

Buzzing on the Mouthpiece

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While I know that I certainly did a lot of things right in my studies, there are three major things that I wish I had done, in retrospect, sooner:

1. get a new horn
2. sit with better posture, and
3. buzz more on the mouthpiece.

In fact, although I knew during my studies that some players and teachers were strong advocates of buzzing, I really only personally got into it after the need frequently arose to warm-up a bit in route to playing jobs during my time in the Nashville Symphony—driving in the car! The longer I teach, the more benefits I see from buzzing on the mouthpiece.

As a first note, when buzzing on the mouthpiece you want to produce a “buzzy” buzz. I first heard this term used by hornist Gail Williams in a master class setting some years back to describe the tone you want to get on a mouthpiece. Buzzing needs to be somewhat loud and very focused, especially in terms of pitch. It may help to hold the mouthpiece as you buzz not at the tip but more in the body of the mouthpiece to get the right kind of tone and feel.

Buzzing is great as a warm-up exercise to set the embouchure

(I frequently begin my playing day buzzing against a drone for tonal reference), but there are many applications of buzzing in a practice session.

Accuracy

One of my favorite uses of buzzing on the mouthpiece alone in practice is to check out what we were really playing in passages that we missed, an idea I learned during observations of trombone lessons given by M. Dee Stewart at Indiana University. Often when checked on the mouthpiece alone one will find that pitch control is not very accurate—and it can't be much better on the horn! To quote Farkas, “If you can't play it on the mouthpiece, you can't play it on the instrument.” I buzz frequently in practice sessions to check and focus passages, and recommend this practice as a useful tool for any brass player.

Tone

Buzzing passages on the mouthpiece seems to improve not only accuracy but also basic tonal color. You need to be buzzing on the center of the pitch for your horn to produce the best, most resonant tone. It also really helps in building a tone to eliminate the various slight overshoots and

“scoops” that will become obvious when buzzing passages on the mouthpiece.

High Range Problems

Another favorite use of buzzing on the mouthpiece in my teaching is in range and embouchure development. You should, in my opinion, be able to buzz to the top of your range—if you can't, as already noted, there are issues to think about in your approach to the high range, especially the use of the corners and possibly the jaw as well. The geometry has to be right. I like to buzz arpeggios in and out of the top of my range before I begin to play in that range during my warm-up time to be certain that I have set up the right approach to playing in that range.

Finally, it is pretty much impossible to use excessive pressure on the mouthpiece by itself, a great thing especially during the pre-warm up phase of the playing day. Buzzing is a great tool to help to set your embouchure mechanics correctly right from the start.

One additional “interesting” usage of mouthpiece buzzing is to try to play duets on mouthpieces. It is sometimes a considerable challenge to make the intonation correct, but it is certainly worth

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the effort, and can point out just how much one needs to solidify pitch control.

At any point in a practice session I rarely buzz over roughly 3 minutes straight. You really don't want to buzz for 15 or 20 minutes without a break. That much buzzing spread intelligently through a day of practice and rehearsals can, however, be one of the best things you will ever do for your playing.

Finally, a note on buzzing without the mouthpiece. Buzzing without the mouthpiece (free buzzing) can be quite useful. The embouchure setting without the mouthpiece should be very similar to the embouchure with the mouthpiece. To be able to buzz without a mouthpiece is, in a sense, not a major skill to work on, but if a hornist can't buzz a without a mouthpiece it is potentially a sign of other problems that need addressing, typically relating to the corners (too much "smile") or to the jaw position (too receded). Periodically I insert free buzzing into

the beginning of my warm-up to double check the geometry of my set up. (Curiously, students who can't buzz well frequently can't whistle either; this again relates to the use of the corners of the embouchure and jaw placement.)

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Dr. Ericson balances an active career as a performer and teacher of the horn. He has served since 2001 on the faculty at Arizona State University and also serves in the summers as Artist-Faculty at the Brevard Music Center in North Carolina. At ASU Ericson teaches horn, performs regularly with groups including the Arizona State University Faculty Woodwind Quintet and The Phoenix Symphony, and is an active recitalist. At Brevard, Ericson teaches horn, performs Principal Horn in the Brevard Music Center Orchestra, and is an active chamber musician. He also serves as Website Editor for The IHS Online, the website of the International Horn Society. His first solo project, Les Adeiux (music of Franz Strauss and others) was released in 2003 on the Summit label and was hailed by The Horn Call for "fantastic playing . . . the level of musicality, nuance and artistry is not to be missed." Equally at home in music of all periods, Ericson has made recordings with The Potsdam Brass Quintet, The Nashville Symphony, and other ensembles, including with Native American flutist R. Carlos Nakai on Fourth World, which was nominated for a Grammy Award in 2002.

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