

Trombone Slide Action: Beauty of Movement, Beauty of Sound

Joe Dixon

The uniqueness of trombone is centered upon its use of a slide; however, the teaching of efficient slide action to young students is often insufficiently addressed. Frequently students are simply taught to move the slide as fast as possible without any further instruction or monitoring. Unfortunately, they continue for years attempting to move faster and faster without regard to effortlessness and efficiency. In reality, the slide needs to move only as fast as necessary—not as fast as possible. Conversely, we could say that the slide moves as slow as is efficient—but no slower. Nonetheless, ignoring form when teaching slide action will result in poor technique.

Like many skills, any effort that is exerted beyond what is efficient will create negative results. All aspects of playing an instrument should be monitored by these questions:

- Does it look effortless?
- Does it feel effortless?
- Does it sound effortless?

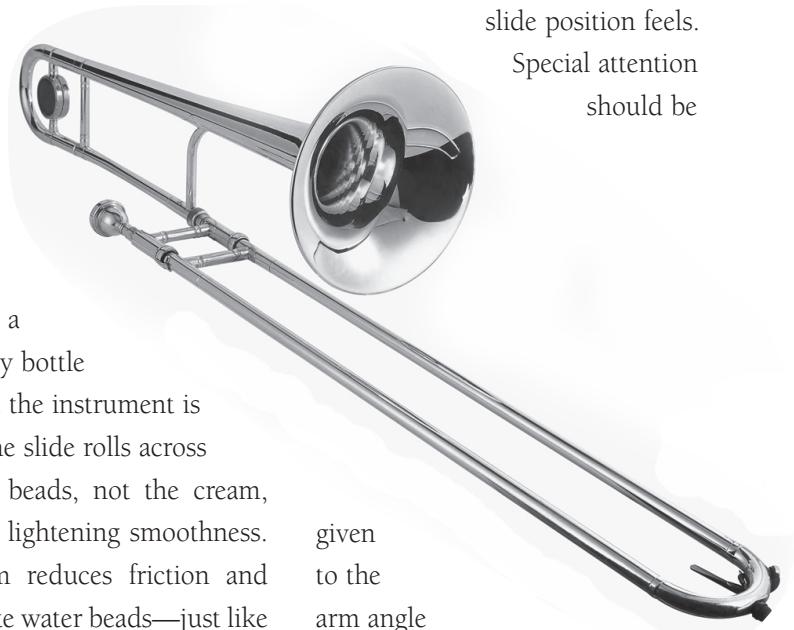
FIRST THINGS FIRST

Before our approach to slide action can be discussed, we must address three important points.

You must have a trombone slide that works. Often I check trombone slides while visiting schools and I wouldn't perform on 98% of them. I suggest that students clean and re-lubricate slides at least twice a week. Use an excellent cream lubricant. Slide oil, although convenient, is not an acceptable choice. A dry slide is impossible to move correctly and will cause serious friction wear on the slide tubes. Use a water spray bottle every time the instrument is played. The slide rolls across the water beads, not the cream, to achieve lightening smoothness. The cream reduces friction and helps create water beads—just like wax on a car. I would also estimate that 50% of the trombone slides that I check have issues requiring professional repair. Unfortunately, students can become complacent with the condition of their slide and accept it as status quo. I want students to memorize what their slide feels like at its best (when new) and never let them

accept less than that again. Do you check trombone slides at least once a week?

For most, I would be “preaching to the choir” discussing the importance of posture in breathing and tone production. For trombone, muscle-memory is also important for learning to play with good intonation. Inconsistent posture changes the way that a slide position feels. Special attention should be



given to the arm angle floating away from the body. The angle should allow the right arm to reach all positions without changing the actual distance of the arm from the ribs. By making the hand position and arm angle consistent, we reduce the variables for memorizing the feel of a position to only one element: elbow angle.

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Similarly, I teach that right hand position stays as consistent as possible. I use two fingers and a thumb at the bottom of the slide brace. The hand stays at a right angle to the slide with the palm facing the chest. While holding the slide brace, I prefer students not allow their fingers to protrude past the first knuckle. This allows a little extra “reach” as well as helping prevent the ever-popular problem of touching the bell with the fingers. Students should not “let go” of the slide with their thumb except for 7th position.

LEARNING SLIDE POSITIONS

Similar to our rules for efficiency, trombone positions should be taught by: what does it sound like? What does it look like? What does it feel like? From the beginning, teachers and students should be obsessed with exact placement. Remember that posture and hand position are essential to learning to play in-tune.

Good intonation requires a trained ear, embouchure muscle-memory, and arm muscle-memory. Are you re-enforcing these skills every day?

SLIDE MOVEMENT

Slide action is about quickness, gracefulness, and efficiency. Place the slide. There should not be any adverse reaction from the body or instrument when the player either moves or stops the slide. Avoid the bell of the instrument bouncing while moving or the slide forcing a “bungee” reaction when stopping. Keeping the texture of the arm soft will help minimize reactions. Work for grace and

agility—“beauty of movement” is effortless. Brute force is not an option.

The hand position (two fingers and a thumb) is held as if one were holding a small ball bearing between the thumb and fingers. That imaginary ball bearing becomes a point that we move in a straight line to exact positions in space in front of us. Moving this “point in space” is much more exact than thinking of moving the entire slide.

The slide does have to move quickly, however, addressing velocity without visual effortlessness will never give a satisfactory result. In reality, the trombonist has the same amount of time to move between positions that a trumpeter has to depress a valve, or a flutist to depress a key. Unfortunately, this realization seems to add to the sense of panic rather than staying focused on accuracy and ease of movement.

Changing positions requires that a player synchronize the exact placement of the slide with the articulation syllable and the lip vibration of the note being played. No simple task. It is Reason No. 1 that the pace of beginning trombone classes moves slower than other instruments. Do not

allow a student to anticipate and move early—think of changing on the note.

Placing the slide also means that I do want students to “throw” or “sling” the slide from one position to another. I use the wrist only for tuning adjustments. The wrist—like the arm—will be relaxed, but not loose.

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Perhaps the principal reason that young trombonists have difficulty in learning to slur is that they never really learned to correctly connect two notes without space, pause or hesitation. Proper slurring is impossible without a proper slide technique.

The beauty of slide movement is visually the same no matter what style is being performed. For example, louder dynamics do not translate into more aggressive slide action.

In my clinics for beginners I always visually demonstrate slide technique. I want students to memorize in their minds what it looks like. I want them to mimic what my changes look like.

Our artistic slide movement helps translate into “beauty of sound” by helping avoid tension, facilitating continuous airflow, improving intonation, and setting the foundation for musically satisfying transitions between notes. Like other fundamental aspects of playing—tone quality, intonation, and articulation—slide technique is not a skill that you teach and then “move on.” It is a skill where form is being perfected for a lifetime.

Joe Dixon is well known as a brass and wind ensemble clinician. He is an artist clinician for S.E. Shires trombones and F. Schmidt low brass. He currently resides in Houston. Mr. Dixon may be contacted via his web site joedixonstudio.com.