



The United States Army Band

Pershing's Own

So You Want To Be A Great Tuba Player

by Staff Sergeant David T. Brown

Take a moment to think back to the last time you heard a great tuba or euphonium player. Perhaps you saw this performer at a live concert, or just got a copy of the latest CD. What were some of your impressions? In the midst of listening, did you ever wish you could sound like that, or be just as good. Well, we have all been there, and there is great news. The things that got the best players to where they are, are still accessible today. The simple answer of course is PRACTICE. Sounds Simple, but many of us spend hours upon hours playing our horns and not seemingly "breaking through" to that next level. So if the answer to become a great player is practice, where do we go from there. What kind of practice? How do we practice to become better? This article outlines what I have observed and learned in 15 years of study, observation, and practice. I hope it will be helpful to you.

World-Class Sound

The legendary tubist Arnold Jacobs once remarked that it's not necessary for a student to understand all of the physical actions involved in playing the tuba, just to be sure that "it sounds better than anyone else." Now, that might sound like a joke, but Jake's observation was succinct and clear. You have to sound great. Musical instruments are defined by their sound, and so are musicians. World-class tuba and euphonium players don't have sound "problems." They just don't. That doesn't mean they all sound the same, far from it in fact. But all great players produce great tone qualities. But how do I do it? Here are some excellent techniques.

A former teacher of mine told me, "no one ever graduates from whole notes..." He wasn't talking about technique, but tone production. The best method for sound study is the Arban's. Transposing from the trumpet or trombone versions is fine. But you may want to get a copy of the newest version specifically for Tuba from Encore Music Publishers and compiled by Jerry Young.

The first 20 Studies or so are just WHOLE NOTES. Open to the first study, set your metronome (yes, even for these footballs, there is still a TEMPO). I recommend a slow metronome setting, at least less than 84. I use 60, but that may tire you out too soon. Then, begin playing the exercises with a mezzo-forte dynamic, and tune your ears on your sound. What do you sound like? Do you like the sound? Can you reposition yourself in the practice room to point your bell at different angles and hear it better?

Focus on your tone, it's consistency, it's steadiness, and it's timbre. Play all of the whole note studies straight though, with little rest. Don't turn off the metronome. Let it run when you dump water, or turn the page. That little click often works like an invisible tutor tapping you on the shoulder to put the horn back on your face. Play all the whole note exercises, then go back and do them all down one octave, and up one octave, as your range

allows. We can't ignore the upper and lower registers when we practice tone production, but always remember that the vast majority of your notes will be in the middle, so work it out first. The great Harvey Phillips taught me about the three registers on the tuba, the high, the low, and the cash register. He called the middle the cash register to remind us that when we play as professionals, most of the notes are right in the middle.

Two other points about tone practice: Use a tuner. Turn it on at the beginning and let it hear everything you play. It doesn't replace your ears, but it helps to give us solid feedback about the notes we play. Keep track of which notes on your horn tend to show a pattern of sharpness or flatness. Knowing which notes to blow up or down can really pay off when playing in a chamber group such as a brass quintet. Finally, practice these whole notes every day. Make it the first thing you do. Focus on your sound. If you don't know what TO sound like, go back to the recordings or concerts where great tuba/euphonium players play, and imitate that sound.

World-Class Technique

Music is an art of perfection. That doesn't mean we are all perfect, of course no one is. But unlike baseball, where 3 out of 10 makes a batter an all-star, music's standard is perfection. Play the right notes. That comes from good technique. How do you find that? Once again I recommend the Arban's Book. Just after the whole note studies in the beginning, are some quarter-note studies that are very good for working on the basics. Again, the metronome should be running always when you practice technique. You will very rarely find any music where there isn't any tempo, so get used to putting a steady one into every thing you play. Practice playing the quarter notes in strict time, with clear and clean articulation. Strive for immediate full sound when you articulate a note. No "pear shaping," or starting notes very soft only to immediately crescendo. Get your basic articulation in line, and in time. Next, move to the scales section of the book. Play them SLOWLY. The performers I know that play scales the fastest, practice them the slowest. The virtuoso tubist Pat Sheridan once told me he has gone on to the stage many times and performed things faster than he EVER practiced them. Pat, as always, stepped up to the challenge. Why could he do that? Because he practiced them at slow tempos to the point of near perfection. So that when he was asked to play them very fast, he simply did so, without skipping a beat. Practice slowly, and correctly. Never try to play it too fast until you have mastered it slower. Next, learn all your scales and arpeggios, which are in the Arban's book. If you read the caption just prior to the scale section, you will find the Jean Baptiste Arban believed that the study of scales was greatly lacking in his day, (over 100 years ago). Strangely, that fact is largely unchanged today. If you learn all your scales, you will be a better sightreader, and you will have great technique. Don't forget about the minor and diminished scales and arpeggios. For those, you may have to look further than the Arban's, although many are in there. Work on technique through the quarter-note exercises and the scales and arpeggios everyday. You WILL get better, it's hard not to.

World-Class Musicianship

This one is the most important. You might think it odd to put it at the end, though. But I did so for two reasons. First, many of our musical ideas are held back by poor sound and technique. If you sound bad, and don't play enough right notes, most people will not tune in close enough to hear your musical expression. So you must display a working proficiency in the previous areas in order to create a "palate" from which your musical ideas can emerge. Secondly, your musicianship isn't "practiced" as much as it is cultivated. The sections about sound and technique can be mastered by sure mechanical practice. But

musicianship cannot. And without it, your playing will be lifeless. Arnold Jacobs reminded us that "music is an art form." We can never lose sight of that fact. So how do you become a world-class musician? First you must listen to the greats. They are famous for a reason. And you should listen to the world's great musicians every chance you get. I don't just mean tuba and euphonium players here, far from it. Go listen to the great string soloists, and opera singers, and pianists, etc. Don't limit your musical exposure. You will learn a great deal about musical expression from these great artists. Make listening a PART of your practice plan. Listen while you practice. Play along with the best. And imitate their ideas, so you that you have a starting point from which to start your own musical journey. Also, listen to more than one artist play a particular piece. This will show you that great interpretations are in abundance. Next, take lessons with an established musician in your area. Mainly with a brass player, but periodically with someone who is not--a great singer, or violinist. You will learn a great deal from them. Finally, focus on becoming a performer.

Music is a performing art. Which means you will rarely make a career playing just for yourself. You need to learn to play for others. To make the music interesting for others. To entertain people with your music, and make them want to hear more. After all, isn't that what the great performers that you have heard do? You can, and will too. How? By playing for others often. Play things that you have worked up for your peers, friends, etc. Also, schedule as many formal performances as possible, including recitals, solo opportunities, or concerts. You should perform often, and make it a habit. Many players spend the vast majority of playing time in a room where no one is listening. And they are surprised that no one wants to listen to them outside of that room either. Become a performer. There's no practice like the real thing.

When I was a young student, I was overwhelmed with the prospect of trying to become a great player. Would I be good enough? Don't the really great players have some intangible "thing" that I would never possess? Aren't there already a lot of good players out there? My first teacher, R. Winston Morris, reminded me, "there's always room at the top." That means, if you want to be a great player, you can be. Dedicated practice is the key. Practice the fundamentals of performance, technique, and sound production. Finally, we have all been at the place where we doubted whether we were practicing the right things, or even getting any better. I am convinced that if you practice the basics diligently and daily, you will become better. And in time, you can become great. It's actually harder to do so, and not get better. If you practice enough, someday people will be listening to your music, and imitating you.... Now go practice, and I look forward to hearing you play someday soon.

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