

Sound Solutions: Troubleshooting the Trumpet Section

Purpose: to identify and offer solutions to prevalent problems common in young trumpet students.

SOUND

Next to playing musically, **SOUND** is the most important aspect of playing the trumpet (or of any instrument for that matter).

Important 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 orchestras, and invite university professors to work with your students)
- Frequently play quality recordings of professionals (Phil Smith, Maurice Andre, Chris Martin, Hakan Hardenberger, Wynton Marsalis, etc.)
- Encourage students to identify what adjectives describe *their* ideal sound (brilliant, rich, warm, sweet, vibrant, dark, 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.

Keith Johnson (University of North Texas, *retired*) clarified that “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.”

Common Sound Pitfalls – what to watch for:

- Airy, thin tone
- “Pinched” sound
- Dull, or excessively bright sound

Proper embouchure formation:

- 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

Common embouchure pitfalls - watch out for:

- 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 or bunching the chin.

AIR

Keys to obtaining an efficient and proper use of air:

- 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.
- Strive for consistent resonance and timbre on each note.

Common airflow pitfalls – what to watch for:

- “wah”ing – This problem is pervasive. The image of a “brick” tends to help; however, awareness of the “wah” is a major factor for improvement.
- 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 of 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.”
- 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.

ARTICULATION

Keys to proper articulation:

- Encourage students to model the articulation of great players (similar to sound)
- Good articulation is a direct result of 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.

Common articulation pitfalls – what to watch for:

- 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.

Some ways to improve these issues:

- “Air articulation” – this is simply 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. Remove tuning slide and have student buzz mouthpiece in leadpipe. 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.

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- Snell, Howard. *The Trumpet: Its Practice and Performance, A Guide for Students*. St. Marks Isle, British Isles: Rakeway Music, 1997.