

**Techniques for the Intermediate Tuba Player**  
**A Clinic for the Texas Bandmasters Association**  
**By John Canfield and Trevor Culp**

**I. Equipment**

**a. Use good equipment and keep it in good condition**

It takes a great deal of skill, time, and material to build a tuba. This is why tubas are expensive. Over the past ten to fifteen years, design improvements have resulted in instruments that play more efficiently, in tune, and with a beautiful sound. Tubas are truly an investment and need to be well cared for and regularly maintained. Dents are not only unsightly but also demoralizing for the player who must use the instrument. In addition to proper instrument care, regular attention to the tuba mouthpiece is essential. In order to minimize sickness and infection, mouthpieces should be cleaned daily. Check that there are no nicks in the rim. These not only harbor bacteria but can also physically damage the player's lips. Check that the mouthpiece shank is round and fits firmly into the mouthpiece receiver on the tuba. *Dr. Skip Gray, Professor of Music, University of Kentucky*

**b. Mouthpiece Considerations**

**1. Fit and Comfort**

The mouthpiece should comfortably fit the student's facial structure. There is not a "one size fits all" solution for every student.

**2. Rim**

The rim should be sharp enough to allow for complete flexibility on the instrument. An extreme round rim will be very comfortable but will not allow the player to explore the extremes of the instrument

**3. Back Bore**

The back bore of the mouthpiece should facilitate the free flow of air to the instrument. This part of the mouthpiece should be kept clean and free of obstructions at all times.

**II. The Warm – Up**

**a. A warm – up routine** that incorporates all tonal and technical aspects of playing should be rigorously followed by young players (see Tuba Warm-ups)

**b. Pedal Tones** should be played daily as part of the warm – up routine. Pedal Tones will not only open up the lower register, but they will also increase the full range of the instrument while warming up tone quality.

**c. Practice makes perfect**

and speaking of practice there is an old adage among brass players that states "a little bit of practice everyday is much better than a lot once in a while". Because playing a brass instrument well requires training muscles to respond consistently as well as building muscle stamina, they must be exercised daily.

## Techniques for the Intermediate Tuba Player, Page 2

Irregular practice simply mandates too much "relearning and rebuilding" to effectively lead to better playing. Regular, daily practice reinforces newly acquired technique and allows the player to more easily build upon it as well as strengthen his or her ability to play for longer and more trying periods on the instrument. But solely spending time on the instrument is not enough. Practice time needs to be organized so that the player is both reinforcing previously acquired skills as well as learning new ones, thus advancing on the instrument. Each practice period should be structured to place effective attention to various essential aspects of playing. *Dr. Skip Gray, Professor of Music, University of Kentucky*

### III. Breathing

#### a. Improvement of breathing - quality and quantity

In producing a good tone on the tuba, it is absolutely essential to take full, relaxed breaths. Tuba players need to be constantly encouraged to breathe often, without any excessive bodily movement or tension in the shoulders, throat, or face. In order to play the tuba well and with a good tone, the lungs should never go below half capacity. When a tuba players go "below half a tank" of air, negative physical aspects begin creeping into his or her playing including pushing from the diaphragm, closing the throat, and raising the tongue position (thus interfering with the airflow and sound). It is also much easier and quicker to fill the lungs from the halfway mark than from empty.

#### b. Breathing Exercises – There are many good breathing exercises that can be incorporated into the daily warm-up routine. Here is one from Donald C. Little, Professor of Tuba, College of Music University of North Texas

*Inhale slowly and comfortably over five counts, then exhale similarly over five counts. This can usually be repeated several times as such slow respiratory activity will tend to avoid hyperventilation. It is not necessary to expel every last bit of air, but do take in as much air as comfortably possible. This will eventually help you to make better and more efficient use of your lung capacity. It is not actually possible to increase your lung capacity, called vital capacity, but most of us can easily learn to make better use of what we have.*

Use the sound "HOE" for both inhalations and exhalations but without actually vocalizing.

Quarter note = 60 for all three exercises

**5/4 1 2 3 4 5 1 2 3 4 5**

*Inhale* - - - - - *Exhale* - - - - -

Repeat three or four times then rest for approximately 20-30 seconds before proceeding.

**4/4 1 2 3 4 1 2 3 4**



## Techniques for the Intermediate Tuba Player, Page 4

### c. **Developing ease on the instrument - refining the basic vocabulary and grammar of music**

In order to speak fluently and effectively, it is necessary to have a well-developed vocabulary and thorough understanding of the grammar of a language. Similarly, to perform with ease and expression on a musical instrument, the basic syntax of music must be well engrained. Scales and arpeggios comprise the fundamental structural aspects of most music that we play and, to advance on a musical instrument, it is essential that scales and arpeggios be practiced daily and mastered. *Dr. Skip Gray, Professor of Music, University of Kentucky*

## V. **Developing Listening Skills**

### a. **Listening and going to concerts**

If you want to become a better musician, you need to listen to a lot of music. By attending concerts and listening to recordings, we absorb new musical ideas. It is also good to have a diverse listening diet that ranges from classical to jazz, opera to pop, with all of the other styles in between! Most musicians have one or two "unforgettable concerts" that they have attended. Keep music alive and support other musicians by going to concerts regularly. *Dr. Skip Gray, Professor of Music University of Kentucky*

### b. **Suggested Recordings**

1. **Portrait of and Artist – Arnold Jacobs**(Chicago Symphony Orchestra 1944-88)  
This is a very good recording for any brass player, but it is especially important for the tubist. It is recommended that the recording should be listened to in their entirety because of the commentary that follows the recording. It is like sitting through a lesson with the legendary Arnold Jacobs.
2. **Orchestral Excerpts for Tuba – Gene Pokorny** (Chicago Symphony 1988-?)  
This is a great recording for introducing the tuba player to great orchestral works that include tuba. This recording also has audio commentary included with the recording. This music is very advanced, but it will show the listener what they can work toward.
3. **Tuba Carnival – Oystein Baadsvik**  
Unlike the first two CD's listed here, this recording is for pure enjoyment. This recording will show the student a lot of the more ornamented music that can be played on the tuba. Some of the pieces on this album include Arban's *Carnival of Venice* played with all variations. This entire CD will prove to the student that you don't always have to oom-pah music, which is the typical stereotype with the tuba. This is an amazing recording

## Techniques for the Intermediate Tuba Player, Page 5

### Bass Trombone:

1. Charles Vernon – Bass Trombone (Chicago Symphony 1986-?)  
This CD has been put on the list because the Bass Trombone and the Tuba play much of the same solo literature, and they are very closely related in the orchestral world. It is just another way for the student to expand their musical horizons. This is also a very enjoyable recording with music by some very famous composers. *Trevor Culp, Tubist, Stephen F. Austin State University*

All of these recordings can found at [www.hickeys.com](http://www.hickeys.com) and other vendors that sell specialty recordings. Most of these recording should run around fifteen dollars. Every young tuba player should add these great recordings to their music library. Everybody can learn something from these great recordings.

### References

- Culp, Trevor, Recordings for Tuba Players, Stephen F. Austin State University, Nacogdoches, Texas, 2005
- Gray, Skip, Dr., Taking the Steps for Better Tuba Playing, The University of Kentucky Tuba / Euphonium website, 2001
- Little, Donald, Breathing Exercises for Brass Players, University of North Texas, Denton, Texas, 2002