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Strategies for Music Learning

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Volume 36:2 (Winter) Pedagogy Section Articles:*Strategies for Music Learning:* by George Palton*Circular Breathing Defined:* by Paul Nobis*Tips for Tuba: Downbeat, upfeet!* by David Porter*Stepping Stones to Success: Don Haddad's Suite for Baritone (Tuba)* by Pat Stuckemeyer**Strategies for Music Learning**

by George Palton

There is a clear difference between musical talent and musical ability. Many young students have limitless potential on their instrument but must learn how to cultivate their natural skills. Frequently this need presents itself late in the high school and early college years. At this time the amount of repertoire the student is expected to learn increases greatly while the time they have to prepare it decreases significantly.

This article will provide strategies on how to take a new and fresh piece of literature from being completely unknown to performance ready. Before doing so two preliminary concerns should be addressed. A frequent question from many young students is what materials they should practice. A balanced regiment of fundamentals, scales, lyrical and technical etudes, excerpts, and solo literature can help a student develop into a well-rounded musician. Of course it is very important that the repertoire is well suited to their needs and goals. The wisdom of an experienced applied instructor is an invaluable asset in this regard.

The next concern is how to address fundamentals. Most elements of tuba and euphonium playing can be broken down into simple mental and physical components. A daily routine is the time in which the musician should isolate and develop these facets of playing in a practical and most of all consistent method. In 2004 I conducted a survey of college professors, prominent free lance musicians, and musicians in professional

ensembles such as military bands and orchestras. The results were published in the Winter 2005 *ITEA Journal*. To summarize, 59% of the respondents executed a daily routine 4–6 days a week and 28% did so every day. Within their daily routine a vast majority of the respondents indicated that they did the following either every day or almost every day: breathing exercises, mouthpiece buzzing, long tones, flexibility lip slurs, low and high range exercises, single tonguing exercises, scales, and phrasing, or melodic exercises. Developing a daily routine is a matter in which the advice of a teacher is vital as well.

Efficient practice can be broken down into three simple steps:

- 1) The Basics: Pitches and Rhythm
- 2) Survival: Time and Air
- 3) Music Making: Expressive Devices, Terminology, and Style.

Proper fundamentals are an irreplaceable component of learning and performing any literature. When challenged with a new piece of music students are often consumed with fingerings and rhythms. This may cause them to lose focus on fundamentals that may be imperative to their development. For example, it does not matter which valve is down, if you are not breathing effectively, notes may not speak at all. The student must realize that proper fundamentals are a pre-requisite to the music learning strategies outlined below.

The numeric order these steps are listed does not indicate that one is more

important than the other or that they must be executed in that particular sequence. However, learning pitches and rhythm is the most frequent starting point when practicing a new piece of literature. When working on the basics, slow practice is a must! Often young students choose to bypass slow practice while experienced professionals will use it to polish repertoire that they have performed at a high level for years. Once the tempo is adequately reduced, deconstruct the music to focus on specific variables that are of concern. If a passage is in an uncomfortable octave, transpose it up or down as needed. If the rhythm is difficult, clap it, play it on one note, write the rhythms below, or draw lines above the strong beats. If the fingerings are challenging, practice them alone with a metronome. The rhythm of the valves should closely resemble that of the music. If the pitches are challenging, first start by playing them on a piano. Then sing the pitches and buzz them on your mouthpiece. Once this is mastered, play it on your instrument. If you can hear a phrase, you most likely are able to play it. If the articulations are difficult, practice saying them on your preferred syllable such as "toh" or "doh." Finally, slurred practice is paramount to ensure even tone and air flow. The options can be as varied as music itself, therefore start by listing the skills necessary to master a passage, conquering them one by one, and then assimilating these elements into the music.

Once a phrase is successfully learned, repetition is important for retention. Typically three successful repetitions at a particular tempo are sufficient to increase the speed gradually. One successful execution following several misfires does not put the probability for success in your favor. If a phrase becomes easy this is usually an indication that you are ready for the next modest tempo increase. From there, learned phrases can be expanded into learned sections by chunking them together. As you continue to learn a piece of music do not always start from the beginning when you practice it. Many who have judged solo and ensemble contests or auditions have heard students start strong only to gradually crumble during the performance. Make sure every measure has been polished evenly and to give special attention to the more tricky spots. This can be accomplished by working backwards by section and starting in the middle of the work in addition to starting at the beginning.


The next step in successfully learning a piece of music is Survival: Time and Air. A metronome is vital even beyond the preliminary stages of practice. Many young students will accelerate the easy passages and slow down the more difficult spots, yet a musician's tasks must be performed on demand. It can also become habit to add time when a breath is necessary. The time of breath must be taken from the end of a note so that subsequent notes may begin on time. In addition, all of these breaths must be planned, marked in the part, and practiced. The purpose is two fold: not only must the musician survive the

phrase with proper fundamentals and tone, but also the breath must be taken in a location that is musically tasteful. This is extremely tedious at times, which can foster a false notion that an inexperienced musician can plan breaths at sight. However, lack of breath support is a common reason to make a mistake, therefore eliminating this variable will reduce errors.

Lastly, we will discuss the final and most important step in practicing, Music Making: Expressive Devices, Terminology, and Style. Before this subject is expanded I must first give credit to a very important mentor, Dr. Skip Gray at the University of Kentucky, for his ability to articulate these concepts with profound clarity. We have three basic devices for expression on our instruments, the modification of dynamics, time, and articulation. Music can be given character and excitement through the use of crescendo and decrescendo, acceleration and rallentando, and by manipulating the attack and length of a note. These tools should be used to capture and communicate the spirit of the music and tell its story. Of course moments in music are not all created equal, thus the largest of gestures should be saved for the most significant moments. The musician should strive to create contrast with every day nuance, grandiose gestures, and everything in between.

The ability to demonstrate musical expression is one that must also be developed over time. In constructing a musical plan start by playing the ink in regards to all of the expressive markings and terminology. Should a term find

its way into your music that you do not know, look it up. A pocket music dictionary provides instant gratification for this purpose and is an essential practice tool. Next, analyze the music's theoretical syntax as a means to determine where important moments exist. These occasions are often framed by a tension and release, which must be communicated to an audience. This can occur on a small scale, such as cadences within a phrase. Tension and release also occurs on a more broad scale, most often through the departure, manipulation, and triumphant return of the primary tonal and thematic material. It is crucial to listen to music in order to emulate these techniques and to absorb its characteristic style. Often it can be trial and error, but when that moment of genius strikes, mark your music and make a plan! Finally, be sure to exaggerate every gesture. It may seem like you are "overdoing it" but given the low frequencies of our instruments and the physical space in between the performer and audience, it is necessary to clearly dictate your musical concepts.

While these methods can be tedious they can also be successful. We have all had experiences in performance that have inspired us to make sacrifices for our art. And while such a methodical approach to practice may seem in contradiction to these inspirations, they can help the individual make music to the best of their ability. Do not just work hard, work smart. With an organized approach to practice the individual can reach their goals quickly and turn talent into ability. 

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