



A Teacher's Guide to a Happier Tuba Section

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“A Teachers Guide to a Happier Tuba Section”

Richard Murrow

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I. Who’s right for the tuba?

Johnny, the 6 foot, 200 lb 6th grader can probably bench press the tuba AND a 200 lb set of free weights at the same time? The football coach, who is equally aware of Johnny’s talent, is likely having Johnny over to his house 2 or 3 times a week for pizza and burgers. Think about it, at 11 or 12 years old, football may be more appealing to Johnny than the tuba. So, let’s be realistic, who’s right for the tuba?

1. The trumpet player with a terrible embouchure and no upper register?
2. The student who can’t afford to buy/rent another instrument?
3. Johnny the 200 lb football player?

Actually all of the above could be a possibility.

I do not believe that size is the most important consideration. There are too many examples of fine tuba players who are slight in stature (do not exclude women). Yes, air is crucial but the person with smaller vital capacity simply has to breathe more often than the individual with a 7-liter vital capacity! Efficient breathing is **the real** consideration. The important point to remember is the inhalation must be as relaxed and full as possible, like yawning. Do not over analyze breathing. It should be natural. A complete dissertation on breathing can be lengthy and best saved for another discussion.

EAR and ATTITUDE

1. Does the student have an interest in playing the tuba? Believe it or not, some students like the sound. Get these kids on board ASAP! Interest and a desire to play the tuba is probably the single most important consideration!
2. Does the budding tuba player have a good ear? This is often an overlooked, underestimated quality. Remember, in the early stages of playing, the tuba player is

at least an octave below everyone else. If they have a good sense of pitch there is more hope of them developing some sense of independence, thus avoiding frustration and dropping out of band. Later, that ear can make or break the intonation in your entire band. WHAT POWER!

II. What instrument is right for the player?

In the early stages, if the tuba is too large the student will be uncomfortable playing it (frustration again). Mom or Dad will not enjoy putting massive 4/4 tubas in the back of the car and everyone becomes discouraged. Not a good formula for retention!

The Beginner:

A. $\frac{3}{4}$ Tubas and manageable cases.

INSTRUMENTS:

Junior High – Middle School (some examples)

Miraphone 1271 – 4 front action piston valves
Miraphone 282 - 4 front action rotary valves
Miraphone S186 - 4 front action rotary valves
(Advanced groups - 4/4 tuba)

High School – 4/4 tubas

Miraphone 1864U 4 front action rotary valve
Miraphone S186 Similar to the 1864U.
Less Expensive than the 186. Excellent value.
Miraphone 191 4 or 5 valves

Students must make an Investment: Commitment helps with retention.

Student Purchases: DEG Tuba Rest, Mouthpiece, and brass maintenance products (oil, snake, grease, etc.)

III. Three Words On Mouthpieces: NOT TOO LARGE for beginners!

Suggestions:

1. Beginner

Conn Helleberg 7B, Miraphone TU17 or TU19, Schilke Helleberg

2. Intermediate/Advanced

Conn Helleberg Regular or Standard Cup, Miraphone TU21, Griego 325D, Loud LM7, Perantucci PT36

3. ADVANCED- “Very” Advanced High School to Professional

Loud LM7(stainless steel), Miraphone TU31 or TU41 Perantucci PT36, Pt 50, or PT 88, Mike Finn 3H or 3, Griego 330D.

Personal Tuba Purchases:

The CC Tuba and the prospective university tuba/music ed. Major: **DO NOT** fear the CC tuba. It can be used successfully in a section with BBb tubas. If a student is going to major in music, the CC tuba will very likely be the choice of any serious tuba teacher.

IV. Develop Ears, Air, and Tone

1. **Mouthpiece Buzzing:** Open, relaxed, airy sound. We buzz to develop breathing, embouchure, and the ear. Use simple tunes that students are familiar with (Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star, Happy Birthday, etc.). It's never too early to start buzzing.
2. **Scales, lip slurs, articulation exercises.** If these things are not drilled on a daily basis, we fight the instrument and will never be comfortable or happy playing. The great English tubist, John Fletcher said, “Anyone who does not consider longtones, tonguing, scales, and lip slurs a basic necessity lives in a fool's paradise.”

The tuba is obviously a very large instrument with an open tube of approximately 18 feet (before adding valves). This results in an extremely slow response as compared to the other brass instruments. It is very important then, that fundamental brass skills be as finely tuned as possible. This is best achieved through the studies mentioned in 2 above. The development and refinement in these basic skills will greatly improve the intonation, tone, and precision in your band or any ensemble that a tubist plays in.

TEN TIPS TO TERRIFIED TEACHERS TO TWEAK TERRIBLE TUBA TONES!

1. Buzz the mouthpiece daily. Open, airy, relaxed.
2. Posture – Sit Tall, Stay relaxed. Standing while seated.
3. Breathing – Think “O” to breathe. Stay Relaxed.
4. Long tones, the key to good tone and control.
5. Lip slurs – The brass player’s best friend. Air and embouchure MUST work correctly to produce smooth slurs.
6. Daily tonguing exercises. Clean articulation is one of the most common problems among tuba players.
7. Legato Etudes. Essential for musicianship, air, embouchure, control and tone.
8. Horn, Mouthpiece, Body, Head alignment.
9. Concept. Has the student ever heard a great tuba sound, or does he know what he is supposed to sound like? Get good recordings for students to listen to and encourage them to buy their own.
10. Chamber music experience: Duets, Trios, etc.

LITERATURE – Supplement the band method or music with etudes, solos, technical studies, duets, trios, and quartets. A solo/ensemble contest is not the only time students can perform chamber music. The University Interscholastic League Prescribed Music List is a great source for suggestions of this literature.

Tuba players become very insecure when playing melodic or technical material. They are not used to playing melodies. Because tubists in bands are all playing the same part all the time, they depend on each other for rhythmic security more than any other section. Is this because they are less talented? I believe it is because the musical motivation is generally not given to tubists to develop their musicianship, independence, etc. Flutists, clarinetists, trumpet players are faced with these musical challenges almost from the first day they play an instrument. You figure it out. Greater independence = more confidence in a normal ensemble situation and hopefully less boredom and greater retention.

If we never play anything more challenging than simple whole notes and quarter notes in a supportive role, the musical challenge is not very strong. How then can we learn to be really expressive, even when we play those whole notes? We develop a greater understanding of music and hopefully a deeper sensitivity to music through the study of melodic material. When this happens you can get into students hearts. Tubists develop a love of music which results in better retention and you have happy tuba players who are with you forever.

Don’t forget the tuba players just because they are in the back, far away, and due to simple parts require less of your time than the clarinet section. They are your foundation. It’s up to you to give them the tools to become good musicians. DO this and you will have a Happy Tuba Section!

Richard Murrow

Richard Murrow is the principal tubist with the East Texas Symphony Orchestra, Texas Chamber Orchestra, American Chamber Brass, and is co-leader of the jazz group, "Brazzology". He has also played and recorded with both the Dallas Wind Symphony and the Dallas Jazz Orchestra. In 1996 Mr. Murrow recorded his first feature CD with Brazzology co-leader, Larry Spencer, entitled "Pick Yourself Up". "Pick Yourself Up" has achieved international success with sales throughout the U.S. as well as Europe and Japan. He has recorded numerous commercial CD's, plus radio and TV jingles. Richard is a former member of the U.S Naval Academy Band and The Navy Show Band. In his early career Richard traveled with the Ringling Bros. And Barnum & Bailey Circus Band, The Moscow Circus, and Ice Capades. He has also played with a host of international artists including Mel Torme, George Shearing, Brian Wilson, The Moody Blues, and Robert Guillaume just to mention a few.

In addition to his love of the tuba, Richard is also a freelance bass player. Part of his bass duties include playing with the Celebration Band at Stonebridge United Methodist Church in McKinney, Texas, a position he has held since January, 2000. He has also spent countless hours over the past 35 years playing bass in every musical genre from pop/commercial, rock, jazz, country, to stage musicals and recording studios.

Richard Murrow has taught Tuba and Euphonium at Texas Christian University since 1996. Prior to his appointment at T.C.U. Richard Murrow taught at the University of Texas at Arlington for fifteen years. As an educator Mr. Murrow has given educational clinics and solo performances at over 250 universities and high schools during the past ten years. From 1978-1998 Richard taught over 25,000 hours of private low brass lessons in Texas public schools in the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex. Additionally, his teaching and performances have taken him over most of the United States, as well as some fifteen countries in South America and Europe. In 1999 Mr. Murrow was a guest soloist with the National Orchestra of Peru, in Lima, Peru, where he also taught at the Lima Conservatory. Richard Murrow is a tuba Artist/Clinician/Design Consultant for the Miraphone Corporation of Waldkraiburg, Germany.



The Sound Has A Name

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