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IMPROVING YOUR TROMBONE PLAYERS/ COMMON PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

This handout is divided into 4 parts:

- A. Fundamentals (how to play the trombone correctly)
- B. Tone Problems
- C. Technique Problems
- D. Common Errors and Solutions

A. FUNDAMENTALS

To play well on the trombone all of the following must be correct:

1. Embouchure (the “M” setting with a relaxed aperture)
2. Air (One steady, unending stream)
3. Relaxed body (Especially the throat)
4. Articulation (*Tah* syllable)
5. Coordination of tongue and slide (Both must “hit” at the same moment)
6. Equipment that is appropriate and working (Correct mouthpiece/instrument fit; Working slide)

1. Embouchure

- Start the brass embouchure by saying “M”, then buzzing w/o the mouthpiece
- Buzz into the mouthpiece on a concert F, then transfer that to the horn
- Important points are:
 1. Firm corners, relaxed aperture
 2. Little to no movement when playing
 3. Aperture remains round and open in all registers; NO:
 - Pinching/Squeezing/Smiling/Pressing or Other Nasties

2. Air (One steady, unending stream)

- Always use a steady stream of air (DON'T EVER STOP THE AIR UNTIL YOU BREATHE)
- Air on a wind instrument is like the bow on a violin
- Most common problems are:
 1. Stopping the air between notes
 2. Stopping the air with the tongue
 3. Playing with a pinched throat
- Solutions:
 1. Teach the concept of multiple notes in one breath from day one;
 2. Teach the concept “the air never stops”
 3. Teach the concept of “open throat” (yawning)
- TAKE BIG BREATHS!

3. Relaxed body (Especially the throat)

- See above; relaxation and proper breathing are interconnected
- Proper hand position, especially the LH, will prevent tension

4. Articulation (Tah syllable)

- Most low brass players use *TAH* (*TOH* for low; *TEE* for high)
- The tongue STARTS, BUT NEVER STOPS, the air
- A light tongue is almost always preferable to a heavy tongue
- Practice tonguing  notes up to $\text{♩} = 120$
- For multiple tongue: Tah Gah (probably not Ta Ka, like trumpet) for duples
Tah Tah Gah for triples

 notes DOWN to $\text{♩} = 112$

5. Coordination of tongue and slide (Both must “hit” at the same moment)

- Tongue and slide must “hit” together
- Play passages very slowly to coordinate, then increase speed
- RH position, holding the slide, must be correct
- Keep the slide direction constant as long as possible (use alternates)
- Keep the tongue light

6. Equipment that is appropriate and working (Correct mouthpiece/instrument fit; Working slide)

- 50% of all young players’ slides are unplayable!
- Any and all dents in the slide must be removed
- Modern trombones are now:
 1. Large bore (.547"/8.5" bells/F attachments)
 2. Mouthpieces are around the Bach 5 size
- Students should upgrade from their beginning horns to large bore tenors with F attachments around 9th grade.

B. TONE PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Make sure your trombone students know what a good trombone tone sounds like. An excellent starting point is in Joe Alessi's (Principal Trombone, New York Philharmonic) CD *Slide Area*, available at Amazon.com. Also, your trombonists should have a good daily warmup/scale routine (see my handouts).

1. PINCHED SOUND

- Open the throat (think "aah")
- Do not stop the air between notes
- Do not stop the air with the tongue (causes throat tension)
- Blow more air; do not under-blow the instrument
- Avoid pinched lips

2. SMALL, TINY SOUND

- Blow more air
- Use firm corners with a relaxed center in the embouchure
- Make sure the mouthpiece is not too small: use a Bach 6 1/2 or 5 (no Bach 12C mouthpieces!)
- For secondary (8th grade or older) make sure the instrument is not a small beginning horn (see instrument recommendations). Small mouthpieces and horns make for a small sound.

3. EDGY/BLATTY TONE

- Do not overblow
- As above, check for correct mouthpiece size. A small mouthpiece causes poor tone.
- As above, check the instrument size. For secondary student a beginning trombone will be too small.
- Make sure the tongue is not too heavy at the beginning of the note, and not stopping each note ending

4. POOR INTONATION (which causes poor tone)

- Check for proper slide placement using a tuner
- Check for proper right hand position - cramped fingers or a fist will make slide placement impossible
- Make sure the slide is in good condition - no dents

C. TECHNICAL PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Make sure your trombone students are playing on good instruments with working slides. Many technical problems are actually caused by a hand slide that has been dented so often that moving it is impossible. Students should also be lubricating their slides on a regular basis with *Superslik* slide cream or an equivalent.

Also, see first sections *4. Articulations* and *5. Slide Coordination* under **FUNDAMENTALS**. Many technical problems are related to these.

1. SLOW PLAYING ("Can't keep up" or "Always late")

- Make sure the slide works! See above
- Use proper Right Hand position - no tension or fist
- Use a lighter tongue for technical passages
- Practice scales regularly: slow at first, then faster

2. INABILITY TO PLAY DIFFICULT PASSAGES, SUCH AS:

- Vaughan Williams *Folk Song Suite, Mvt. 3*
- Most marches by Fillmore
- Opening 6/8 section of *Chance Variations on a Korean Folk Song*

- As before, practice the passage slowly then speed up
- Look for alternate positions, such as D in $\flat 4$; F in 6; B \flat in $\sharp 5$) to reduce slide movement
- Use a light tongue
- Consider double tonguing for 16th note passages above MM = 116

3. TROMBONES ARE ALWAYS LATE

- The trombones are big and in the back row. Play slightly ahead of the beat.
- Can they really see you? Adjust the stand so you can see their bells.
- Don't point the bell down - hold the bell slightly below horizontal.

D. COMMON TROMBONE ERRORS & CORRECTIONS

1. UNDERSHOOTS NOTES

1. Blow more air
2. Faster air stream
3. Think “tee” articulation
4. Tongue harder

2. OVERSHOOT NOTES

1. Think “tow” articulation
2. Relax
3. Slower air stream

3. CRACKED NOTES (not the same as #2; concerns the beginning of the note)

1. Lower tongue (“tow”)
2. Slower air stream
3. Relax

4. STOPPING THE NOTES WITH THE TONGUE

1. Don’t stop the notes with the tongue; only use the tongue to start a note
2. Think “AHH” when playing

5. STOPPING THE AIR BETWEEN NOTES (NOT LIKE #4)

1. Don’t stop the air between notes (blow steady air; air is like a sentence - don’t breath between words, etc.)

6. AIR STOPPED AT THE LIPS

1. Relax
2. Open throat like yawning
3. Blow air through the bell (teacher, put hand in front of bell)

All of these are very common.

#’s 1, 2, 3, 6 happen with beginners

#’s 4 & 5 are very bad (as in: *MUST BE FIXED*)