Teaching Beginner Trumpet Students

Dr. Gary Wurtz

I was recently invited to provide a session on the teaching of beginner trumpet players at the TBA Convention/Clinic. Although I have much experience teaching beginners, the truth is that as a college professor for over twenty years, my days of teaching beginners were a while back. For that reason, I decided to prepare for the clinic by combining what I think with the thoughts of a few other talented and respected teachers who teach beginners in our state. Answering my call for input, folks like Bene Davis, Melodianne Mallow, Cindy Bulloch, Jason Tucker and Chris Wurtz shared their thoughts. It should come as no surprise that none of these gifted teachers do things exactly the same way as anyone else, and I was, frankly, happy to learn that. In my opinion, there is no one way to teach students new to the trumpet how to play it. Even for my college students, I often express the thought that there are many ideas about how to play the trumpet, and mine are the ones I am comfortable with. With that being the mindset, I am pleased to offer a few thoughts that I hope might prove helpful to someone.

The good news is that you don't have to reinvent the wheel. Teaching someone how to play the trumpet from scratch has already been done successfully by a lot of people, so all you have to do is find something that works that you also believe in.

Perhaps the first pertinent questions to address regard equipment. People ask me if I believe students should start on cornets or trumpets. Though these instruments were decidedly different early in their histories, nowadays they have become a bit homogenized. Cornets are generally more cylindrical than originally conceived, and trumpets incorporate more conical tubing than they once did. Though it's possible that, in some students' hands, a youngster may achieve a better tone on a cornet than a trumpet at the earliest stages, to me the best reason to consider using cornets over trumpets is simply because the center of gravity and proximity of the mechanism to their faces better fits their typically small stature. In terms of tone quality, in the hands of most beginners the difference between a cornet and a trumpet is negligible, in my experience. Although there are some school districts that are afforded the luxury of being able to insist on exact brands and models of instruments, I think it is important to realize that in many districts students are going to have to play whatever is most convenient, including whatever is the least expensive option. It is important for teachers to learn to make that work!

The choice of a mouthpiece size is something about which most have a strong opinion. I started on a 7C, which many still use. I have been a part of programs where the standard issue for beginners was a 5B. If you compare mouthpiece measurements in a published manufacturer's brochure, you will find that the difference in the dimensions between the mouthpiece size options employed by most is miniscule. In my opinion, B cups are generally too much for a beginner to handle. While they may help produce a
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slightly darker sound, the sacrifice in endurance and range may not be worth it. Here's a novel thought: find a mouthpiece that works for a student based on the size and fleshiness of the lips. Students with larger lips may need more room, while students with thinner lips may need something a little smaller to allow them to succeed. I don’t believe all beginners should play the same size mouthpiece any more than I believe every 6th grader should wear the same size shoe!

My main contact with beginners, nowadays, happens at our annual summer band camp. “Beginners” at band camp have just finished their first year of band, and that is enough time for habits to have fully formed. While many students are in fine shape after a year, the most common negative issues I encounter after one year are bad posture, inferior hand position and poor mouthpiece placement. Students who do not suffer from these tend to be positioned for the most future success. Therefore, let me quickly address each of these.

Students should sit up straight, with their heads positioned directly in line with their spine. If the head is on front of the spine it places a lot of stress on the upper muscles of the back. Many band directors ask students to sit forward in their chairs, and I have no problem with that, but on a personal note, I am much more comfortable with my back in the back of the chair. Since children are people, I believe they are likely to feel the same way. Controversial?

In order for the valves to function at the highest level, mechanically speaking, they need to be pushed straight down. Poor hand position often results in pushing the pistons at an angle, causing the valves to hang, resulting in poor execution. Encourage students to hold the valves with the left hand so that the thumb is in the saddle on the first slide and the third or fourth finger are in the ring on the third slide. The right hand should form an inverted “C”, with the fingers arched over the valves so that they can depress the valves straight down. I teach students to think of their fingers as an extension of the valve stem. The right thumb should be inserted between the first and second valve casings, and kept straight so as to keep the right hand from collapsing against the trumpet. Teach students to move third and first valve slides to adjust intonation on low D, C-sharp and even E right from the beginning. They can use both hands, just like you expect your beginning woodwind players to. Never let them think it is beyond them, because it is not.

Perhaps the biggest trumpet killer is placing the mouthpiece rim directly on the red of the lips, and especially on the red of the upper lip. The upper lip is the primary vibrator; placing the rim directly on it, puts great restriction on its ability to vibrate. Teachers should constantly monitor the placement of the mouthpiece on the top lip. If a ring appears below the line that divides the face from the labial skin, then the mouthpiece is too low. Experience has shown me that trying to correct this problem once it is the student's customary manner of setting up meets with very limited success. Once students become accustomed to playing this way they find it almost impossible to reestablish their mouthpiece placement, yet some of the most typical problems associated with this issue are poor range, inflexibility, fuzzy sound and a lack of endurance. Directors should be consistent, insistent and persistent in their instruction to keep the mouthpiece high enough.

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At this point I am going offer up what may be viewed as a very controversial point of view, and I am willing to suffer the consequences. I think it is quite acceptable, if not beneficial, to downplay buzzing the mouthpiece by itself as a major part of teaching the trumpet to beginners. Yes, I said that! Playing on the mouthpiece by itself is harder to do than playing the trumpet, and therefore students have limited success with it. Furthermore, playing on the mouthpiece is not all that fun. They want to play the trumpet...we all did! In fact, the sooner the teacher can have new students playing a recognizable melody, the sooner you have them, and their parents, hooked. Why not experiment with one class and try teaching without emphasizing mouthpiece buzzing. Instead, speak not of buzzing at all, but of blowing smoothly through the trumpet until the sound catches. Don't expect students to hit certain pitches. Some will naturally play lower and some higher. Allow them to enjoy success where they are. If they can play a great low C, start there. If the student in the next chair plays a nice G, or even a fourth space C, go with it. Enjoy some harmony! After a few days they will learn to make the adjustments necessary to play other pitches.

Above all, be encouraging and make it fun. Hear them play often. Give them frequent chair tests, but allow ties. If it is fun, and they are having success, they will practice more and stay in band longer. Teaching beginner trumpets is like anything else: nothing works for everybody, but everything works for somebody. If my ideas don't work for you, that does not offend me, but if they help you in some way, then I am pleased I could help.

Dr. Gary Wurtz teaches trumpet, directs the top jazz band, and is the Associate Director for Undergraduate Studies for the School of Music at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, Texas, where he has taught since 1992. Prior to becoming the Professor of Trumpet at SFASU, Wurtz taught private trumpet at numerous public schools, and alongside such respected band directors as Cindy Bulloch, Dick Clardy, Malcolm Helm, John Benzer, Frank Troyka and Pete Tolhuizen. He has played trumpet professionally in many orchestras, jazz groups, wind bands, chamber ensembles, commercial venues and as a soloist. He held the position of Principal Trumpet of the Richardson Symphony Orchestra for 16 years as well as co-principal and principal positions in Mexico City and in the Dominican Republic. At SFA he has chaired the Faculty Senate, and in 2011 he was chosen as the recipient of the Teaching Excellence Award for the College of Fine Arts. His students have gone on to successful careers as band directors, performers, military band members, and even careers outside of music. He received a Bachelor of Music Education degree from West Texas A&M University in 1985, a Master of Music Education degree from the University of North Texas in 1987 and a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from UNT in 2001. Dr. Wurtz is an artist for Schilke Trumpets.