

## How to Series: All you wanted to know about 'Low Brass', but were frightened to ask...

*'What you expect is what you get'; or what happens when 'you don't know, what you don't know?'*

### *The importance of the 'Templates'*

#### **Posture, Hand Position, Breathing, Embouchure**

➤ Trombone: the basics -

***Size considerations:*** The trombone is relatively heavy, awkward for beginners, requiring some gross motor skill expertise for slide technique. And, like most wind instruments, it is basically designed for adult body shapes, arm length and hand size. Remember, when helping students to choose the trombone it is best to check hand sizes, arm length to insure that the student's fingers can *comfortably* hold the trombone and manipulate the slide.

- It is the Left Hand that holds the instrument, allowing for the right hand - 1st two fingers/thumb and wrist/elbow and shoulder, the ease of action without trying to carry the weight of the instrument and operate the slide simultaneously. Start with the left-hand flat – upright; thumb wraps around bell brace, forefinger on/over the mouthpiece lead pipe and remaining 3 fingers wrap around the 1<sup>st</sup> side brace.
- Arm length is ALWAYS going to be a problem for young trombonists, but don't despair. There are trombone slide extenders available, which will assist in getting out to 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> positions. The trombone hand position is a bit complicated to explain the uninitiated so I will show you and you can take phone pictures!
- The left hand holds the instrument and the right hand moves the slide. Right hand holds the slide, palm facing the chest and the 1<sup>st</sup> two fingers and thumb holding the slide brace towards the bottom of the brace. Make sure that the elbow is not too high or too low, naturally follows the angle from the wrist. The wrist acts as a hinge joint to effect smooth slide motion. The slower the

tempo, the faster the slide must move so as to avoid smearing between pitches.

- The trombone comes in three pieces and has to be put together and taken apart by the student. Herein lies the great danger, as the slide is very delicate, the slightest dent impacts the instrument's ability to be played.
- It comes in a bell, slide and mouthpiece combination. The slide section being inserted into the bell receiver pipe and connected together by the use of a threaded circle. The bell and slide sections should be at a 90° angle. Beware of the slide coming in contact with the bell rim as this can dent the slide, making the instrument inoperable.
- The main slide and tuning slide(s) must be lubricated at regular intervals. However, the weekly slide lubrication is of a special nature and must be demonstrated.
- The trombone mouthpiece placement and position is crucial for future success.+ It is placed in the middle of the mouth, with a 2/3 top lip and 1/3 bottom lip ratio, and is the same placement set-up for euphonium mouthpieces.\*
- As a trombone has a slide instead of valves or keys, with the exception of the 'double trombone' the instrument is, for all practical purposes is a 'fretless' instrument. It has 7 positions, just as the valved brass have 7 basic valve combinations, nevertheless, the positions are slightly different on every trombone. Ultimately, it is a combination of ear and kinesthetic muscle memory, which the trombonist must acquire from 'time on task' learning (listening and adjusting), just like young string players.
- The most common trombone model today is the Bb/F trigger instrument. As you are most likely to come in contact with this instrument fairly early on. It is important to know that it has become the 'standard' instrument. The trigger trombone is in Bb the F side is engaged when the left thumb depresses the valve. It expedites the slide requirements, simplifying the slide shifts by replacing the need for using 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> positions. There is insufficient space to go into great detail here regarding the various pros and cons.
- Other developments include the introduction of the new generation of plastic trombones, such as the P-bone, coming in various bright colours. There is also the 'kinder bone' which is a variant of the Bb/F attachment.

- Mouthpiece placement for trombone: 2/3 top lip & 1/3 bottom lip.\*
- [https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1404&context=honors\\_research\\_projects](https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1404&context=honors_research_projects)

➤ Euphonium: the basics-

- ***Size Considerations:*** The Euphonium is a heavy instrument: Holding it is like cradling a small child. The instrument is supported by the left hand and the valves are operated by the right hand. In the case of English and European instruments, if there is a 4<sup>th</sup> valve, it is most likely located on the right side of the instrument half way down the bell tube. In this arrangement, the left-hand forefinger is used to depress the valve.
- The Japanese, Chinese, American, and some European models follow the “in-line arrangement of either 3, or four valves.
- More advanced euphonium models have a 4<sup>th</sup> valve, as already mentioned. This is a double instrument arrangement: shorter side in Bb and longer 2<sup>nd</sup> side in F. This arrangement is a cross between the need for improvement in intonation and easier valve combinations. The instrument suffers from the valve issues mentioned in the trumpet presentation, as well as the problems brought on by its conical shape, which compounds the intonation issues. The conical (cone) shape tends to distort the vibrating air column.
- Holding the euphonium may require some adjustment consideration as it is crucial to proper mouthpiece placement and valve/fingering hand position. It will have a lot to do with the length of the student’s torso. A longer torso will require a cushion under the bottom of the instrument. If the torso is too short, then the angle of the instrument will have to be adjusted.
- The correct finger alignment is very important in developing quick and accurate fingering. Make sure that the right thumb and elbow are in the right place: the right thumb should oppose the finger action. Be sure that the elbow is not too high or too low, but follows a natural looking angle down from the wrist.
- Mouthpiece placement is the same as for trombone: 2/3 top lip & 1/3 bottom lip.\*

➤ Tuba: the basics-

**Size considerations:** The tuba is a heavy instrument: Holding the instrument is problematic, depending on the size of the student. There are tuba stand options such as tripod posts, cradles. The best option for younger students is to use either a single Bb tuba or a single Eb tuba. These provide easier handling and weight options. Adjustment consideration for instrument is essential for both finger/hand position and mouthpiece placement.

- The Eb tuba option sets up minor transposition issue when reading bass clef. When reading from a Bb method book the student has to remember that on an Eb instrument G equates to concert Bb. If you choose the Bb tuba option there are no transposition issues.
- The tuba is played 'bell up right' and has the same fingering arrangement as the euphonium. Again, check body shape and hand size.
- The mouthpiece is placed in the centre of the mouth and 50/50 on the upper and lower lips.\*
- Carrying the instrument can lead to creative cartage options such as a little handcart, shock cords on a skateboard and a variety of other ideas.
- More advanced Tuba models have a 4<sup>th</sup> valve, as already mentioned. This too is a double instrument arrangement: shorter side in Bb and longer 2<sup>nd</sup> side in F. This arrangement is a cross between the need for improvement in intonation and easier valve combinations. Just like the euphonium, the tuba suffers from the valve issues mentioned in the trumpet as well as the problems brought on by its conical shape, which compounds the intonation issues.

*Air support is crucial for wind instruments and needs a separate discussion. There are many points of view and many strategies and many have merit, while some are really contradictory and confusing.*

*Some people talk about the diaphragm in incorrect terms and function. However, proper air intake, delivery and control are essential for a rewarding engagement with the wind family. For young players it is best not to get too complicated but to focus on the basics of air intake and exhale.*

Another viewpoint article on brass embouchures:

<http://www.brucepearsonmusic.com/articles/TeachingTheBrassEmbouchure.pdf>

It is my standard policy that students are not allowed to play each other's instruments unless supervised by a designated music teacher. There are many

reasons for this policy beyond hygiene issues for wind instruments. Suffice it to say that each student learns specific ways of caring for their instrument. These instruments are not toys but precision crafted, delicate objects that have in some cases very intricate mechanisms with fine tolerances. It is therefore best that students do not share instruments as damages can quite easily occur, such as a dropped instrument or trombone slide, etc. Ultimately, it is a case of respect and care. Instrument repairs can be very expensive as well as time consuming and this policy can alleviate some collateral damage.

### **A couple of the most important considerations for encouraging low brass retention rates**

- *Consider their engagement with the technical demands of the training material and performance repertoire: keeping it challenging **and** achievable. Above all, it is important to foster a 'low brass' community spirit. It is **special** to play in the low brass section! Always place yourself in the shoes of your low brass section for a 'reality' check.*
- *Remember: Your low brass section will also need the same exposure to rigorous training materials as your upper winds! No short cuts. Simply passing out concert repertoire and expecting it to provide the essential material for good pedagogical skill development is insufficient and short-sighted.*

***Ensemble method books that clearly feature and reinforce the above information and promote sequential training with scales/key studies and rhythmic vocabulary are essential for rewarding low brass progression and development. We must keep them engaged, prepared and set up for success.***

*\*The correct placement for all brass instrument mouthpieces on the lips is best done with a mouthpiece visualiser. This is generally accomplished with a trombone/euphonium & tuba rim visualiser. Old mouthpieces can be turned into visualisers. Simply cut the rim off and have a little thin metal rod welded to the outside face of the rim. Conversely, you buy an expensive one from the music store. In either way you will need 4 of them. The visualiser allows both teacher and student the opportunity to both see and feel the correct placement, and should be used regularly in the early learning stages.*

*\*\* All brass instruments come in two basic shapes: Cylindrical and Conical. Simply put, Cone shaped and Cylinder shaped. Cone shaped instruments gradually get larger from the time the tubing leaves the mouthpiece receiver and are as follows:*

- *Cornet*
- *Flugel horn*

- *French horn*
- *Tenor horn*
- *Baritone*
- *Euphonium*
- *Tuba*

*Cylindrical Instruments stay more evenly straight until they arrive at the beginning of the bell flare and are as follows:*

- *Trumpet*
- *Trombone*

*Bass Trombone*

*+Mouthpiece placement is still an individualised issue. My recommendations are based on best practice overall. Please see - <http://www.wilktone.com/?p=92> for further information.*

**More information on teaching Low Brass is available at these excellent sites.**

<https://banddirector.com/?s=low+brass>

<http://getbanded.com/training-young-low-brass-players-ear-development/>

<https://www.smartmusic.com/blog/beginning-low-brass-with-high-standards/>

<https://banddirector.com/brass/low-brass-class-teaching-guide/>

### **Recommended Readings list**

Green, Elizabeth A. H., 2006, *Practicing Successfully*, GIA Publications, Chicago, Ill., USA

Holz, Emil and Jacobi, Roger E., 1966, *Teaching Band Instruments to Beginners*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc.

Kohut, Daniel L, 1973, 1996, *Instrumental Pedagogy*, Stipes Publishing, USA

Lautzenheiser, T., 1992, *The Art of Successful Teaching*, GIA Publications, Chicago, Ill., USA

Schleuter, Stanley, L., 1997, *A Sound Approach to Teaching Instrumentalists*, Schirmer Books, Prentice Hall Int., New York, USA

Severson, P & McDunn, M., 1983, *Brass Wind Artistry*, Accura Music, Athens, Ohio, USA

Baily, Wayne, Patrick Miles, Alan Siebert and William Stanley, 2006  
*Teaching Brass: A Resource Manual*, McGraw-Hill, NY, USA

Edward Kleinhammer, *The Art of Trombone Playing* Alfred Publishing Co. 1996

Phillips, Harvey & Winkle, William, *The Art of Tuba and Euphonium Playing* Suzuki Publishing Company, 1994