

Toward More Melodic Low Brass

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A weakness I find all too often in young tubists/euphoniumists is a lack of melodic thinking. Rather than thinking of the parts they play in a linear way, they treat each note as merely a sound without considering its relationship to surrounding notes or other parts.

I blame this on a number of faults in the general training of the low brass player. As the instruments are so often relegated to simple accompaniment parts in a style which emphasizes rhythm, players have limited experience in melodic work. It is melodic playing which is so important in development of musical thought. Crescendos, decrescendos, accelerandos, and ritardandos are all most often based in melodic interpretations and it is imperative that the bass/accompaniment voices support these interpretations. This is the key to good ensemble playing, but without melodic experience, how is one to understand the subtle shadings of a line?

Another less obvious and perhaps more controversial observation regards the music which is often most popular for listening. So much of our musical sensitivity develops through our listening. Most young people listen primarily or even exclusively to rock music. I have no problem with this, however, the bulk of rock/pop music lacks well developed and executed melodies. When one listens only to rhythmically and melodically simple music, how is it possible to develop a solid sense of more sophisticated expressions?

As a first suggestion to help developing musicians, I recommend a listening program. I particularly like to use some of the great arias from various operas - particularly works of Verdi and Puccini. Another excellent source can be jazz singers. I learn every time I listen to themelodic interpretations of Billie Holliday or the rhythmically sophisticated stylings of Ella Fitzgerald. What is most important in the selection of music for this program is that it be 1) melodically and musically profound and 2) that it appeal to the listener. A forced regiment will probably do more harm than good to a student. As the teacher, you must try to steer the students to appropriate materials which match their tastes. Often, with an explanation of a given selection (the story of the opera, etc.), the listener can be more appreciative — always ‘prime the pump’ when possible.

To begin to apply the knowledge acquired through listening, students should be encouraged to play melodies. Vocalises such as those of Bordgioni and Conconne are excellent and I use them constantly, but they may not always be appropriate at every level. If the student does not yet truly understand expressive classical melody, then these may be difficult to maneuver. I often have students play melodies they know and like. These can be pop or classic. Of greatest importance is that the student use the instrument to make music. It can be very helpful to learn these melodies by ear to assist in internalizing the music. Acquiring a more musical spirit is at the core of this training.

Of greatest importance in musical development is singing. This is not a statement which normally meets resistance from teachers, but it is surprising how few actually have students sing. Not a lesson goes by that I and my students do not sing. In ensemble rehearsal, it is often helpful to have sections sing a part. At first this can be somewhat embarrassing, but this rapidly passes. Sing with the students to help them overcome their fear. Be sure that the singing is done full bodied and wholeheartedly and not in the typical quiet, shy manner which is very indistinct in pitch, rhythm and phrasing. Sing as if it is a performance. Singing encourages musical thought and requires greater attention to the task at hand. It also helps in learning phrasing and developing the sense of line which is so important in learning to blow through phrases. It is rare that a player does not play a line better after he has sung it.

When working with accompaniment parts, the player should sing the melody to learn the structure his musical part is to support. Have the student play his part while singing the melody in his head. In teaching, whenever possible, use a sung example rather than a verbal reduction of a more profound musical thought. The more often you sing for your students, the easier it becomes for them to sing to you.

As instructors of low brass instruments, we must realize that their development can be handicapped by lack of melodic experience. The normal band/orchestra experience is not sufficient. We must seek ways to increase the students direct contact with melodic playing. Special ensembles are excellent supplements to a music program and should be actively pursued. Tuba/euphonium ensembles, low brass choirs, or even duet/trio groups all encourage more melodic thinking and playing.

We must encourage more expressive melodic thinking in our so called ‘Background Brass.’ The better these people are, the better the group will be — Guaranteed !

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