

“Using Vocal Techniques to Enhance All Aspects of Low Brass Performance”

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Steven Mead, Clinician

Sponsored by Boosey and Hawkes

Steven Mead workshops give an insight into how this famous international euphonium soloist approaches his own playing and that of his many students.

He is regarded as the premier euphonium teacher in Europe including schools such as the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester; The Royal Academy of Music, London; The Birmingham Conservatoire; The Royal Scottish Academy of Music and Drama, Glasgow. He has also given specialist euphonium education courses in Japan, Holland, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Germany and Austria as well as guest tutoring on prestigious courses such as the Swiss Brass Week and Lieksa Brass Week (Finland).

A. Introduction

- 1 Personal history, mine and yours, early singing experiences, allied to the performance of singing.
 - o What were the experiences, good/bad and what about the substance ?
 - o Was it vocal training, or just singing, trained or untrained ?
 - o Was there any concept of vocal performance or was it just with others at school, church, in the bath etc ?
 - o What was the music: spiritual, descriptive, competition orientated, recreational, academic etc ?
- 1 What elements of our personal history do we remember and are we aware that it influences our core musicality, ability to phrase, tonal concepts, natural musical breathing? If we all had some early singing experiences is it possible to remember them now and re-apply what was part of our experience to the way we make music/teach music now?
- 1 My influences
 - o early sounds I heard. S.A. junior choir, junior band, first music lessons, brass lessons
 - o feeling for sonority, UK brass bands, soloists, recordings
 - o singing in public
- 1 How brass playing took over from singing for me, and why.
- 1 My career, in brief and how the realization that as I developed as a musician and brass performer, I was regressing in terms of my memory of vocal tuition and honing what was clearly working to become a detailed method I could apply to my students and my own playing.

B. Elements of the method

AIR FLOW

- 1 from before the beginning of the inhalation to the end of the respiration the body should feel powerful and relaxed
- 1 the air passes without any over constraint through into the mouthpiece
- 1 the air is supported on its journey through the instrument, like an extension of ourselves

FREEING the BODY OF TENSION

- 1 relaxation techniques and breathing exercises all contribute as does increasing personal self confidence
- 1 correct straight body posture, with the upper body upright as if supported like a puppet on strings
- 1 my eyes theory !! link between the action (or inaction preferably) of the eyes muscles and the throat
- 1 extending/heightening the oral cavity- egg shape, vertical

CORRECT BREATHING

- 1 you have to, as performers or teachers, adopt **a** method that works for you and seems to work for your students
- 1 expand as you breathe, taking the air low, filling the lungs from their base
- 1 use the correct muscles to support your 'air bag'
- 1 keep upper body relaxed during the breathing process
- 1 keep the eyes clearly open
- 1 work at regular 'open' breathing exercises, timed, paced and controlled

ORIGIN of the SOUND

- 1 the sound for low brass players does **not** originate from any one place; throat, lips, lungs, oral cavity, mouthpiece !!
- 1 the whole **middle** body 'creates' and sustains the sound
- 1 the rest of the body forms itself around this core tone and captures its energy and power
- 1 the conception of timbre and the ability to sustain an even tone throughout the pitch range starts in the brain, we pre-program ourselves with tonal excellence (getting this concept appreciated by the student is normally the hardest skill)
- 1 importance of guided listening and encouragement of student when tone improves. Use of sound models, while still allowing for the student to develop their own personal preferences

MUSCLE USE

- 1 depending on the age of the student, the teacher will need to understand what muscles need to 'move' and which need to be kept fixed.
- 1 'fix' the sides of the lips
- 1 keep the aperture of the lips open in a precise and focused way
- 1 relax the neck and shoulder muscles

- use the strong diaphragmatic muscles in the same way a cellist uses a bow...we are normally only 'down' bow !
- use the mouth's internal muscles to preserve the shape

ORAL CAVITY

- basic understanding of resonance (from the Latin: *resonantia*, "echo")
- in vocal terms: amplification of a source of speech sounds, especially of phonation, by sympathetic vibration of the air, especially in the cavities of the mouth, nose and pharynx.
- brass players can grasp this concept by singing in a variety of ways, with their teacher
- brass players do not need complex explanations, keep it simple

TONGUE POSITION – VOWEL SOUNDS

- three basic vowel sounds, 'ah', 'aw', and 'oo'. These sounds, can be developed through singing, 'half whistling', and blowing pitched air through the mouthpiece
- make sure the tongue movement is not excessive
- ensure the tip of the tongue position for the beginning of the note does not vary
- support all the vowel sounds with the right kind of air
- vowel sound technique will only work if the aperture shape and 'bicycle' wheel muscles work together in the correct way.

OPENNESS of the EMBOUCHURE

- this is critical to the free flow of the air
- each student's lips will be slightly different so a flexible approach is necessary
- think 'ah' as the basic sonority and projecting this sound through the instrument
- always moving, causing easy vibration of the lips, throughout the dynamic and pitch range

EVENNESS OF LIP VIBRATION

- use the vertical, centered index finger method to assess evenness
- essential for maintaining consistent response

C. Musical Applications

SOUND QUALITY – SUBJECTIVE OR OBJECTIVE ?

- can we use vocal models to teach sound quality and do we have to be able to demonstrate it ? Yes and ideally ..yes.
- long tone practice, how to do it.
- building dynamics into long tone work
- think legato, play melodies
- articulate within the air stream, play and sing the same example

BUILDING A BETTER SOUND

- the right mouthpiece and instrument combination make a huge difference

- mouthpiece: getting the balance correct between cup shape/depth, rim diameter and back bore
- use a large a size as possible to help you do the job
- maintain a consistent warm-up method which also allows for new 'elements' to enter the regular routine
- make tone allied to open, powerful airflow a focus of practice

EASE OF PRODUCTION

- essential for all-round development; practice 'combination' exercises, with free air, singing, 'mouthpiece' air, half whistling and then playing, keeping the air flow consistent and the lips in the same position
- consequent less reliance on the tongue
- 'dah' rather than 'tah' for low brass
- tongue and air together
- imaginary dart-throwing exercises for tone placement
- a good conductor can improve the tone production of his/her musicians

LEGATO MELODIC LINE

- listen to singers: imitate the smoothness, imitate aspects of diction, imitate starts and ends of phrases
- use vocal techniques even with 'normal' technical , range- building exercises.

DEVELOPING RANGE – RICH FULL LOW TONES, POWERFUL CLEAR HIGH RANGE

- once the above elements, both physical/muscular and mental conceptions are embraced the dedication of the student and teacher will be the determining factor as to the full extent of development
- variety of daily exercises , use of metronome and imagination, keeping the air free, upper body, (including the eyes) relaxed and open
- develop even response from the low tones, particularly Bb,B and the lower octave in particular
- make all tongue position flexibility natural using daily lip slurs

DEVELOPING FLEXIBILITY

- vocalize two notes lip flexibilities
- then three note
- then focus the 'face' and play them, keeping the body still
- develop four , five etc note exercises until complete freedom is achieved

VARIETY IN ARTICULATION

- use the 'tonguing on a line' (Remington method) as the basis then exploit contrasts of dah, dat, doo, ta, tu, la etc and assess the application determined by style, dynamic of the music

VIBRATO

- *"Singers should not produce musical tones with a voice gaping wide in a distorted fashion or with an absurdly powerful bellowing, especially when singing at the divine mysteries; moreover they should avoid tones having a wide and ringing vibrato, since*

these tones do not maintain a true pitch and because of their continuous wobble cannot form a balanced concord with other voices". Practica musicae (1496) of Gaffunus (MSD, xx, 1968, pp.148ff)

- avoid extremist teaching and theories; allow your students to develop a beautiful sound but one which is always musically sympathetic to the ensemble or situation
- do not be tempted to imitate the excesses of vocal vibrato
- for low brass, free the lower jaw allowing the resonant sound to vibrate rather than just the pitch, i.e. keep the space of the oral cavity round and high

TECHNICAL STUDIES, FAST EXECUTION, COMBINED WITH FAST TONGUE USE, EXPRESSION AND NUANCE

- use a large range of technical exercises and use them in a consistent yet flexible manner
- stress the use of a metronome for instilling and re-asserting rhythmic discipline
- even in study material listen to ends of phrases and sustaining quality of long tones; it marks out a high quality student from an average one.
- **THINK LIKE A MUSICIAN NOT LIKE A BRASS PLAYER**

Thinking musically is one of the most important things to learn in the process of creating of a vocal style of brass playing. Develop the ear and a feeling for melodic line so that good musical experiences in the memory trigger immediate solutions to musical problems.

Steven Mead

Steven Mead's extraordinary pioneering work with the euphonium has gained him worldwide recognition as one of the *world's leading euphonium players* and he has been acclaimed as the most traveled soloist in the history of the instrument. He is currently in demand as a recitalist and clinician throughout the world of brass playing. Not only has he been at the forefront of performance but is credited as a pioneer in euphonium education and repertoire.

Steven has been a professional euphonium soloist for some 15 years after a successful career with some of the top British brass bands and as a full time music teacher. It is this wealth of experience that has helped to create a musician who communicates with his audiences.

In the brass band world Steven has been principal euphonium with several of Great Britain's finest brass bands including Desford Colliery Band (1983-1989) and the CWS (Glasgow) Band (1996 Champion Band of Great Britain). He is also travels to the USA for band practice ! He's principal euphonium with the top brass band in North America, the superbly professional Brass Band of Battle Creek.

Television success undoubtedly helped his early career. On two occasions he won the solo prize in the BBC Best of Brass Competition (1983,85). He also was awarded the Euphonium Player of the Year Award 1986 and 1993.

In 1991 he founded the British Tuba Quartet (2 euphoniums and 2 tubas) that has since gone on to create worldwide recognition for its artistry and skill.

Keen to perpetuate the success on the low brass world in general, he has been the Artistic Director of all 5 of the National Tuba / Euphonium Conferences , held in the UK.

Professional musicians around the world have admired the rich expressive approach to musical performance and as a result Steven is performing increasingly with orchestras and chamber ensembles in addition to brass and wind bands. His innovation has extended to mouthpiece and instrument design, including the new Besson Prestige Euphonium.

He is also Senior Tutor of Euphonium at the Royal Northern College of Music, Manchester as well as a clinician and instrument consultant for Boosey and Hawkes

Whether as a campaigner for the instrument or on the concert hall stage Steven is rarely out of the spotlight, each year he continues to take the euphonium to new audiences including concerts with the Capella Cracoviensis (Poland), London Brass, the Dutch Marine Band, The Helsinki Philharmonic and the US Army Band, and a CD with the Classic Quintet (woodwind quintet from Bolzano, Italy). His two latest solo CDs, 'Oration' and 'The World of the Euphonium Vol.4' on the Polyphonic label have received huge critical acclaim.

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