

Some Thoughts on the Warm Up

By Judson Scott

I spent a summer teaching trumpet at the New England Music Camp in Maine. In addition to teaching trumpet lessons my duties included rehearsing and performing with the students in the orchestra and wind ensemble. The first rehearsal of the day began at 8:00 am, and, as I was not especially a “morning” person, I tended to roll out of bed with just enough time to grab a cup of coffee on my way to rehearsal: by the end of the first week my chops were a mess. Dr. Stephen Jones, the other trumpet faculty, had been getting up at 6:00 every morning so that he had an hour to warm up before the rehearsal—he sounded fabulous. Clearly Steve’s approach was more productive than mine. Ever since that a summer, a daily routine has been the cornerstone of my practice. The most basic performance challenge is to play one note perfectly, therefore, most warm-ups begins with long-tones. Long tones strip away all distraction from the most basic elements of playing the trumpet. The term long-tone is unfortunate, because the length of the note is not nearly so important as a deep inhale that leads directly to a clean attack and a well supported tone. There are added benefits from playing long, long- tones, however, the most important come from practicing the clean attack and firm breath support.

If one is focused on the notes, long tones can seem pointless or boring, but of course, long tone exercises are not about the notes. If long-tone studies are not engaging, you are not listening to yourself. The value in long tones is in the blowing; blowing against your best sound, undistracted by valves or motion of any kind. Learn to love the beautiful sound that you can make and always make a sound that you can love. This is an opportunity to experiment; can you blow to greater resonance? Can you engage the corners more to bring greater clarity to your sound? Music is an art sculptured in sound and your tone color is the single most important element in your playing. As you progress to harder studies maintain the beautiful tone that is so easy to achieve in the first line of the warm-up. Treat everything you play as an embellished long-tone.

Breathing is one of the most fundamental aspects of brass playing and should be addressed in the warm-up. Michael Chunn recommends taking several breaths and exhaling through a somewhat focused aperture, to feel the air. There are also some excellent tools available. Vincent Penzarella, Second Trumpet of the New York Philharmonic, recommends using a “breathing bag”. This is simply a rubber bag that will expand easily to hold five or six liters of air. The Breath Builder is also a very useful tool—a ping pong ball in a tube that can be supported by your inhale and exhale—and is available through most online brass stores. The important point is, of course, to learn to breath.

As important as air is, it must be focused by your embouchure. The vibrating surface should be completely relaxed and focused to the center of your embouchure by strong corners. Throughout your warm-up, begin each phrase with a full breath and a breath attack. The more precise your control over your lips, the more precise is your control over your instrument.

Mouthpiece and lip buzzing are short cuts to developing an efficient embouchure with a focused aperture. When you buzz your lips the tone should be free and easy, and focused to the center of your embouchure. When you buzz on the mouthpiece the placement of the mouthpiece should capture the buzz that your lips can perform on their own. The tone should be robust with no airiness. Air leaving your body that is not buzzing is inefficient. If you are getting a lot of air in your buzz tone, focus the aperture toward the center. How small can your aperture be? Buzzing exercises may be intermingled with long tones to provide some variety.

Learn to push the air against your most beautiful and resonant sound; everything else will be easy. As you reach for higher notes always play as easily as in the beginning. If you feel yourself bringing in tension to reach higher notes, stop. High notes are not more difficult; they are simply a more refined version of the low notes. To throw a dart and hit the center of a dartboard, need you throw the dart harder? No, similarly high range is about control, not force.