

Rehearsal Techniques for the Trombone Sectional

(Proper Prior Practice Prevents Poor Performance!!)

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Many school band programs stress skill acquisition to virtually every wind section except the trombones. Why allow the trombones to “slide by” when it comes to acquiring skills equal to their musical colleagues?

Because of time constraints the band director cannot offer individual instruction regularly. The following ideas utilize teaching techniques used in the applied studio and adapt them to sectional rehearsals. These techniques are directed toward improving, slide movement, wind control, intonation and tone quality of high school trombonists. These exercises are offered as ancillary ideas on which the entire section can work and are not meant to replace the musical work normally completed. The director will find the most benefit likely from incorporating only one exercise per sectional.

In this article, the reference to airstream is synonymous with wind stream. That is to say that the movement of wind, not necessarily air, through the instrument is the desired goal. Once the student understands that the movement and velocity of air (wind) is more important than quantity, progress can be made.

REHEARSAL TECHNIQUES:

1. Mouthpiece Practice: A lack of intensity in the wind stream and the inability to produce correctly centered tones are problems indigenous to the trombone section. Therefore, the ability to produce pitches on the mouthpiece is crucial to the development of young brass players. It enables the student to depend on their wind and the “mind’s ear” to guide them in producing the correct pitch. The necessary exaggeration of the wind stream in mouthpiece practice is an important element in development of sound production. While it is true that one is not “buzzing” when playing, there is an unconscious mechanism that allows us to do what is necessary to produce a clear sound once the mouthpiece is inserted into the instrument. The director can check for correct buzzing technique simply by having the student remove the mouthpiece quickly while buzzing. If the lips continue to buzz for more than just a “second” then the student likely is forcing the lips together to create the buzz. The lips should be brought together as the air passes across them and the wind encounters back pressure from the mouthpiece. If done correctly, once the mouthpiece is removed from the embouchure, the buzzing should cease.

A practical application of this technique to the sectional would be to have part of the section play a passage while the remainder of the section “buzzes” the same passage. This will give a pitch reference to those students performing on the mouthpiece only. An enhancement of this technique for those students performing only on the mouthpiece would be for them to simulate actual slide movement while “buzzing” the excerpt. If done correctly, this will illustrate to the students how closely slide placement is associated with pitch center. One may actually observe students adjusting their imaginary slide positions when they begin to hear poor intonation!

Combining mouthpiece practice with singing will also help students develop their sense of audiation. As all band directors have found, this is likely the most important technique to develop in young musicians.

2. Glissandi Practice: One of the more productive ways of improving connection in legato and rapid scalar passages is through glissandi practice. This practice technique is useful also on

passages containing difficult intervals. Glissandi practice is essentially practice without articulation. In order for it to be effective, students must refrain from articulating any pitch except those that occur after a breath. Initially students may have to breathe frequently, but this will improve over time. Encourage students to play slowly and gradually work to a performance tempo. Note that this is a metered glissando effect (Ex. 2). The basic duration of the notes does not change, but the student continues moving the wind so that a glissando will occur between those pitches which remain on the same partial.

Example 2



Natural slurs will occur across partials. Indicate to the students that the wind stream should feel essentially the same producing a slur as it does performing a glissando. Once students can maintain the intensity in their wind, add the articulation back into the passage. This will encourage them to articulate “on the wind rather than with the wind.”

For sectional rehearsals, this glissandi practice lends itself to scale patterns. Using the standard rhythm pattern shown below, most students will find the scale difficult to negotiate initially. A lack of total familiarity with the slide pattern is most often the cause. Although this process may sound “muddy” at first, one finds that when students are attempting to glissando, the tone quality becomes focused and centered. The consistent wind needed to create glissandi helps the student create an open, centered tone.

Example 3



The resultant sound in Example 3 should be a continuous, metered glissandi. The slide does not pause at each successive pitch, but moves continuously in a steady tempo.

To enhance the glissando concept, add another octave to the exercise. The direction of the added octave is at the discretion of the director. Subtle changes in embouchure and tongue level, coupled with the necessary change in wind speed, will assist the student in the development of range and flexibility. Developing a sense of wind movement through the instrument is the ultimate goal of this exercise.

This technique of no articulation also applies to valved instruments. The focus is on the breath and finger pattern without it being hampered by articulation. Proper movement of the wind, as it applies to the slide or finger pattern, is imperative if one expects it to coordinate with articulation.

3. Alternate Positions: Inserting alternate positions into scale practice is a marvelous way to develop intonation and tone quality. First, scale practice is a mechanism to familiarize the students with the key of the excerpt to be rehearsed. Secondly, placing alternate positions in a scale pattern allows the student to practice alternates in a comfortable setting. Thirdly, by improving the intonation of the alternate positions tone quality will also improve.

In a sectional, the band director should determine a scale to use and identify which pitches have alternate positions. (A practical knowledge of the overtone system will assist with this. Make sure to include alternates for the F-attachment where applicable). For best results, insert the alternates one at a time in the scale. After one alternate position has been mastered, add

another until several have been introduced to the pattern. To assist with intonation, have one-half of the section play the pitches in the primary position and the other half use the alternate. Of course one would not perform any scale in this manner, but it is an easy way to incorporate alternate position practice into a somewhat mechanical exercise.

4. **Metronome Practice:** Intonation and consistent articulation are affected directly by slide movement and placement. The following exercise focuses on the coordination of tongue and slide.

Example 1



Although the exercise appears simplistic, note the student can only move the slide when it is time to change pitch. Instruct the student to change slide positions at the instant the metronome clicks. Do not allow the student to move the slide early between clicks. Anticipating slide motion will negate any positive effects of the exercise. (To use this exercise successfully in a sectional setting, it will be necessary to use a metronome that can be amplified.)

The first time through the exercise should be played staccato. Each successive time lengthen the duration until the note length reaches full value (legato). The director should note that students tend to articulate strongly when first learning this exercise. Encourage them to tongue clearly but softly on each pitch. As the articulation becomes more legato, the goal is to continue the crisp slide movement found in the staccato style. (This exercise can be used on any scale pattern.)

Once the students can adequately execute the exercise, extend the technique to slurring. Insure that the wind stream is not broken and utilize natural slurs where they occur. The success of this exercise depends not only on quick slide movement, but on a fast-moving, uninterrupted wind stream.

5. **Five Note Scale Patterns:** One of the more accessible practice techniques available to build speed and consistency in slide movement is through five note patterns. The pattern shown below can be transferred to scales in all registers and modes. These patterns are excellent vehicles to introduce the key of a particular excerpt to be rehearsed. The repetitious nature of these patterns applies to the large group setting and progress can be monitored easily with a metronome. The patterns can be adapted to include a variety of articulations and modes thus making them exceptional teaching tools.

Example 4



Unlike the exercises discussed earlier, the five-note patterns are intended to be played quickly. Students may begin the patterns at a moderate tempo, but should increase tempo as they become familiar with the pattern.

Eventually students will reach a threshold of tempo. A light-hearted game or competition may serve to maintain the student's interest. For example, one half of the section could challenge the other to see how quickly (and correctly) they can perform a particular pattern. Another scenario might include the freshmen challenging the sophomores to the same. Any number of situations can be arranged to maximize learning in the rehearsal. For those trombonists with F-attachments, these five note patterns should be extended into the low register.

6. Backwards Practice: This is an often overlooked practice technique that is beneficial to trombonists. When students are faced with a difficult passage, practicing it from back to front can ease the difficulty of certain intervals and slide patterns. Have the student begin with the last pitch in the passage and add one pitch at a time. (Always return to the beginning pitch.) In a sense this technique helps the student learn intervals and proper slide movement while unlearning mistakes.

Example 5

Example 5

Original

continue until complete

This practice technique gives the student more repetitions than they would do normally in their practice routine. It keeps their mind engaged and eliminates the mindless repetitions so often apparent in practice sessions.

With time, the director may find this technique one of the most beneficial practice methods. Initially the exercise should be done slowly, but as competence increases the excerpt can be worked to the proper tempo. This technique is certainly an innovative approach for many students, so begin with small sections of a passage to insure early success.

Coda:

In closing, note that several of the exercises focus directly on improving tone while others focus on slide technique and articulation.

Tone production:

1. Mouthpiece Practice
2. Glissandi Practice
3. Alternate Positions

Slide technique and articulation:

1. Glissandi Practice
2. Metronome Practice
3. Five Note Scale Patterns
4. Backwards Practice

One should discover from diligent practice of these techniques how closely slide technique and articulation are related. One should also “rediscover” the importance of wind in the development of tone quality.

It is hoped the above exercises will be helpful in turning your next sectional into an exciting and challenging, musical event. Be aware that students will integrate the techniques with varying levels of success. Be supportive of the students that have difficulty with the techniques and urge them to practice on their own. Acquisition of technique is extremely important, but using it to enhance an expressive musical performance is the ultimate goal. Urge the students to practice with a definite goal in mind and remember the six Ps of musical success; **“Proper Prior Practice Prevents Poor Performance”!**

Mark E. Britt is in his fourth year on the faculty of Furman University where he teaches applied low brass, music education courses, and is a member of the Furman Brass Trio. Dr. Britt received the Bachelor of Music Education from Appalachian State University and the Master of Music in Performance from Northwestern University. He received the Doctorate in Trombone Performance from The Florida State University. He is active as a conductor, clinician, and adjudicator at high schools and universities across the southeast. Most recently he performed on the world premier of two works for brass trio at the 1996 International Brassfest held in Long Beach, California. He has also been a soloist at the Eastern Trombone Festival in Washington, DC and has been invited to perform at the 1999 International Trombone Festival. His principal teachers have been Harold McKinney, Frank Crisafulli, and John Drew. Currently he serves as the CMENC Southern Division Co-chairman.