formation

- Coffee Straw to help set embouchure.
- Maintain firm, set corners
- A fixed, flat chin that points downward from the corners
- Proper ratio of upper and lower lip (60/40 or 50/50 is ideal)
- The pink part of the lip should be inside the cup of the mouthpiece and as reasonably close to the center as possible

IMPORTANT POINTS

Next to playing with musical expression, *sound* is the most important aspect of playing the trumpet (or of any instrument for that matter). Make great sound the focus of your teaching.

Keys to producing a beautiful sound on the trumpet:

- Clear mental and aural concept of desired sound
- Proper embouchure formation
- Efficient and correct use of air

Obtaining a proper mental and aural concept of sound

- Find as many opportunities for students as possible to hear great trumpet playing. Some examples include visiting guest artists at local universities, regional or full-time orchestras, and invite university professors to work with your students.
- Play quality recordings of the best professionals (Phil Smith, Allison Balsom, Tine Thing Helseth, Selina Ott, Christopher Martin, Håkan Hardenberger, Wynton Marsalis, and Sean Jones are some of many)
- Encourage students to identify what adjectives describe their ideal sound (brilliant, rich, warm, sweet, vibrant, dark, resonant, thick, etc.). Then ask them to create that sound on their trumpet. It should be the preeminent goal in their music making.
- Students have to hear it to be able to emulate it – they need good models

Dr. Keith Johnson (Emeritus Regents Professor of Trumpet, University of North Texas) observed: “to attempt to play without a good sense of how one wishes to sound is akin to attempting to learn to speak a language without having heard the language. The principal reason so many young players sound poorly is that most of them have only heard each other.”

AIR

COMMON PROBLEMS

- Wah
- Weak air flow
- Insufficient inhalation
- Shallow, tension filled breaths

SOLUTIONS

- “wah”ing – This problem is pervasive. The “wah” is an inconsistent note shape while playing, often mirroring the shape of an egg or football. The image of a “brick” tends to help; however, awareness of the “wah” is a major factor for improvement. Sustain and forward direction are helpful.
- Weak airflow. The air should mirror the phrasing. As these two aspects of brass playing become related, they positively impact the other. As one focuses on phrasing, the necessary and proper air required to play a phrase is used. Arnold Jacob’s philosophy largely involved the phrase, “song and wind.” The song is essentially the intellectual concentration of playing the instrument (this involves all the sound and musical decisions). The wind is the energy for the vibration of the lips, or the fuel for the engine. Jacobs further said, “Study the product, not the method. Mentalize music by making statements, not by asking questions.”
- Insufficient inhalation. Breathing exercises with deliberate metronomic counts. Teach them to breathe in time with the music and connected to the first note.
- Shallow, or chest breaths create tension and foster a weak, pinched sound. Encourage students to fill their lungs from the bottom to the top, with an open relaxed throat, and a deep breath.

IMPORTANT POINTS

- Deep, relaxing breaths are essential. Strive to create the breath one takes while visiting a doctor.
- Air flow should always be pervasive and flowing
- Focus on air connecting each note. Direction
- Relaxed throat

ARTICULATION

COMMON PROBLEMS

- Articulation with the throat and/or the tongue stopping the air. This is often a result of trying to play too short, too soon. Be careful and attentive to what's happening when asking students to play short – especially younger students.
- Improper tongue placement – in between the teeth, or directly behind the teeth.
- “Huffing”. This is essentially articulation via the throat.
- Difficulty with multiple tonguing

SOLUTIONS

- “Air articulation” – this is tonguing without using the trumpet. This allows the tongue to become coordinated with the air, as well as the ability to place the tongue in the proper location in the mouth.
- Playing on the lead pipe only. This allows for clarity in hearing what is occurring during articulation.
- “hoo-doo” attacks. This helps get clarity and control in the articulation.
- Please listen to students individually.
- Focus on melodic, musical playing before focusing on playing short. Teach them to move their air with ease.

IMPORTANT POINTS

- Encourage students to model the articulation of great players (similar to sound)
- Good articulation is directly related to proper airflow

- In general, the tongue should touch at the top of the mouth where the teeth and gums meet. The use of a “tu” syllable will help achieve this.

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