

Version 1

7-2-11

Dear All:

This is a written version of how I practice the trumpet. I am not a professional musician, but I do enjoy playing the trumpet – especially mainstream jazz. The bits of information in this document are from my own experiences, and I hope they will aid you in the continuous journey of musical improvement.

General notes regarding practice:

I try to practice every day, at least 20 minutes. This routine keeps your lips in shape (they are literally muscles, and will fatigue if you don't work them out regularly...so that means a little bit every day!) and also keeps your fingers connected with your brain. Like athletics, you need to exercise your lips (embouchure), fingers and brain if you want to perform well. However, if you don't have a lot of time to play, you would do well to make your practice *efficient*. That means messing around is not what you want to be doing. If you truly want to get better, practice should not be fun*: it should be hard work, like doing homework. That said, you should get enjoyment out of performing and the feeling of accomplishment from self improvement.

If you are a beginning trumpet player, *you must be patient* and work on boring old scales and get better at them. You can't just play a D-minor scale and say, 'I played it from memory, now I can move on' – constantly force yourself to improve and say, 'Ok, that D-minor scale was good in that I hit all the notes in time, but I kind of cracked that A, so I'm going to do it again slower a few more times and make it perfect'. It took me about 4 years between 5th (when I started) and 9th grade where I didn't really like the trumpet (I wanted to quit in 7th grade) because I was an average player, and it was a struggle to play what I heard in my head. However, around 9th grade I realized those years of gradual work eventually made my technique good enough where it wasn't as much of a struggle. From then on, practicing the trumpet was a chance to say what I wanted through my horn, and a pleasure rather than a chore. *All you need to do is hit that point where you like what you're hearing from your own instrument, making you come back for more.*

For jazz players, seek to imitate those you look up to in terms of copying their licks (nothing wrong with that in jazz; actually it's a form of flattery), their tone (if you listen to someone enough, you will inevitably start to embody their sound), and their approach to improvisation. Copying is totally OK and even encouraged. I think that even though you copy, say, Charlie Parker's ideas, you always put a bit of yourself into the line, adding to *your* style.

*Branford Marsalis told me practice shouldn't be fun. Let's face it - you're practicing, not performing. He also told me that if you want to play like the masters of today, you have to *listen to what they listened to* as they made their careers. For example, Nicholas Payton probably grew up listening to Louis Armstrong and other players from the early part of the 20th century. So, go ahead and listen to the old guys!

Also:

Everyone needs to learn to read music if they are going to play...so learn!

Specifics regarding practice:

Warming up is extremely important. If you keep a routine every time you play, you will feel ready to play after a short rest (2-3 minutes) following the warm up.

Warm-up part 1: Buzz on mouthpiece (3-5 minutes)

Start with a low tone, slowly lip up to a major third and back down to the root again. This should sound like a siren on a fire engine, so you should not be rushing.

Repeat 4x

Go back to original low tone, slowly lip up to a fifth and back down to the root again.

Repeat 4x

Go back to original low tone, slowly lip up to an octave and back down to the root again.

Reasoning: let muscles in embouchure stretch out a little without being subjected to the constraints of the discrete tones on the trumpet itself.

General notes on trumpet technique:

When you play you should have the horn parallel to the floor, with your elbows pointed outwards and your back straight. Sit on the edge of your chair with your back straight if you have to sit down. If you have a choice, you should stand up (it allows your lungs to open up). I guarantee that holding your horn out straight will improve your tone if you tend to play at an angle to the floor. You will also be able to play higher without a pinched sound. By standing up straight with your elbows out,

you allow your lungs to fully expand, thus giving you extra air to force through the trumpet. Have you ever seen a professional lead trumpet player who didn't stand up straight? If you did, they are probably not a very good one. Pressing the horn against your lips as little as possible is also a good thing to keep in mind. True power and clarity comes from the air, not from jamming the horn into your mouth.

Breathing should be done through your 'stomach' (diaphragm) and not through your 'shoulders'. For example, your shoulders should stay relatively still when you take a breath while playing. Your 'gut' should move outward, using your diaphragm. You can practice this type of breathing by lying on a floor and putting a textbook or two on your stomach, trying to lift the books up and down with your 'stomach'. That same exact body motion should happen when standing up playing. Using your shoulders tightens up your throat and chest and the result is a pinched sound, and also reduced ability to hit higher notes clearly.

Your right fingers should be curled around the horn and pressing the valves, not so that they are flat across the keys. Your right thumb goes in between the first and second valve casing and the lead pipe. You should ideally only have your right pinky in the hook if you are using your left hand with a plunger or another mute, but realistically a lot of people still use it. The correct technique allows you to play faster with less effort.

Your left hand should go naturally around the valve casings with your middle or ring finger going through the 3rd valve slide (which you should extend to keep low C sharp and D in tune).

Warm-up part 2: Chromatic scale

Join mouthpiece and trumpet, blow air through it for about 30 seconds to literally warm the instrument up.

Play a slurred chromatic scale at slow-medium tempo from low F# to middle C, keeping the pace very smooth, even if a note is missed. Continue up chromatically to high C and back down to middle C. If possible, continue in the same breath down to low F#.

Focus on keeping an even pace and adding a crescendo as you move up the scale, with a decrescendo on the way down. Slower is better! No one is impressed when you go quickly through your warm-up, so take your time and get it right!!

Repeat 1-2x more

Reasoning: This warms up the horn itself, which keeps it in tune (especially if it is cold in the area where you are playing). Also, if it is the first time you are playing that day, it helps connect your fingers to your brain. Also, going from low F# to high C starts adjusting your embouchure to accommodate your full range.

Warm-up part 3: Range test

Start a chromatic scale going upward from middle G to high G. My range limit is around the G an octave above the staff, but you should play a slurred chromatic scale up to the upper limit of your range and then come back down to high G at the same pace. Make sure to *increase* the amount of air as you go up the scale, especially to the top of your range. *The last thing you want to hear is a pinched sound as you squeak out a high note*; you want a clear, bell-like note that is in tune, and you need enough air to make that happen. It is usually a good idea to try and do this exercise in two parts: middle G to high G, take a big breath, and start from high G to as far as you can go keeping an even pace.

If you are working on extending your range, repeat this and try to make it to the half step above the one you know you can reach. You can also do this exercise AFTER you finish your practice session, which makes sense if you don't want to tire yourself out too much right away. As always, focus on keeping a TONE that you LIKE. Every time you play, and I mean EVERY TIME, make sure your tone sounds the way you want it. 90% of tone problems come from not having enough air (i.e. not sitting up or standing up straight). 5% is your embouchure being out of shape (i.e. not practicing at least 20 mins a day).

Reasoning: Allows your embouchure to adjust to your maximum range. Some trumpet players swear that hitting high notes consistently is difficult if you don't include a few in your warm up exercises.

Warm-up part 4: Flexibility

Start at a middle C, holding it until it is steady and clear, then slowly lip up to an E and back down again. Repeat this, getting faster and faster, until it grows into a lip trill. Hold the lip trill for 5-10 seconds. Then move up chromatically, to a C#, and lip up to the next partial tone (also E). Repeat up to a high C.

Repeat this exercise again starting at middle C and moving chromatically down as far as you can go. It is typically easier to execute a lip trill in the higher register than the lower register as the partials are closer together up high. Remember to only use your lips – don't confuse this with a shake (i.e. no physical movement should be necessary except a slight movement of your lips for a lip trill).

Reasoning: Improves flexibility of your embouchure. I find that if I don't do some flexibility exercises before I start playing, it becomes difficult to play intervals later that session.

Practice segment 1: Long tones

Simply start at middle G, take a deep breath and hold it until your breath runs out. Constantly focus on keeping a good tone. Incorporate dynamics, such as an extended crescendo, then decrescendo, then crescendo with your remaining air.

Move up a half step to G# and repeat going up the chromatic scale.

Another variation on this is to actually time yourself. Try to play 30 seconds of middle G. Then move up the G major scale to an A, and hold for 30 seconds again, with only a big breath in between. Try to make it to high G, and then take 1 minute break. Start from high G and move down the major scale to middle G.

Reasoning: This will build endurance. Your tone should be stronger as a result. These exercises can be very difficult at first, so you probably will have to see where your limits are. Think of long tones as running long distance. Ever play a ballad? They drain your chops because of all the long tones involved. Practicing long tones may not be fun, but it will get you in shape.

Practice segment 2: Scales

It doesn't matter what type of music you want to play, but if you're playing an instrument, you need to know your scales. That means all of them. Backward and forward. Memorize them so you can play them all on command.

Here is a list of scales that you should know, especially if you play jazz:

Major

Minor

Dominant

Blues

Diminished

Whole tone

Augmented

Also good to know are:

Melodic minor

Half diminished

There are more scales than this, but I think you should prioritize if you are just starting out.

You should know them in all 12 keys, ideally. You've probably read that somewhere. Well, it takes a while to do that, and you will know some scales better than others, just because you are more familiar with them.

The best way to memorize new scales is to constantly test yourself. Memorize the pattern that the scales follow (i.e. what will the next note be? A half step or a whole step?) rather than the actual notes. Play them VERY SLOWLY at first so you hear exactly the correct pitches. It is much more important to reinforce the correct pitches than play the scales quickly. Once you think you have it down, gradually play them faster (but keep the pace even!). If you mess up even one note, stop, slow down, and do it again. Do it 5 more times. Challenge yourself to do it correctly every time. Don't reinforce something that you know is wrong by practicing it! Get it right, which usually happens by playing more slowly.

Learning scales is also a pain when you're starting out. I almost quit when I was in 7th grade because I was still learning scales, etc but I was forced to continue. This painful 'homework' that I went through has served me extremely well since then. But I am not an exception. Anyone who knows their scales very well can play music, as it is largely comprised of scales put together (especially in jazz).

The next thing to do once you have mastered your scales in the easiest octave, play them down until low G or F# and back up to the top of your range, as this gets you used to the fingerings of the upper range and making the transition between the root note and the notes around it.

Reasoning: Scales are the basis of all music, especially jazz. So much music consists of scales connected to each other that knowing them by heart will help simplify complicated passages and generally make music easier for you.

Practice segment 3: Arpeggios

I think arpeggios are pretty cool. They sound really impressive when you can go through them quickly and cleanly. But that is a caveat – they trick is playing them cleanly. The Arban book has many exercises in this area (and many others) and is an easy way to get started. That book is absolutely worth the price. Work through 2-3 arpeggios a day, starting *very slowly* so that everything is perfect by the time you get them under your fingers faster. You are only hurting yourself if you go through these fast without really learning them. Spend the time now to learn them *correctly*!

There are many permutations of arpeggios that go through all the different scales, inverting them, different patterns, etc. This will keep you busy for a while. Memorize as much as you can! I think arpeggios sound great when played with confidence and I am always trying to learn more versions.

Practice segment 4: Improvisation

This is the part where you get to really express yourself and I find to be the most fun. I generally use play-a-long tracks such as ones from Jamey Aebersold where there is a rhythm section playing in the background but no melody, which is what you get to play. I basically just play the head (melody) and

improvise until I finish the track. Then onto the next one!! Try to think about timing, and following all the chord changes. Try listening to the song with someone famous (an actual recording) before playing and try to imitate what they did. Or better yet, just play with the original recording trying to do a call and response pattern with the soloist. Listen to how much space the soloist leaves. Try to incorporate a lick you just learned and want to memorize. Look away from any music if you can so you are forced to memorize the changes! No one really wants to show up to a jam session with a fake book – learn as many tunes by heart as you can!

Try varying your range during the solo; don't just stay in your 'comfortable' area. Listen to Freddie Hubbard and how he reaches for some of those high notes and makes the struggle for them sound awesome. There is something to making it look easy when playing classical music for example, but I really like how jazz players try to play a line in their head, don't quite make it, but make the battle to get it out sound heroic. All those squeals, slides, shakes, growls, and everything else really add to your solo and makes the audience believe your musical story more.

In the end, your style is your style. It is up to you to figure out what you like, but it helps to be able to play appropriately in all contexts (swing, funk, latin, etc) so challenge yourself and try something new!

Practice segment 5: Etudes

I like to play some classical to keep my technique up and keep things interesting. I usually look through the Arban book, or some Clarke studies. There is so much music out there, keeping your reading skills up is important, and it also changes your mentality so you don't get in a mental rut.

Warm down (1-2 mins)

Start from a middle G, then go down chromatically to a low G taking 1 second per note. Then try to lip down to make sounds that are as low as possible (not real notes, but you can sort of lip around down there). Do this a few times for a total of about 1-2 minutes.

Reasoning: This relieves some of the stress in your lips by relaxing them, and makes sure that your lips are healthy for the next day's practice/performance.

Conclusion

As I continually update this document (in response to reader's comments and questions), I hope that you get an idea of what I think about as I practice. My intention is to share what knowledge I have gained with you, so ask away!