

What's Going On Back There?! Teaching Beginning Euphonium and Tuba

Dr. Matthew Mireles

Students want to learn how to play euphoniums and tubas because it looks and sounds like a lot of fun. The more we can build on these initial passions for making music, the more the students will have an enjoyable long-term journey of development and fulfillment. As music educators, it is important that we engage euphonium and tuba players in fun and enjoyable environments to build on their enthusiasm. Also help them understand how important their part is to the ensemble. Think about how your ensemble would sound if no one were playing the tuba or euphonium. If the students understand how important their part is, they will be more invested in the ensemble.

While making music is a lot of fun, making good music is even better. Students want to play well, and be part of a good sounding ensemble. This article will focus mainly on teaching the proper fundamentals of euphonium and tuba playing to give the beginning students the right tools to build facility on their instrument. Once the students have a grasp of the proper fundamentals, they will have more success and fun playing. Then you can give them more interesting music, and the music-making environment will be the

most fulfilling. There is no trick or secret to playing a euphonium or tuba. People have been playing these instruments for generations. The important thing is to instill good fundamentals, and insist that the students do everything the right way from the start. Being a stickler about the fundamentals early will pay off in the long run.

The Embouchure

When I am showing people how to make their first sound on a low brass instrument, I find that they understand the technique the best when I demonstrate a buzz for them. If you are not a low brass musician, make it a project of yours to learn these instruments. Your students will understand the techniques easier by watching and listening to you demonstrate.

Before we can buzz a sound through the mouthpiece and instrument, it is important to get a feel for the proper shape of the lips that allows them to vibrate efficiently. For euphonium players, start by saying the letter "M." (Pronounced "emmm"). This will put the lips and teeth in a good position to start a buzz. Then blow a thin stream of air through the center of the lips to form the aperture (the opening between the lips that the air moves through). If

you narrow the aperture around the air, the lips will vibrate against each other, and make a buzzing sound. (Buzzing the lips without a mouthpiece or an instrument is called free buzzing.) On the tuba, the aperture will be larger. Use the same procedure, but start by saying the word "too." This will put them in a good starting position.

Whether you are free buzzing, buzzing on the mouthpiece, or playing the instrument, it is important to keep a defined oval-shaped aperture. Do not allow air to escape from anywhere else. Have the students think of a thin piece of string coming straight from their lungs, through their mouth, and into the instrument. This will help them visualize the air being focused and controlled.

When placing the mouthpiece on the face for the first time, have the students place it in the center of their lips and teeth. Most successful players use either even placement between the top and bottom lip inside the mouthpiece, or a little more upper lip in mouthpiece than lower lip, but this can vary player to player. The most important thing is that both lips are inside the mouthpiece and active in the buzz. Some players tend to rest the mouthpiece rim on the lower lip. This doesn't allow the lower lip to

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contribute to the buzz, and will lead to problems with their tone quality.

Buzzing on a mouthpiece is great for teaching beginners the technique for brass playing. It develops the embouchure muscles, and builds strength and endurance. Again, be sure to insist on these proper low brass-playing fundamentals from the start.

- The teeth need to be open inside mouth. Some beginners tend to have their teeth closed while buzzing. Open teeth allow the air to move into the instrument properly.

- The tongue should be at the bottom of the mouth. Like saying the word “taw.” Some beginners tend to place their tongues forward against their teeth while buzzing. The tongue out of the way also allows for proper airflow into the instrument.

- If the student has a nasally sound, most likely their teeth are closed, or their tongue is arched toward their teeth.

Common Buzzing Bad Habits

- Lip puckering results in a fleshy embouchure. It will be difficult to keep the aperture defined and flexible with too much flesh around it. This will result in different contact points for the air to move through, causing a double buzz, or other problems with the sound.

- Puffing cheeks will widen the aperture too much. This will also lead to control and accuracy problems since the aperture is not clear and controlled.

- Smiling lips will thin out the aperture and pull it too much laterally. The aperture needs to be a precise oval, and smiling will cause it to be too long. This will lead to a thin or airy sound, and note accuracy problems.

Teach students how to change the pitch while buzzing. When practicing on the mouthpiece, it is good to produce smooth sirens and glissandos.

- The aperture gets narrower for higher pitches, and wider for lower pitches. This is inner mouthpiece control.

- Have students think of using “aw” and “ee” syllables.

“Aw” for low notes, and “ee” for higher notes. These syllables put the mouth in the right shape to play each register.

- Also think the direction of the air in the mouthpiece for range. While playing, directing the air downward towards the chin can help a player’s high range.

While buzzing on the mouthpiece is great for a player’s development, it is also important to remember to play more on the instrument than on the mouthpiece. They have different resistances, so the feel is different. Our ultimate goal is to have students play better on the instrument, so have them achieve good sounds on the instrument.

Euphonium and tuba students will begin to strengthen their embouchure muscles and get in different habits of playing. So it is very important to start the students off on an efficient path with good fundamentals. Be sure they avoid bad habits that cause inefficiencies. Let the tone quality and pitch accuracy be your guide on when to change things in their embouchure. Making changes early in a student’s development is easier than major embouchure changes later.

THE EMBOUCHURE

- Say the letter “M” to put the lips in place to buzz.
- Avoid lip puckering, puffing cheeks, and smiling lips.
- Keep a defined aperture that is also flexible
- Teeth need to be open inside mouth.
- Place the mouthpiece in the center of the lips and teeth.
- Buzzing on a mouthpiece is great for teaching the technique of brass playing.
- Buzzing develops embouchure muscles, and builds strength and endurance.
- Tongue placement inside the mouth influences tone production.
- The size of the aperture changes the pitch.
- The direction of the air in the mouthpiece, and the shape of the mouth can influence range.

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Posture

Proper posture allows for efficient breathing and eliminates body tension. To produce quality sounds on the tuba and euphonium, players need to have good posture habits. If you teach the students that their posture contributes to a successful tone production, they will take it more seriously.

When holding the euphonium or tuba, the front of the leadpipe needs to point straight on to the player's face. Think of how a trombone slide is straight on the player's face. On the euphonium and tuba, the leadpipe bends around the bell, but the front is straight on the face. Instruments are made differently, so the position of the euphonium or tuba can look differently from brand to brand. As long as the front of the leadpipe is straight, the student is set up correctly. Here are some helpful posture fundamentals.

- Both feet need to be flat on the floor.
- The upper body should be in the same position as if they are standing up straight.
- The instrument should come to them.
 - For euphonium players you must monitor whether the instrument rests on their leg, or if they have to hold the instrument up just like they are standing. Don't let students hunch over to get to the mouthpiece. You can place something on their leg to raise the height of the instrument to meet their face.
 - For tuba players you must monitor the lead pipe height when the student is sitting down. When they are sitting up straight, the mouthpiece may be above or below their face and need some adjustment. You can shift the instrument up and down their legs, or tilt the instrument left or right. They can also rest instrument on the edge of the chair to hold it steady.

Hand Placement

Proper hand placement fundamentals allow for efficient playing technique. Even though the right hand moves the valves, both hands need to have proper placement and technique to achieve the best performance. Both hands should be in a natural relaxed position. They should not feel contorted, or in an awkward shape. There are two styles of euphoniums and tubas though. There are instruments with top action valves, and others front action valves. No matter which style of instrument they have, their right hand needs to be in a "C" shape. Make the shape of a "C" with the fingers and thumb, and place the pads of their fingers on top of the valves. This will keep the fingers from being too flat or too arched. Also, anchor the thumb on the side of the first valve casing. All of this will give the hand the most control over the valves.

For top action valves specifically, the left hand goes across the front of the instrument and grips the outer tubing. For the euphonium, the left arm should be able to hold up the instrument on its own. Many euphonium and tuba beginners also like to grip the lead pipe with their left hand, "The Gorilla Grip!" This doesn't allow the player to stand while playing. It also doesn't allow the body to be free of tension, and tension will disturb the tone. They also need to get in the habit of using a 4th valve on the side of the instrument.

For front action valves, the left hand should grip the outer tubing, with the arm behind the instrument. This will have the least amount of bodily tension. For tuba players, this will also get their left hand in a position that allows them to push and pull valve slides in the future.

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POSTURE AND HAND PLACEMENT

- *The leadpipe needs to point straight on to the player's face.*
- *Both feet flat on the floor.*
- *Upper body in the same position as if the player is standing up straight.*
- *The instrument should come to the player.*
- *Make sure the student positions the instrument where they can sit up comfortably while playing.*
- *For euphonium players, monitor whether the instrument rests on the student's leg, or if they have to hold the instrument up just like they are standing.*
- *For tuba players, monitor the lead pipe height when the student is sitting down. It may be above or below their face, and needing adjustment.*
- *Proper hand placement allows for efficient playing technique.*
- *Both hands should be in a natural relaxed position.*
- *Right hand in "C" shape*
- *Thumb should be anchored on the valve casing.*
- *Place the pads of their fingers on top of the valves. Fingers not too flat or too arched.*

Breathing

Playing a low brass instrument requires moving large amounts of air through the tubing. In order for this to happen the student also needs to get in the habit of breathing in a large amount of air. A player's tone is a direct result of the quality of air used.

Air = Sound

full air = full sound

wimpy air = wimpy sound

forced air = forced sound

For many students, tone quality problems are caused by insufficient amounts of air. Inhaling large amounts of air gives the sound stability and support. Long tone practice with decrescendos and crescendos are also good breath control exercises.

Tonguing/Articulation

Articulation technique on a brass instrument involves striking of the tongue. To introduce this idea to your students, have them first say "tah." The tongue movement when saying "tah" is the same as when articulating on a brass instrument. The word "tah" also has fast air with it. (Which the student needs to get in the habit of playing with. Students can move to softer articulations later, but "tah" promotes good air habits.)

Bad habits to avoid while tonguing

- Tonguing that looks like "chewing" can cause pitch problems, and make it difficult for the student to tongue faster passages.
- There shouldn't be any air sound before the buzz/ tone. We want a clear front to notes. Start students with clear-tongued notes to promote good habits.

BREATHING, TONGUING/ARTICULATION

- *Playing a brass instrument requires moving large amounts of air.*
- *A player's tone is a direct result of the quality of air used.*
- *Air = Sound*
- *Long tone practice is a good breath control exercise.*
- *Articulation technique on a brass instrument involves striking of the tongue.*
- *The tongue movement when saying "tah" is the same as when articulating on a brass instrument.*
- *The word "tah" also has fast air with it.*
- *Avoid bad habits while tonguing, like chewing, or air before the tongue.*

Sound Concepts

Brass players are judged greatly on the quality of their sound. Problems in the tone can result from having problems in the embouchure shape, tongue placement, airflow/breathing, lip placement, mouthpiece placement, and body tension. Developing

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good fundamentals results in the best tone qualities. Use knowledge of the fundamentals to diagnose problems with the student's sound in any register. Working on the fundamentals will help students achieve pure, round, full, resonant, warm, beautiful, and clear sounds.

Practice Habits

Brass players need to develop their embouchure muscles along with their playing technique. Insist on students practicing every day for a specified amount of time. Developing good practice habits should start in beginning band. Brass players have exercises, like athletes, to develop their skills. Here are some examples that get the player's embouchure in shape, and develop their technique.

- Lip slurs - Flexibilities
- Long tones
- Tonguing exercises
- Scales
- Arpeggios
- Playing in upper and lower registers/Range building
- Playing melodies

Listening

Be sure to provide professional recordings for students to hear.

In order for them to produce quality sounds, students must first hear what a superior tone quality sounds like. Here are some soloists and chamber ensembles that your students can hear for great examples of euphonium and tuba playing.

- Euphonium Soloists: Brian Bowman, David Childs, Adam Frey, Steven Mead, Matthew Mireles, Ben Pierce, Demondrae Thurman
- Tuba Soloists: Oystein Baadsvik, Roger Bobo, Pat Sheridan, Roland Szentpali
- Tuba-Euphonium Quartets: Boreas Quartet, Sotto Voce Quartet

Dr. Matthew Mireles is highly active as a conductor, performer, and educator, with his performances achieving high praise, and his students having success in major competitions. As a euphonium soloist, Dr. Mireles made his professional debut at the 2012 International Tuba Euphonium Conference in Linz, Austria performing with the Military Wind Ensemble of Upper Austria. His successes in major competitions include winning the 2008 Leonard Falcone International Euphonium Competition, the 2007 Mid-Texas Symphony Young Artist Competition, the 2007 University of Alabama Concerto-Aria Competition, the 2008 International Tuba Euphonium Conference Chamber Music Competition, and the Judge's Special Recognition Award at the 2010 Plowman Chamber Music Competition. Dr. Mireles recorded a solo album "Prometheus." He plays first euphonium with the Boreas Quartet and recorded "The Serpent's Kiss" with them. Both albums are released through Potenza Music. Currently, Dr. Matthew Mireles is the Director of Bands and Low Brass at Cameron University in Lawton, Oklahoma. Before joining the faculty at Cameron, Dr. Mireles conducted and taught at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is also on faculty at the Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp in Twin Lake, MI, where he teaches low brass and conducting. Dr. Mireles earned a Doctor of Musical Arts degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, a Master of Music degree from the University of Alabama, and a Bachelor of Arts Degree with Teacher Certification from St. Mary's University in San Antonio. His major teachers include John Stevens, Dr. Demondrae Thurman, Lee Hipp, Scott Teeple, and Mark Hetzler.