

## General Advice for Brass Players

Changing your mind can improve your playing – By Richard Colquhoun

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### What is the point of this?

Something that sets brass players apart from many other types of instrumentalists is that we are responsible for the production of sound. There are no keys to press or strings to pluck that enable us to play any note on the instrument at any time of day or night; it all has to come from *you*. This is why no two people sound alike, even when playing the same instrument. My intention with this document is to pass on some general advice that if followed can improve your brass playing almost overnight by changing what you aim for when you are playing.

### Why breathing is not the answer

Experts love to lecture brass players about breathing, diaphragm support, push in (or out?! ) here or there, and on and on... However, there is rarely any long term improvement in playing as a result of these countless lectures. Here is the truth: we all know how to breathe. If that weren't true then we would not be here. We also all know how to control our breath in different situations, for talking, shouting, running or playing a note on an instrument. There is no special science here, just common sense. Breathe before you play. If you need to last for longer then take a deeper breath. Many people do not follow this simple logic. Catchphrases such as "*fill your instrument with air*" simply don't make sense when a rudimentary understanding of physics tells us that the instrument must be already full of something otherwise it would collapse in on itself. Renold Schilke was giving lectures about this in the 1950s – when are we going to start listening to him?

This is not to say that there is no technique or knack to breathing. If you want to play above the staff for a whole concert then there are good habits that will help you. But my argument is that if brass playing were simply about breathing then we could all become experts overnight by joining the local yoga club. This is not the case. Inevitably, focusing all of your effort on breathing only results in one thing: Overblowing. Overblowing is the term used when a player blows too much air to make the desired sound, causing the lips to collapse into the mouthpiece. This then has the knock-on effect of bad sound, unbalanced intonation, poor stamina, added mouthpiece pressure... The list goes on.

Many people try to solve overblowing by buying a bigger mouthpiece, which may help for a while, but longer term covering up a problem does nothing other than prevent real progress. In summary, correct breathing is important, but alone it doesn't solve most brass playing problems.

### Listening honestly

Who are you listening to when you play? Most conductors will tell you to listen to the people around you so that you gel well with the ensemble. This is good advice, but you're not going to gel well with anybody if you sound terrible. Very few people that I meet are truly honest with themselves about the sound that comes out of their instrument. This even includes seasoned professionals who lovingly cling on to a mouthpiece that makes playing difficult because their teacher and their teacher's teachers told them that it was the only "*legitimate*" way to play "*properly*". Although sound is affected by choice of equipment a lot of people do not have an endless budget to experiment with gear, and as I hinted earlier, most changes in equipment only serve to cover up inherent problems with technique.

All schools of brass playing fall into one of three categories.

1. Imagine the sound you want and it will just happen.
2. Do the right thing and the sound will fix itself.
3. Your sound can be used to diagnose and solve problems in your playing. Proper sound is the starting point.

Most methods fall into the first two types because these attitudes take responsibility of informed decision-making away from the player and hand it over to a mysterious force that nobody understands. That way there is always something to blame when things go wrong – the mouthpiece, valve alignment, the temperature of the environment, you name it. The leaves on the trees can make you split a top C if it's never your fault. This way of thinking also gives teachers plausible deniability when their pupils don't develop.

When you understand that what comes out of the instrument reflects what you put into it then you can become more deeply aware of your playing habits and start to change them for the better. Recognising common faults in your sound and that of others can turn every playing experience into a learning experience. Now all we need to do is define what “good” means!

## Correct sound

The idea of correct sound is pretty subjective. What is “*correct*” for the lead trumpet player of a big band is very different from the sound needed by a 2nd cornet player in a brass band. The subject of tone in that capacity, however, is more the domain of the mouthpiece salesman than the instrumental teacher. A properly functioning instrument should be capable of producing a clean, well projected sound with controllable (if not perfect) intonation. Regardless of the sound that you want, your technique dictates whether or not you are trying to produce a sound that is in alignment with or opposition to the laws of nature.

When we start trying to define the properties of a thing, such as sound, we soon realise that we are always dealing with pairs of opposites. For example, light and dark or dull and bright. Problems often tend to arise when these opposites get muddled, for example if we were to think that bright is the opposite of dark. Light is the opposite of dark, but it is also a word that means the opposite of heavy. As you can see, things get pretty confusing fairly quickly! There are also nonsense words such as round or full tone. What are the opposites of those, square and empty? These words do not make sense. I suggest instead that we think about these pairs: Powerful or weak? Spread or focused? Projected or veiled? Relaxed or forced? When we use these terms it is very easy to see what our true goals should be:

A powerful, projected and focused sound produced in the most relaxed manner possible. I challenge you to find somebody who actually wants to play with a weak, veiled and spread sound that is forced out of the instrument. Great players are often accused of “making it look easy” because they’re playing with their instrument and not against it.

## Articulation

I believe that articulation is one of the most important and misunderstood aspects of brass playing. I talk about it a lot. Articulation is a big source of power in and control over your sound. The tongue controls the build-up of pressure inside your mouth before the air reaches your lips and should be thought of as the primary factor in tone production. When we think about how many other types of instrument work, there is some kind of percussive action that causes sound to start. Pianos contain hammers that hit the strings; guitarists pluck strings, often with a plectrum; percussionists literally hit things with sticks... Why should a brass instrument be any different?

Many players don’t know where their tongue is in their mouth whilst they are playing and many others will give vague explanations akin to a flag flapping in the wind. In my opinion most players move their tongue too much and this can be heard in the dropping of pitch after each attack. Thinking that this is solved by “*air support*” they blow more, resulting in a “*DUH-WAH*” sound for every note. For most this is more easily heard in the playing of others before in their own playing. This is a valuable learning experience.

I recommend a lot of staccato and marcato playing. This is because as well as strengthening the tongue it is great for learning efficiency and realising how little air you need to play any single note on the instrument. If you are playing a long string of repeated notes then you may notice the tongue acting like a valve, both starting and stopping each note. If you are moving the tongue too much then there will be an obvious limit to how short (staccato) you can make those notes and the speed that you can play.

## Am I on track?

General advice is one thing, but having a quick list to check at any time to see if things are going correctly is much more useful. Below you will see a few questions and suggestions to keep things working properly. If you are doing these things correctly then you can and will make progress.

- **Am I hitting each note in tune with a clear sound?**  
This is the first stop solution for 90% of problems on a brass instrument. Because it is easy to bend notes out of tune (often called *off-centre*) you have to be sure that you can hear the pitch of each note before you try and play it. You can develop your ear by practicing scales and arpeggios and concentrating on every note. Playing all of the correct notes is not enough, you need to play all of the notes correctly, with a clean attack.
- **When I play loudly, is my sound projecting or spreading?**  
Famous lead trumpet player Roger Ingram says that he never plays at more than 70% of his capacity, ever. A clear, articulate sound carries much further than a blasted spread tone. It also improves your stamina and intonation massively. Often people blow harder because they cannot hear themselves playing. That's because the bell is facing away from you. If you stand in front of a brass instrument you'll soon realise that playing loud enough is very rarely a problem.
- **I'm out of breath/don't know where to breathe/can't last long enough.**  
We must be practical about this. First of all, when you practise by yourself your goals should be different to when you're performing or practising in a group. At home you can push yourself to go further. Practise being correct and your ability to make air last will grow over time. I tell my pupils to breathe so that they stay alive and not because of the music. Playing correctly is much more efficient.
- **What's the difference between strength and stamina?**  
This is simple, bodybuilders don't win marathons. You never have to build up strength to play a brass instrument. If you can close your mouth hard enough to stop air escaping, then that is all the strength you need to play anything. Range does not relate to strength, it is about discovering and remembering what it feels like to play each pitch. Mostly stamina is related to playing efficiently (making what you've got last longer), minimising mouthpiece pressure and not overblowing (more tongue and less air), we all do it to some degree... Your lip will start to go when it has been abused too much to effectively resist the air and vibrate.  
Less abuse = more stamina.
- **I don't want to change the way I play, I've done this for a long time.**  
Good luck! Improvement is change. You cannot do the same things and get different results. Remember: Playing correctly is the easiest way to play!

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