

Low Brass Tone Production

by Dr. Mark Britt, Furman University

Concept of Sound

With exception of solid technical skills, the salient component of developing a characteristic sound on low brass instruments is developing the student's concept of sound. This concept of sound is developed through focused, repeated listening to an artist who is proficient on that particular instrument. It may be possible that the band director is able to fulfill this role, but if not, having quality recordings available to the student is highly recommended. The number of high school low brass players that have never heard a recording of a professional musician is quite high. While it is true that every person has their own unique sound and style, exposure to a variety of models can only enhance this critical, developmental process.

Inhalation / Exhalation Process

Many difficulties arise because of the manner in which the students inhale. A "noisy" breath is a sign that the student is not getting enough quality air in an efficient manner. The sound of the breath should be quiet.

1. Use a breathing tube (.5 inch or .75 x1 inch PVC)
2. 80/20% Rule. (Tension can be created by taking an overly large breath.)
3. Wind versus Air.

Impedance At The Mouthpiece

If the portion of the embouchure inside the cup of the mouthpiece is either overly tense or "puckered", the air flow into the instrument will be impeded.

1. Lips stretched too tightly. ("Happy Brass Player")
2. Teeth clinched. (Need at least a fingers' worth of space.)
3. "MMMM" in the corners, "UUUUH" in the middle, and blow through the letter "P"
4. Check the above with mouthpiece buzzing (Visually see movement of air by placing piece of paper in front of mouthpiece).

Interrupting The Air Stream

The most common pitfall in legato playing involves the interruption of the air stream resulting in "wah-wah" articulation. The use of glissandi (natural slurs for euphonium and tuba) can help alleviate the problem.

1. Play the passage in question using no articulation (glissandi). Articulation "on the air stream" not "with the air stream."
2. "Buzz" the passage both with and without articulation.
3. "Oo, Aw, Ee" vowels to assist with register shift.
4. Concept of warm, intense air at soft dynamic levels.

Mouthpiece Placement / Horn Angle

Most of the problems associated with improper mouthpiece placement stem from the mouthpiece being placed too low on the lips. This does not allow the upper lip to vibrate freely and affects the aperture.

1. Especially watch mouthpiece placement in those students who switch from brass instruments (horn and trumpet).
2. Lateral placement not as crucial as vertical placement. Low brass players typically use a "high placement", but NOT as high as horn players. Tuba mouthpiece should rest directly (almost touch) below the nose.
3. Mouthpiece should not rest on upper lip. ("To the box" look)

Dr. Mark Britt joined the faculty at Furman in 1995. In addition to applied low brass lessons, he teaches courses in brass methods, orchestration, and music appreciation. Dr. Britt serves as a coach for the brass and trombone ensembles; works with the Paladin Regiment; and is the faculty advisor for the CMENC chapter. In addition to prior collegiate teaching positions, Dr. Britt was a band director in the North Carolina public schools. He is active as a conductor, clinician, and adjudicator at high schools and universities across the southeast.