

Reprints from the

International Trumpet Guild Journal

to promote communications among trumpet players around the world and to improve the artistic level of performance, teaching, and literature associated with the trumpet

Frank G. Campos, Clinic Editor – *John Schlabach: On Connecting the Ear and Trumpet Playing* (Jun 02/50)

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On Connecting the Ear and Trumpet Playing

BY JOHN SCHLABACH

The development of aural perception and skill is one of the most critical elements of musicianship for any instrument. Due to the substantial physical requirements of playing the trumpet, many trumpeters lag behind in the development of aural skills and musicianship; their practice and performing goals are often concentrated on the improvement of playing mechanics. They are unaware that their ear is not well “connected” to their trumpet playing. Very few exercises exist specifically for strengthening the ear in relation to performing on the trumpet.

Many trumpet players believe their ear is engaged when performing because they know instantly whether they played the right notes, correct rhythms, achieved a full sound, etc. However, their ear (or brain) is only judging or evaluating the performance. The mechanical parts of trumpet playing are in control, and the ear is following, not leading the playing. The ear is active only in *response* to the sensations and mechanics of performing, and this process leaves players vulnerable to inconsistency, causing them to depend significantly upon “feel.”

If asked to sing an etude or solo, these players miss many of the more challenging intervals. They might insist that they’re hearing the notes in their heads, but just can’t sing them. This is false; if a player can’t sing the notes accurately, regardless of vocal quality, he/she is almost certainly not hearing the pitches before they are played. In such a case, the trumpet is being used to confirm each note for the ear.

Players often assume they are performing musically if they can explain in detail where they’ll make a crescendo, ritard, accelerando, etc. It is more likely they have “instructions” occurring in their minds in response to what they see on a page of music, rather than actually hearing vivid musical sounds. The disadvantage of this approach can be compared to watching a movie in a foreign language with subtitles. One can get the basic information by reading the words, but would be missing the inflection, nuance, subtlety, and beauty of the language.

In order to perform in a truly musical manner, a player must be able to hear every pitch, including each 16th note in a fast passage. Only then can the ear lead

the mechanical aspects of performing, thereby causing the physical components to respond correctly. When a player is closer to 100% pitch accuracy, musical factors such as articulation, style, note length, inflection, and musical line (the beauty of the language) emerge as the actual sounds become clear and strong in the performer’s mind. Very fine players, it should be noted, sing musical examples with enthusiasm, authority, correct style, and accurate pitch. This is positive proof that when they are performing on the trumpet, an engaged and active ear is leading them as they play.

To improve musicianship, it is important to understand that players must always practice fundamentals such as long tones, lip slurs, scales, arpeggio patterns, and articulation exercises. This must be done to improve (or maintain) the mechanical part of their playing to the point that it *can* be led by their ear. Practice and improvement of aural ability can never *replace* daily repetitions of basic skills. For example, a lip slur that is heard accurately still can’t sound good if the player’s embouchure can’t efficiently execute the

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slur. However, the large majority of trumpeters are more deficient in aural perception and its connection to their playing. Two very important methods of developing the ear include accurately singing exercises and repertoire, and practicing everything on the

mouthpiece before playing it on the trumpet. Both of these activities strengthen the aural image and require the ear to be strongly engaged. (See Schlabach’s October 1999 *Clinic*.)

Aural ability can also be refined by using specific exercises that address both accurate interval perception and its connection to the instrument. The following number sequences are scale degree patterns, arranged in increasing difficulty. They are to be sung and fingered on the valves, not performed on the trumpet. Each pattern should be mastered in every key, including major and minor, before progressing to the next one. It is tempting to think that if F major is mastered for a given pattern, mastering the same pattern in F# major or B-flat minor is not important. However, the most effective improvement in connecting the ear to one’s playing occurs when all keys are performed easily, and this requires much repetition. Accuracy is

critical, and patience is paramount; it is common for a player to have to work a few weeks on a single pattern before going on to the next one. Often, players think they have mastered a pattern if they can sing it accurately, but they may still stumble with the fingerings in certain keys. This means that the ear is gaining in perception but the connection to the trumpet is still lacking. Both factors are equally important.

At first, it will be beneficial for many players to use a form of pitch reference such as a keyboard or pitch pipe to provide a model for singing/hearing the pattern. One should NOT play the patterns on the trumpet first, as that would reinforce leading with the trumpet mechanics, rather than with the ear. The whole purpose of these patterns is to reverse that process. After much repetition and patience, the intervals in the patterns will become more obvious and a pitch reference will no longer be necessary. The correct intervals and fingerings will become an automatic response in any key. It is important to sing strongly and authoritatively, even if mistakes are made. Weak or careful singing shows up as tentative playing.

Additional instructions:

- Use any syllable (such as “La”) or solfege.
- The 7th degree in minor should be natural, not raised, to differentiate it from major.
- The player should start with the first pattern that is not easy in every key, though nothing is wrong with starting with #1.
- The patterns should be practiced in two, ten-minute sessions each day: one during regular practice as a break, and another independent session.

Singing/Fingering Patterns: Ascending and Descending (up or down arrows indicate ascending or descending interval for the next scale degree. The 7th degree often goes underneath the tonic.)

Ascending Patterns

1. 1 2 3 4 5 3 4 2 1
2. 1 2 3 5 4 6 5 3 1
3. 1 2 3 4 5 6 4 5 3 2 1(↓) 7 1
4. 1 2 3 5 4 3 2(↓) 7 1
5. 1 2 3 4 5 6 4 5 3 2(↓) 7 2 1
6. 1 3 2 4 3 5 4 2 3 1 2(↓) 7 1
7. 1 2 3 4 5 6 5 4 3 5 4 2 1
8. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 7 8 6 5 4 2 3 1
9. 1 2 3 5 6 4 5 7 8 5 4 2 1
10. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 7 8 6 5 4(↓) 7 2 1
11. 1 2 3 5 4 6 5 7 8 7 5 3 1
12. 1 2 3 5 4 6 5 9 8 6 4 2 1

13. 1 3 2 4 3 5 7 9 8 5 4 2 1
14. 1 2 3 5 4 7 9 7 8 6 4 2 1
15. 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 7 8 4 3(↓) 7 1
16. 1 3 2 4 5 3 4 7 8 9 7 8 6 4(↓) 7 2 1
17. 1 3 6 5 4 7 9 10 8 5 2 3 1
18. 3 1 2 4 5 3 4 6 7 8 6 4 2(↓) 7 1
19. 3 1 2 4 5 3 4 7 8 6 4(↓) 7 1
20. 5 3 1 5 6 4 2 7 8 3 4 5 1
21. 1 3 5 3 4 7 9 7 8 #4 5 3 1
22. 3 4 2 7 5 6 4 2 7 8 2 3 1
23. 5 3 2 4 9 5 7 8 3 5 4 2 1
24. 1 6 5 9 8 4(↓) 7 2 1
25. 1 7 8 2 3 9 7(↓) 7 8

Descending Patterns

1. 8 7 6 4 5 3 4 2 1
2. 8 7 6 5 3 4 5 2 1
3. 8 5 4 5 3 5 4 2 1
4. 8 6 7 5 4 3(↓) 7 2 1
5. 8 6 5 3 2 4 5(↓) 7 1
6. 8 7 6 9 7 6 5 3 4 5 2 3 1
7. 8 5 7 4 3 5 4 2 1 3(↓) 7 2 1
8. 8 7 9 8 5 4 3 5 6 4 2(↓) 7 1
9. 8 6 4 3(↑) 7 5 2(↓) 7 1
10. 8 7 6 5 7 6 5 3 4 6(↓) 7 5 1
11. 8 5 7 4 6 3 5 2 4(↓) 7 1 2 1
12. 8 4 6 2(↑) 7 3 5(↓) 7 1
13. 8 5 9 4(↑) 7 3(↓) 7 3 1
14. 8 3 6 2(↑) 7 4 3 5 1
15. 8 2 3(↑) 7 5(↓) 7 2 4 3

The benefits of practicing these patterns vocally over a period of years are substantial. Players will start to notice more ease in getting around the trumpet because technique is following the ear, and note centers will become more accurate. Subtle intonation tendencies and problems will become more obvious both in individual playing and in ensembles. Improvement of aural ability is also much more closely related to improvement in range and endurance than most players realize.

Improving aural skill does not guarantee musicianship, but musical expression usually occurs more naturally as the player’s ear becomes more accurate and perceptive. It is easy for players to ignore this kind of aural practice, but patient and systematic work will open a new world of awareness that will increase the joy of playing the trumpet.

About the author: John Schlabach is the trumpet professor at Ohio University in Athens, OH. He is very active as a soloist, chamber and orchestral musician, and clinician. Schlabach earned degrees from Northwestern and Western Illinois Universities.

