MCMASTER MUSIC EDUCATION NOTEBOOK

Number 9

Terrific Trombone Tips

Keith Kinder

Breathing:
Breathing is **everything** in playing trombone. Virtually all playing problems ultimately come back to the use of the air. We are always trying to establish air **flow**—large quantities of air in motion. You should hear a low register sound when you inhale. High pitches or whistles indicate constrictions somewhere that limit your breathing efficiency. Generally, if you can inhale in a free and relaxed manner, exhalation will take care of itself. Sound, tongue, technique, range all ride on a column of **moving** air.

Posture:
Sit comfortably erect with your back away from the back of the chair (when you inhale you expand to the back as well as to the front). For correct balance you need both feet flat on the floor. Many trombonists prefer to place the left foot somewhat in front of the right.

Holding Position:
The left hand must support all of the weight of the instrument and maintain the balance that prevents it from sagging to the left. The instrument does NOT rest on the player’s shoulder. The left thumb hooks over the bell brace at the first joint, not at the base of the thumb. Wrap the middle two fingers around the upper slide brace. These two fingers carry the full weight of the instrument. The first finger MUST touch the mouthpiece receiver just below the point where the mouthpiece enters the instrument. This is a critical balance point. Without the first finger in this position the weight of the bell will gradually pull the player’s head toward the left. The little finger can either help support the instrument or, more commonly, hooks over the lower slide brace to prevent dropping the slide. For instruments with an F-attachment the thumb should lightly touch the valve with the fleshy part of the thumb face.

The right hand only manipulates the slide. Grip the lower slide brace lightly between the right thumb and the first two fingers, contacting the fleshy part of fingers and thumb. For the most efficient use of the wrist, the palm of the hand should face the player. In effect, the thumb pushes the slide out; the fingers pull it back in.

Both wrists should be straight so that the arms fall comfortably slightly away from the body. The arms form a triangle with the trombone at its apex.

Embouchure:
Keep it simple! Always play with wet lips. Use a syllable like “em” to bring the lips gently together and anchor the corners of the mouth. Once in place, the corners should not move except for the high register where they may turn down slightly. Most fine players play with at least two-thirds upper lip versus one-third lower. Generally avoid low placements. Ideally, the mouthpiece should be centred horizontally under the nose, but the precise placement will depend on the shape of the teeth. Slightly off-centre is fine; radically off-centre is not good.

The shape of the teeth will also determine the downward angle at which the instrument is played. Start with the mouthpiece. Set it on the lips so that contact can be felt all around it without altering the relationship between upper and lower jaw. Although some pedagogical books recommend bringing the lower jaw forward, I believe the jaws should maintain their natural relationship to each other. I believe bringing the lower jaw forward generates tension in the throat that restricts the free movement of the tongue.

Tonguing:
When you say “Tah” your tongue should strike at approximately the point where the upper teeth and the gum meet. Place your tongue in this position and blow against it. You need to make a complete seal so that the air is only released when you let your tongue drop to its natural place at the bottom of your mouth. A complete seal is necessary
to ensure clear beginnings to the notes. Use the syllable “Dah” for a softer, more rounded attack, however, the tongue position should not alter significantly from that of the “Tah” syllable. Your tongue should NEVER pass between your teeth since a complete seal is impossible and the lower jaw is pushed down making the upper register very difficult. Players do, however, experiment with different syllables. A “Toe” syllable initiates a lower tongue placement and a larger mouth cavity that often helps centre the pitch in the low register. Conversely a “Tee” syllable raises the tongue, making the mouth cavity smaller and assisting in the placement of high register notes. These tonguing syllables can be practised away from the instrument.

Multiple Tonguing: Double tonguing and triple tonguing are used when rhythmic figures are too rapid to be easily articulated by single tonguing. For double tonguing, say “Tah-Kah” or “Dah-Gah”, and notice what the tongue does. In essence, one note is articulated at the front of the mouth and another with the back of the tongue. Begin slowly and use these syllables on repeated pitches in eighth notes. Listen carefully to get both syllables equally precise before increasing speed. You will find you need to augment the air flow to balance the “Kah” (“Gah”) syllable with the “Tah” (“Dah”). Practice in all registers. (Use “Tee-Kee” in the high register; “Toe-Koe” for low notes). Double tonguing is used for rhythmic passages that subdivide into groups of two.

For triple tonguing, say “Tah-Tah-Kah” or “Tah-Kah-Tah” or “Dah-Gah-Dah” or “Dah-Dah-Gah”. Triple tonguing is EXACTLY the same as double tonguing except that it is used for rhythms that subdivide into triplets.

Legato:

The development and maintenance of a fine legato is one of the most important aspects of accomplished trombone playing. Ultimately, trombonists must be able to match the smoothness of the valved instruments playing slurred. There are four aspects to legato playing: play all notes full value; move the slide quickly and precisely from position to position; use a “Dah” tongue; and maintain a secure air flow. Start by playing short scale passages with a glissando between each note (no tongue). Then, speed up the slide motion between the notes so that a very brief glissando can be heard (still no tongue). Next, add the “Dah” tongue at precisely the point when the slide arrives at the new position. While slide action must be quick and precise, it should remain relaxed. If you hold the slide with your right palm facing you, legato playing will be easier to achieve.

Dynamics:

Trombonists are required to play a very wide range of dynamics. Volume is a function of the use of the air. Loud volumes often result in a harsh, forced tone. Conversely, at soft dynamic levels the pitch often loses its centre. When playing loud, think of a large air stream (an air stream as large as your face) that moves quickly. For quiet dynamics, think of a small air stream (an air stream no larger than your mouthpiece) that also moves fast. In both cases, you need a lot of moving air.

Register extremes:

Developing a wide range is a long-term project. Most teachers recommend working simultaneously on both high notes and low notes. Use syllables to help adjust the size of the mouth cavity. In the middle register, use “Tah”. The low register is best served by the syllable “Toe”. “Tee” works best for the high register. To accurately articulate high notes, players often consciously tongue higher at the front of the mouth. All kinds of exercises can be used for range development—lip slurs, scale passages, arpeggios, etc. When ascending into the high register, a point will be reached where the tone closes up. This is not a problem, providing you listen very carefully when you descend from that point and make sure you open up the sound again as you approach the middle register. Often the tension generated from stretching for high notes invades the middleregister with undesirable effects on all aspects of playing. A patient, systematic approach will develop embouchure strength and security in the range extremes. And, of course, air flow, air flow, air flow.

Tuning:

A great many tuning problems result from carelessness with the placement of 2nd and 4th position. Often players tend to play these positions flat when the slide direction is out and sharp when the slide direction is in. Any imprecision with these two positions puts all other positions out of place.

***When practising and performing listen to and enjoy your sound! The trombone is a glorious instrument!