

# Inspiring your Low Brass Section through Composition and Arranging

By Patrick Schulz

*"The secret to creativity is knowing how to hide your sources."* (Albert Einstein)

Let's face it, sometimes the low brass section in your band is stuck playing some rather dull and uninspired parts. They have become accustomed to counting numerous rests, playing many "footballs," and taking part in countless unnecessary doublings. This often leads to a general sense of laziness and the impression that their part is not important. As a result, many sit idly by in the back row knowing that they don't need to play well or be interested in the music because they will only be hidden by the "more important" parts being played around them. This attitude is, of course, devastating to the overall quality of your ensemble and should not be tolerated.

One way to inspire your low brass section is to encourage them to play together as a quartet (or other chamber group) and compose or arrange music that will challenge them as individuals. In a chamber music setting, they will need to make important decisions regarding tempo, phrasing, musical expression and rubato, tuning, balance, dynamics, etc. In a smaller group, they will have the primary melodic material and will gain confidence and musicality through the exploration of their chamber music skills. Their improved playing will carry over into band and increase the quality of your program and their enjoyment of music.

As with any young chamber music genre, it is necessary to create new compositions and arrangements in order to help fill the void. There just simply is not a great wealth of high-quality music written for low brass quartets - (yet!) Since our beginnings in 1996, the members of Sotto Voce have been creating new compositions and arrangements for our own ensemble and trombone quartets to play, then publishing them both on our website (<http://www.tubquartet.com>) and elsewhere. The following presents some general guidelines for those interested in arranging for low brass quartet. Many of the same suggestions can be applied to original compositions as well.

## Music to Arrange

- Select music that is appealing to you. It could be from any genre (classical, jazz, rock/pop, etc.)
  - Easier projects include music already composed for four voices, homophonic music (motets, chorales, and other vocal music), simple keyboard music, marches, and traditional jazz tunes.
  - More challenging projects include music that uses imitative polyphony (like Gabrieli or Bach's Contrapuncti), works for large forces (orchestral or band music), complex piano works, and contemporary works using many changes in texture and tone color.

## Planning the Arrangement

- Determine the overall range and tessitura. Look through the entire work and fit the melody to the first trombone/euphonium range (in general, the highest pitch for Euphonium 1 should be A4 or B-flat4). However, also keep in mind the overall tessitura since you don't want to keep one player in their highest range for a long time.
- Keep the bass of the original as the lowest voice (keeping in mind that octave displacements are possible).
- Worry about the inner voices last, since they are the most flexible and can be moved around.
- Select a key that will work well for low brass quartet. Consider range/tessitura, intonation, and technical facility (fingers) when selecting the final key.
  - Approximate ranges: Trbn.'s/Euph.'s (F2 to B-flat4) and Tubas (F1 to D4). This is a conservative range, and good players can play above and below the given pitches.
  - Key selection for intonation, slide positions, and fingers: on the circle of fifths, F through D-flat work best (F, B-flat, E-flat, A-flat, D-flat and their relative minors). D, G, C, and G-flat are possible keys, but will present more intonation and finger problems. B/C-flat is probably the worst key, followed by the other sharp keys.

- Typical Instrument Roles
  - Tbn./Euph 1: the lead voice, sometimes accompaniment if melody is given to another voice.
  - Tbn./Euph 2: assumes multiple roles – plays in harmony with the first euphonium in a higher range, acts as a darker (bass trombone) voice to fill out the harmony, plays in rhythmic unison with the first tuba to create an accompaniment, and occasionally takes over for Euphonium 1 to allow that player some recovery time.
  - Tbn. 3/Tuba 1: assumes multiple roles – plays melodic lines harmonized by the other voices (set above and below Tuba 1), acts as a low tuba with the second tuba, and works with the second euphonium to create accompaniments.
  - Bs Tbn./Tuba 2: bass line, occasionally plays low melodic lines (possibly unaccompanied).
  - Sometimes, the second euphonium will actually be set lower than the first tuba since low thirds between two tubas sounds very thick. Also, if the first tuba is playing a melodic line, the second euphonium part will interfere less in a lower range.
- The Problem with Low Thirds
  - Watch for low, close intervals (especially thirds). Due to the nature of the overtone series, a very muddy and undesirable sound results when tubas are written in low thirds.
  - As a general rule, avoid thirds that are lower than B-flat<sub>2</sub>/D<sub>3</sub> (the B-flat on the second line of the bass clef and the D on the third line).
  - Voicing lower thirds with a tuba and euphonium pair can help lessen the problem since there are fewer overtones in the euphonium sound. However, increasing the space between the root and third is still the best option.
  - Listen to these voice combinations:

*Pleasant voicings*

*Unpleasant voicings*

The image contains two musical diagrams illustrating tuba and euphonium voicings. The top diagram, titled "Pleasant voicings", shows seven examples of tuba and euphonium pairings. The bottom diagram, titled "Unpleasant voicings", shows seven examples of tuba and euphonium pairings with low thirds.

- It is possible to have all voices in close proximity, but they must be in an upper register to be effective. By harmonizing each note of the melody, a barbershop or big band sound results.
- Voice-leading vs. voicing
  - Every attempt should be made to obey the rules of traditional counterpoint for four-part voice-leading since a tonal arrangement is meant to emulate music based on that tradition.
  - However, due to the homogenous nature of the tuba/euphonium quartet, the rules may be broken when a better voicing is the goal.
  - When the arranger abandons the traditional rules, players are lead into odd interval leaps that may or may not be heard. Are better voicings more important than satisfying individual lines?
  - If the outer parts are written to preserve a sense of melody, the inner parts can leap around to achieve better overall voicings.

- In general, try to write smooth melodic lines in each part, but make exceptions to avoid a muddy texture (especially with the inner voices).

Executing the Arrangement: Gabriel Grovlez's *Petites Litanies de Jésus*

- Let's take a look at the opening phrase of a keyboard work by Gabriel Grovlez that I was inspired to arrange for Sotto Voce.
- After finding the piano score, I considered the range of the entire work and discovered that the highest pitch was B-flat5. Because this is about one octave above the top euphonium's range, my first step was to transpose the entire work down an octave and assign each voice in the four-voice texture to the analogous part in the quartet (soprano to E1, alto to E2, tenor to T1, and bass to T2). Now everything is in a playable range. However, as you will hear, a transcription down the octave for tuba/euphonium quartet will usually not work because of the many low thirds and overall muddy texture.

Piano

- Next, I moved some of the melody into the first tuba part for variety. (I also knew that I would eventually be transposing to B-flat Major and this would make the tessitura of this melodic line a little bit too high for euphonium). It works better for the first tuba, an octave lower.

- Usually, I arrange the inner voices by taking the tenor part, transposing it up an octave, and giving it to the second euphonium. Then, put the alto part in the first tuba part (keeping in mind that everything was already moved down an octave from the original). In this case, because the first tuba takes over the melody, the euphonium parts are playing what could have been played by the inner voices in mm. 3-6. Finally, I moved around the accompanying voices to achieve the best possible voicings and reasonable voice-leading.
- The final version is transposed to the key of B-flat Major. This key was selected because it is the brightest key for the entire work that will also translate well to the top euphonium. Remember that the highest pitch in the original was B-flat5. Does this mean that the first euphonium part will have to go up to D-flat5 (a major 6<sup>th</sup> below the original)? In an isolated case like this, a solution is to take that line down an octave. In my arrangement, I set it as a solo for the second euphonium and wrote the harmonies both above and below. The first euphonium then picks up the melodic line an octave higher when it is appropriate.

Musical score for measures 3-6. The score consists of four staves in bass clef, 3/4 time signature, and B-flat key signature. The first staff has a dynamic of *mp* and a triplet of eighth notes. The second staff has a dynamic of *mp* and is labeled "(melody)". The third staff has a dynamic of *mp* and a triplet of eighth notes. The fourth staff has a dynamic of *mp* and a triplet of eighth notes.

Musical score for measures 14-18. The score consists of four staves in bass clef, 3/4 time signature, and B-flat key signature. The first staff has a dynamic of *p*. The second staff has a dynamic of *mf* and a triplet of eighth notes. The third staff has a dynamic of *mp* and a triplet of eighth notes. The fourth staff has a dynamic of *mp* and a triplet of eighth notes. The score concludes with a dynamic of *pp*.

# Inspiring your Low Brass Section Through Band Repertoire

By Mike Forbes

Low brass musicians certainly did NOT pick their instruments for melodies or solos (some didn't pick their instruments at all)! They understand their roll as fundamental "linemen" for the team. In most beginning band music there is an equality of difficulty and musical interest throughout all the parts simply because all the instrumentalists are equally inexperienced. As the music grows more advanced (middle/high school) there is a noticeable shift from "equality" to "special preference" as higher pitched instruments are generally given more expressive, virtuosic material. Some will argue that this is simple acoustics: the ear goes to the higher pitched instruments. Or some argue that it is simple physics: melody instruments are simply more agile and slides/big-fat-valves are two cumbersome to handle melody.

Unfortunately, the music written for the British Brass Band Tradition proves both of these theories completely wrong. From Cornets to BB-flat Basses, all the parts in a brass band demand the same virtuosity equally. We all know that the truth of the matter is that low brass instrumentalists are given non-challenging music because composers/directors/publishers think that low brass musicians cannot handle musical challenges; thus they continue to feed the problem. As music refuses to challenge low brass musicians time and time again, the low brass musician gives up the challenge...and, sometimes, the band program all together. It is crucial that band directors seek out compositions and arrangements that write material for the low brasses that is similar to the writing for other instruments. Equality of writing in terms of virtuosity, expressivity, and range has come a long way in today's band repertoire, however we still have a long way to go. This trend toward equality will only continue if band directors continue to demand it of writers and publishers.

*Key issues to what keeps low brass musicians interested in a piece of music:*

- Limited repetitive material
- Occasional melodic/thematic material
- Interesting/expressive voice leading (not just roots of chords)
- Divisi (or even "1 only" with light coupling with other "1 only's" in the band, (e.g. Chamber Music)
- Featured low brass section (soli)
- Idiomatic writing for low brass instruments
- Using the full gamut of expressive qualities available (slide glissando, full-range (ossia, if need be).

*Examples of Band Repertoire favored by Low Brass Musicians:*

## Genres

- Transcriptions (Elgar, Tchaikovsky, Liszt, Verdi, Weber, Mendelssohn, Rimsky-Korsakov)
- Marches (most always have a low brass feature, esp: Sousa: Stars & Stripes, Them Basses)

## British Composers

- Gustav Holst Suites & Transcriptions (Planets)
- Vaughan-Williams ("Toccata Marziale")
- Malcolm Arnold (Four Scottish Dances)
- Percy Grainger–Aussey (Lincolnshire Posey, Irish Tune/Shepherd's Hey)

## American Composers

- William Schumann (New England Tryptich)
- Leonard Bernstein Transcriptions
- Aaron Copland

## Contemporary Composers

- Igor Stravinsky
- Silvestre Revueltas
- John Barnes Chance

## Beginning Band Composers:

- (Carl Fischer Music): Sean O'Loughlin, Larry Clark, and now: Mike Forbes!

# Inspiring Your Low Brass Players Through Chamber Music

*The Fruits of Your Labor*

*“What to Expect from your Low Brass Players with Chamber Music Involvement”*

*by Demondrae Thurman*

Chamber music for your low brass player can be one of the most powerful constructs to add to a band program. Low Brass players often learn the band music much faster than the other because there is simply less music to learn. Provide those students with tuba/euphonium quartets and/or trombone quartets will give them something to do while time is possibly spent with other parts of the ensemble. It will strengthen there sense of accomplishment, improve there technique as well as there overall musicianship.

- I. Musical responsibility
  - a. Making decisions without a conductor
  - b. Intonation
  - c. Ownership
  
- II. The Big Picture Becomes Clearer
  - a. More to music than the part in band
  - b. Appreciation of other great players
  - c. Higher technical expectations
  
- III. Outreach
  - a. Ambassadors for recruiting Low Brass players
  - b. Performance opportunities in the community
  - c. More parental involvement
  
- IV. Resources
  - a. [www.tubaeuphoniumpress.com](http://www.tubaeuphoniumpress.com)
  - b. [www.iteaonline.org](http://www.iteaonline.org)
  - c. [www.hickeys.com](http://www.hickeys.com)
  - d. Gail Robertson, Professor of Tuba and Euphonium at Central Florida
  - e. John Steven, Professor of Tuba and Euphonium at the University of Wisconsin