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Beginning Euphonium & Tuba: Make It Good to Make It Last

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BEGINNING EUPHONIUM & TUBA: MAKE IT GOOD TO MAKE IT LAST
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"Establishing a low brass culture of excellence."
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PLACING STUDENTS ON EUPHONIUM/ TUBA

It is extremely important to make the student feel successful by setting them up for success from the very beginning by placing them on the correct instrument from the start or having a structured plan in mind to later switch them to euphonium or tuba from a different instrument. Students who drop out of band, did not feel successful at the beginning.

Goals- The instrument physically fits the student. The student is interested in the instrument. If you know the student will be successful at the euphonium or tuba but they originally do not choose it, you may have to convince them to play it. (i.e."Fitting an instrument is like fitting a pair of shoes, the shoes may look really cool but be uncomfortable and your least favorite. This instrument is going to be like wearing your favorite pair of kicks.")

Instrument Fittings- Try to conduct individual interviews, give a mini lesson on embouchure and making a sound on the mouthpiece. It is easier to convince students to pick the correct instrument when they feel immediate success. Show them great videos of euphonium or tuba players performing songs they know.

Things to Consider When Placing Students on Euphonium or Tuba-

- Aural skills- if possible, give the selmer test to all incoming band students, otherwise ask students to identify high vs low pitches, sing back pitches, etc
- Lip size and shape- thicker lips for low brass, even line formed by top and bottom lips
- Teeth- even is good, just try to make sure they do not have an underbite
- Body size- will they be able to handle the instrument, can they carry the instrument while cased (some have wheels!), it's okay for girls to play tuba- convincing parents
- Grades- Make sure to place students on euphonium and tuba that make As/ Bs too! Try to get a print out of their last grading period from the school counselor before interviewing for instrument placement.
- Personality- try to get out going students on euphonium and tuba and make sure that they are up for trying new things that can be challenging.

CLASS STRUCTURE

Homogeneous euphonium and tuba classes are best. Also okay, euphonium and tuba students together. If necessary, trombone can be taught with euphonium and tuba as well. Class length drives your lesson plan and how much time you will spend on each activity. Chris and Jason teach 40 minute classes and Michelle teaches 27 minute classes. We all teach the same concepts utilizing variances in length of daily activities. Seating is preferential to you and your teaching style. Usual set ups are chairs in rows of windows or chairs in one arc. Chairs should have plenty of room side to side and front to back for students to be able to place their instruments while still in the case to the side of their chair, have room for proper student posture, and room for you to be able to teach/ adjust a student one on one. A rolling chair without arms is good to use so that you can see the students at their level and be able to quickly move around to work from student to student.

EQUIPMENT

Instruments- The quality of equipment correlates to retention. There is a variety of school owned inventory in the low brass world. Some are very “unique” as in old but can be used successfully.

Mouthpieces- There are many to choose from and can be determined by brand of instrument at times. Euphoniums- 6½ AL (small bore), Schilke 51D/ Tuba- Helleberg 7B

Instrument Assembly- With case flat on floor and students sitting on their knees have your students do the following to assemble their instrument before class:

- Open their case
- Grasp the middle section of the instrument with one hand and the bell with the other
- Pull out of case and set down instrument flat on floor with valve casing towards ceiling, do not set instrument down on bell
- Remove mouthpiece, close the case and return it to its storage area “cubby”
- Insert mouthpiece and take instrument to chair

TEACHING METHODOLOGY

For beginners, a practical teaching approach is “need to know” rather than a lengthy explanation. If you are comfortable at playing the euphonium or tuba, it is best to demonstrate the desired outcome of your students efforts and then have them try the activity. If a student needs more explanation, you can have the class help them with guided questioning or you can help yourself. Many times peer “pair share” can generate additional explanations of the technique being taught.

Posture- Basic band posture is essential for proper breathing and playing position. Students should sit towards the front of their chair with their back off of the back of the chair with the exception of tubas, spine straight, shoulders down and relaxed, head floating above spine, feet flat on the floor, elbows natural and relaxed, wrists are straight and natural, left arm remains relaxed and not squeezing the instrument.. Students should in general, sit as they would stand with their torso long and leaning forward slightly

Position of Instrument- Adjust the instrument to the student, not the student to the instrument. Have the student practice bringing the instrument to their face rather than them bring themselves to the instrument. The leadpipe needs to be straight on the student’s face. On the euphonium and tuba the leadpipe bends around the bell, but the front of the leadpipe is placed straight off the face. There are many brands of euphoniums and tubas that you will see as a teacher and since they are made differently the angles of the varying euphoniums and tubas may vary too; however, as long as the front of the leadpipe is straight the student is set up correctly. The fingers of the right hand should arch slightly in a “C” shape with the fingertips resting on the correct valve stems. Fingers should not be too flat or too arched. The thumb should be anchored on the side of the first valve casing. Thumb should not be tucked under the

4th valve slide (euphonium). Play with the fingerprints. Practice going from resting position on lap to playing position to emphasis correct posture and hand position.

Euphonium:

- Balance of instrument is supported by the student holding it up to meet their face.
- A “cinnamon rolled” towel placed on their leg can help provide supported height to raise the instrument to their face.
- Pool noodles pieces cut down the side and placed around the bottom of the bow can be helpful too if even more height is needed.
- The left arm should be able to hold up the instrument on its own

Tuba:

- Balance of instrument is supported on the lap, chair, or a tuba stand depending on the size of the student and proportions of the tuba (¾ vs full)
- Student should sit as they stand and position the bottom bow accordingly
- The left hand should be placed on the left side of the tuba, not over the top bow
- Other tricks to get the right instrument position: hardback books, hockey pucks, kitchen drawer liner, yoga bricks

“Magic Combination”/” Rocking”- Have students memorize the “magic combination” which is the descending valve combinations and teaches students why pitches get lower as valves are added. It is also a jump start to later learning the chromatic scale. Also, have students work on “rocking” which is moving between the valve combinations 12 and 23 keeping 2 depressed. This is one of the more difficult coordination combination sequences for beginners. Students should move valves from the large knuckle while keeping the hand curved in a soft and natural “C” shape. Fingerprints remain on caps of valves. Do not allow the students middle knuckle to collapse or let them play with flat fingers.

- “Magic Combination” 0 - 2 - 1 - 12 - 23 - 13 - 123

Breathing- It’s all about moving as much air in and out of your body as efficiently as possible.

- Breathing is natural and calm. It is useful to explore breathing as a skill and function to enhance student understanding. Shape of the breathe is open.
- Air is unobstructed on both the inhalation and exhalation
    - ➢ Silent air in and out. If you hear extra nose something is obstructing the airway.
- Air is not to be held in. It must move continuously, like being on a swing.
- Abdominal area expands first then the chest when breathing in air, like filling a glass of water. “Oh-Up”: breathe in low thinking “oh” and continue with “up” to fill body with air
- There are teaching method variances in breathing through nose or corners from the start of teaching students how to breathe. It is okay to have students breathe through the nose at first in an effort to maintain correct embouchure, as soon as embouchure is established then have students breathe through corners or just naturally open the mouth and breath below the rim of the mouthpiece
- When adding the mouthpiece to air concepts, the student changes nothing about their mouthpiece placement and embouchure and focuses on air moving continuously

- ❖ “Superman” blow air against a single sheet of paper or kleenex held about 6 inches from nose. “Ripping” exercise- place finger vertically in front of mouth, breathe with energy to try to create a ripping sound.
- ❖ The air stream should always be focused and students should think of their air blowing to a target across the classroom from themselves.

Embouchure- The use of a mirror by students is necessary so they can see if they are forming their embouchure correctly.

- ❖ Start with natural face- lips slightly together, jaw relaxed and normal, make students aware of where their corners naturally are, have students pronounce a “m” or “poo” sound or think of spitting sunflower seeds, corners firm slightly but stay in place
- ❖ Teeth are relatively even and slightly apart- about the width of your pinky/ shank of mouthpiece
- ❖ Corners are natural and “set”/“still”
- ❖ Chin is tall and flat
- ❖ Bottom lip is tall against the bottom teeth and not rolled in or out, have students visualize applying chapstick to the bottom lip for the right embouchure
- ❖ Top lip is soft and fleshy
- ❖ Center of the lips- soft, no “kissy face”
- ❖ Oval aperture- taller aperture for low brass players
- ❖ Keep the tongue down and out of the way, “wispy” or “hissing” sounds means the tongue is too high in the mouth.
- ❖ It’s okay for tuba players to buzz an octave too high in the beginning. They will work down eventually with the proper coaching and encouragement. Results in good corner awareness.
- ❖ Modeling correct embouchure is important, REMIND them to look in the mirror
- ❖ Visualizer- on a needed basis, this can also help beginner teachers see what is happening inside the mouthpiece until you are able to hear what the issue is

Mouthpiece Placement-

- ❖ First time using mouthpiece, place the mouthpiece on the students face for them
  - ➢ Mouthpiece angles slightly down
  - ➢ Place the mouthpiece centered on the lips, this may vary slightly depending on where the students natural aperture forms
  - ➢ Vertical placement of mouthpiece is 50/50 to ⅔’s upper- ⅓ lower, lower rim of mouthpiece rests on the valley of the chin
  - ➢ Mouthpiece anchors on the bottom lip and the top lip touches lightly to create a seal, the mouthpiece should just “float” on the face
- ❖ When practicing with the mouthpiece, students should use two fingers and their thumb placed towards end of the mouthpiece shank so that you can see their embouchure
- ❖ When moving air, have tuba students half hole the shank of their mouthpiece using their pinky to create some resistance for beginners
- ❖ Have students practice in mirror going to the correct mouthpiece placement position

First Sounds-

Work with one student at a time focusing on correct mouthpiece placement and how it feels to the student. Reinforce how it looks and feels to the students by asking the class to describe what they are hearing and how they can fix what they think is incorrect. “What does it look like, feel like, sound like?” This is important in making sure the students can self access and be able to practice correctly at home.

- Sit with correct posture
- Help student’s individually with correct placement of mouthpiece
- Students lightly touch moistened lips together and let air pass through the lips, students can visualize lips being the sail of a boat catching the wind as it passes by
- Remind the students that the cup of the mouthpiece is for air only, no “kissy face”
- Blow air through the embouchure- reinforcing a good full breath and embouchure
- Practice the breathing exercise: In for___, Out for___ while forming embouchure with mouthpiece, let the sound happen naturally- not forced
- Have students place palm of hand about 2” in front of the shank of their mouthpiece so they can feel their air blowing focused and through the center of the mouthpiece
- Once the student grasps the concept of correct mouthpiece placement, move to full instrument. Do not spend too much time on just the mouthpiece alone.
- Once you begin to notice student’s embouchure is looking consistently correct it is a good time to start teaching them to breathe other than through their nose.
    - Make sure their embouchure reforms correctly after breathing and that they are not trapping their air/ holding their air inside their body
- Sirens and “roller coasters”, “boings”, “divebombs”
- What am I hearing?: THIS IS A PROCESS, BE PATIENT AND NOT RESULT DRIVEN
    - No sound- lips are not lightly touching, air speed is too slow, lips hard/closed
    - Puffy cheeks-go back to embouchure only, “straw method”
    - Tight/pinched buzz- soften center of lips, focus on air simply passing through the mouthpiece until a sound is accidently/ naturally made and not created
    - “Wet” sounding buzz- remind students to think “m”/”poo” and keep the inside of their lips against their gums/ teeth, no inside fleshy red part of lip should show or touch mouthpiece, no “kissy face”
    - “Wispy” or “hissing” sounds- tongue should remain down/ in the “ahh” position and out of the way of the air stream
- It is possible the tubas may have a hard time producing sound on mouthpiece at first, it is okay to have them use a euphonium mouthpiece to feel slightly more firmness in their corners and then immediately have them recreate that feeling on the tuba mouthpiece. Also, do not forget to let them half hole the shank of the mouthpiece to create a slight resistance that will help create sound.
- As students are able to make a steady sound, practice whole notes/ whole rests to relate concept to reading music, this is also a good time to introduce one and/ or two count breathing, model good sounds using “echo playing”- I play, you play. During this focus on correct embouchures and quality sounds from your students- divide the class in half, use star students as models for demonstration and echo playing.

Full Instrument- Reinforce proper posture, instrument position, mouthpiece placement. From a resting position, have students bring the instrument (with mouthpiece inserted) to their embouchure, breathe correctly, and make a first full instrument sound. At this point, many students are so excited they forget to do all of the above! Be happy with them, but DO STOP and correct them. Also, you may have to bring the whole instrument to some student's faces to reinforce proper mouthpiece placement. Remind the students that the instrument is only amplifying what is happening with the embouchure/mouthpiece. As the students are comfortable playing one steady nice sound in open position, explore high and low sounds!

Lower Sounds-

- Aperture is wider and taller, shake straw
- Use calmer air
- Air stream is more forward
- Lips vibrate more freely in the center, no "kissy face"
- Jaw is lower
- The sound is darker/ warmer
- Think ooh, aww, ooo vowel shape

Higher Sounds-

- Aperture is smaller, soda/ coffee straw
- Use energized air, travels farther
- Air stream is more downward
- Lips slightly curl in, think about grasping the tip of a straw/pencil with the edges of lips
- Sound is brighter, think an eee vowel shape

Articulation- After a steady sound is established move on to teaching articulation. Have students practice with just embouchure at first, then mouthpiece, then full instrument. Demonstrate tonguing four quarter notes using a "toh" syllable. Have students echo back. Check students individually looking for the following things:

- Embouchure looks good
- Air moves continuously
- Jaw remains motionless- only the tip of tongue moves up/ down
- Tongue remains out of way of air, shape tongue like a spoon/ bottom gums hug side of tongue, remind students to think oo/oh syllable
- Make sure they are not stopping the air with their tongue- thud/ "hot" sound is incorrect

Bad habits can happen quickly and are so hard to overcome. Articulation must be monitored daily through individual exercises like "chaining" four quarter notes down the row.

Switch Overs-

Students who are low blowing trumpet players are great candidates for switching to euphonium or tuba. Most of these students will be eager to switch because they are frustrated with their limited capabilities on trumpet.

MAKE IT LAST-

- Give them opportunities to continue their melodic training through use of method books not just in beginner class but beyond, practice duets/trios/quartets, encourage and insist they attend solo and ensemble contest, all- region band auditions
- END GOAL: PREPARED FOR HIGH SCHOOL BAND AND ALL- STATE AUDITIONS