

BASICS OF LEAD AND SECTION PLAYING

To be an effective lead or section player, one must have good sound, projection, stylistic concept and time. A lead player's main job is to *lead* the section and to set up interpretation and phrasing. The lead trumpet player is the “concert master” of a big band. For good team work, the lead Trombone and Lead Alto Sax players should work to lock in with the Lead Trumpet on ensemble passages. I feel that a great lead player should be the least creative person in the section. He or she must play everything exactly the same every time the band performs the tune. Changing the interpretation to fit one's whim that night takes away from the confidence of the rest of the section. The section players all rely on the consistency of a good lead player.

Sound is key! Everyone in the section's sound must project at all volume levels. *Projection* is the real key to being heard at the back of a hall, whether you are playing loud or soft. In order to have effective projection, you must be blowing the air through the horn, not just into it. I think of my sound as a combination of air and energy. When I want to play higher or louder I think of blowing my sound farther away. Everyone in the section should concentrate on hearing the lead player and playing with them.

Time is of the essence! Good time is the cornerstone of good lead and section playing. The music cannot swing without good time. I tell all my students to practice at least half of the time with a metronome. (It really works much the same as a good drummer.) Listen to and relate to the rhythm section when you are playing in a combo or a big band. They are the ones that set up the time and then it is every individual's job in the band to ***play with good time***. *Feel* the music that you play! Become actively involved with the music that you perform.

Stylistic concept and understanding are a must. The best way to learn about styles is to ***LISTEN*** to recordings and live performances. ***I cannot emphasize listening enough!*** We learn from imitation, even in learning our speech patterns from our parents. The more musicians and bands that you have listened to, the better concept you have of how to perform the music properly. The time spent listening will open up your ears and your mind to many different styles and sounds. Really ***study*** what you hear on a recording. Analyze what makes that particular style or musician unique. Transcribing both jazz solos and lead parts off of recordings is of great help, both stylistically and in broadening your sight reading skills.

Be sure to know all the aspects of reading jazz music. It is very different than reading classical music. Sight-reading is a very necessary skill. Any musician must be able to sight read with a great deal of proficiency. Lead players need to be even a cut above the rest of the section when it comes to sight reading and interpreting the music. If you practice rhythms enough, you will begin to recognize rhythmic patterns in their entirety. When you have accomplished this, you can start to “re-read” rather than just sight read. You will be able to see whole phrases that you have seen before. I am convinced that this is what the great studio players, who make their living by reading everyday, do. You must see ***all the components*** of the music at once: phrasing, articulations,

dynamics, jazz embellishments, endings, repeats, D.S., D.C., Coda, etc. I hate it when a teacher says “Just get the notes this time and we will work on the other stuff later!” That is not the way music is written and it is not the way music should be played. All the aspects are part of one big whole that makes the music pleasing to listen to and to understand.

Blend is an important aspect of section playing! We must use our EARS to listen to not only the lead player, but the rest of the section – for intonation, phrasing, stylistic concept and overall sound. A section does NOT need to have the same brand of instrument or the same size mouthpiece to do this. It all comes from LISTENING and COMMUNICATING with each other. Most of the great sections that I have played in included different equipment for every player.

SOME GOOD GENERAL THINGS TO THINK ABOUT TO ENHANCE PLAYING ABILITY IN A BAND:

- Always warm up properly. Be sure that you are ready to play from the very first note of a rehearsal or performance.
- Musical considerations always come first! Remember that the goal you are seeking is to be a great musician, not just a great trumpet player.
- Always use your: Head – Heart – Air!
- A great musician must learn to have empathy for the ***music*** being performed, the ***organization*** being performed in, the ***musicians*** being performed with, and the ***audience*** being performed for!

YOU MUST HAVE A WORKING KNOWLEDGE OF SUCH THINGS AS:

HOW TO PHRASE ALL TYPES OF 8TH NOTES

BeBop – legato “du” tongue or tongue and slur, more even 8th notes – no space between notes.

Jazz/Swing – based on triplet feel – still a legato type of articulation.

Dance Band – more towards dotted 8th and 16th feel – some space between notes. More of a “tu” tongue.

Dixieland - Combination of legato and some more spaced out 8th notes. Very syncopated and “punchy.”

Latin – More even 8th notes. (Brazilian, Afro-Cuban, Salsa, Mambo, etc...)

Rock – More even 8th notes, many times written as 16th notes over a slower tempo.

HOW TO READ AND FEEL SYNCOPATION

Learn how to read and play all sorts of syncopation. Notes that are off the beat are an important part of the real feel of jazz music. Remember that many times 8th rests are felt, more than actually counted. Subdividing the beat will always help how one feels the time. Practice reading rhythms and try to memorize what many of the basic rhythmic patterns look and feel like.

HOW AND WHEN TO USE VIBRATO

Lip/jaw vibrato is actually taken from lip flexibility exercises. The jaw and/or lips move to create the vibrato sound. The more flexible you are, the easier this type of vibrato is.

Hand vibrato is played by moving the right hand back and forth in a controlled manner over the valves.

Vibrato can be fast or slow, narrow or wider. This all depends on the style of chart you are playing. Use faster types of vibrato for dance band music and slower types for more jazz oriented ballads, etc.

Vibrato for all instruments should be used sparingly. Again – it has to do with the stylistic concept of the chart you are playing. Dance band music will usually have more vibrato than jazz oriented music.

HOW AND WHEN TO DO SHAKES (BRASS)

First of all, practice your lip flexibilities a lot, to learn how to shake properly. Shakes today are really lip flexibilities between two definite notes. Older style players actually moved their right hand and made the horn move on their chops to create shakes, but shakes done this way tend to not be as consistent as shakes done with flexibilities. As with vibrato, shakes can be done faster or slower and wider or narrower, depending on the style of music. You would use a faster, closer together type of shake for Basie or Ellington; and a wider, slower type of shake for Stan Kenton or Maynard Ferguson.

HOW AND WHEN TO USE MUTES (BRASS)

Know what kind of a sound each mute gets and what intonation problems can result from the use of each mute. Know how well each mute can be heard in front of the band. Be well versed in the use of the plunger. It has a definite use in the jazz band. Know how to use mutes for both solo work and in the section.

“THE THREE C’S”

1. **CONFIDENCE** – the faith in ourselves to know that we can play anything that is put in front of us. This doesn't necessarily mean that we can sight read everything, but that with the proper amount of practice we can achieve good performance level for any music we need to play. It also means that we can hear and feel all the notes we need to use. We have built up good relative pitch on our horn and our air is working properly.
2. **CONTROL** – the ability to play all over the horn with a good sound and articulation. This takes lots of AIR, as well as flexibility, technique, and long tone practice.
3. **CONSISTENCY** – the ability to play all over the horn at any given moment. This takes physical, mental and emotional proficiency. It comes from many hours of practicing, listening and performance application. The more you work on your confidence and control, the more luck you will have with your consistency.

CHECK LIST FOR PRACTICING

- Warm up properly.
- Take in a FULL breath with some ***energy***.
- Support your sound at all times.
- ***Listen*** to your sound.
- High notes are not higher; they are farther out in front of you. Always think about PROJECTION.
- Use a metronome. Time is of the essence!
- Don't lose concentration every time you make a little mistake or a “flurp.”
- Practice slower and speed up gradually.
- Don't learn mistakes by practicing too fast.
- Build confidence in your abilities.
- Work for consistency and control.
- Horn up and KEEP it there. Always play with a good posture.
- Think about the way you look to others when you are playing – always have a confident demeanor.

HINTS FOR BUILDING RANGE

The proper way to build range is to increase it gradually over a number of years, always using as natural an embouchure as possible. The student needs to learn to let the air do the work instead of the chops, and avoid false or trick embouchures like the plague!

EXERCISES TO EXTEND RANGE:

- flexibility studies
 - long tones
 - pedal tones (with a natural embouchure)
 - endurance builders (such as the characteristic studies in the back of the Arban's Book and the Daily Set-Up drills of Herbert L. Clarke)
 - chords and scales that go gradually higher
 - breathing exercises
- The AIR is our real “octave key” for brass. When you SUPPORT your sound properly, playing high becomes much easier.
- walking, running, biking, swimming, etc

The better shape your body is in, the better chance you have with endurance, sound and range.

Always remember that range comes from endurance, not the other way around!! After the student gains the support and muscle control to play for longer periods of time, he begins to have the basic foundation to start increasing the range. Working to extend the range by half-step increments - over a long period of time - insures control, confidence and consistency in the upper register that will last many years. There is no deep dark secret that will increase range overnight! It takes many hours of hard practice and concentration. There is no shortcut!

The real measure of a good player is how high that person can play, consistently and musically. To describe my own range, I think about the highest note that I can hold with a big sound - at the end of the final ballad - after a four or five hour job.

Quite a few problems can develop when a young player tries to stretch into the upper register too rapidly. A student can injure muscles in the embouchure as well as other parts of the body, by trying too hard to play up high and not having the knowledge and the physical stamina to play correctly in the higher register of the horn.

HERE ARE SOME OF THE WARNING SIGNS TO WATCH FOR:

- loss of flexibility
- airy sound
- trouble with lower register
- loss of control and consistency
- loss of endurance
- inability to center pitches

There was never a time in my life that I spent hours a day just trying to “honk out” high notes. The upper register of the horn was just one of the many facets that I worked on with regard to my over-all playing.

Instead of focusing only on high notes, I try to point out to my students the importance of working

on technique, articulation, flexibility, reading and endurance, as well as the main consideration - **GOOD MUSICAL SOUND IN ALL REGISTERS OF THE HORN!**

FORMULA FOR SUCCESSFUL PLAYING

90% AIR

Without good support, even the most perfect embouchure will not respond properly. Endurance, sound, flexibility and range will only reach their full potential when the air is used effectively. You must work on your air away from the horn, through breathing exercises and physical exercise. Being in good physical shape is a big help in controlling the air that gets through the horn. While you are practicing or performing you must concentrate on blowing the air and the energy THROUGH the horn and OUT of the bell. To be successful on a wind instrument you must understand the concept of blowing the air OUT AWAY FROM YOU in order to make changes in range or dynamics.

9% BRAIN

This is a very important part of our performing on a musical instrument. We must have complete faith in ourselves to be competent players. We must know exactly what we are able to do and do it EVERY TIME we perform on the instrument. We must also realize what we are NOT able to do yet and keep practicing to make our overall playing as good as we possibly can. There are two books that I highly recommend to help this aspect of musicianship: “Psycho-cybernetics” by Dr. Maxwell Maltz and “The Inner Game of Music” by Barry Green.

1% CHOPS

The embouchure must be learned and nurtured properly from the very beginning of our study on the instrument, but once we understand its proper use, it gradually becomes of less importance. The lip formation and function should become second nature and not have to be thought about a lot. When we are using our air and mind properly, very little thought should have to go into our chops. In fact the less we think about our embouchure when performing, the better our endurance will be.

THE END RESULT TO WORK FOR IS A MUSICAL PERFORMANCE:

Becoming a real musician goes way beyond just being a good player. The true musician strives for complete understanding of the music, as well as real communication with the other musicians and the audience.

EVERYTHING must be seen and played in the music: dynamics, articulations, phrasing, etc. The notes are just the beginning! The music must also

be interpreted so that it is stylistically correct, played with conviction, phrased properly and performed with emotion. True musicians really put themselves into the feeling and the spirit of their performance.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions about trumpet playing or jazz performance. I am happy to communicate with you!

Mike Vax has performed clinics and concerts in over 3000 universities, colleges, high schools, junior high schools and elementary schools all over the world in the past 53 years.

Mike Vax is available for clinic and concert appearances for your school, night club, concert hall or jazz society.

HIS GROUPS ARE ALSO AVAILABLE FOR CLINICS AND CONCERTS:

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