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A TONAL APPROACH TO THE TROMBONE SLIDE POSITIONS

by Michael Stroeher

Questions of choice and appropriateness of alternate positions have always been problematic for trombonists. Students hear conflicting opinions from teachers, and many of the method books seem quite arbitrary in their suggestions. Does one use alternate positions to create natural slurs? To correct intonation problems? To minimize slide movement? Should one use the shortest possible positions for sound and security?

The answer to each of these questions is yes, sometimes. But when? If the trombonist has to debate and decide which position to use every time there is a choice, the player will be prone to mistakes and hesitations, especially when under pressure.

The dilemma of trombone positions was resolved for me by John Swallow, who provided a simple rule of thumb. In this article I propose a scheme which expands on Swallow's solutions, taking into account all of the above questions, plus a few more. The result is intended to be a coherent arrangement based on fundamental musical principles. **Essentially, it is nothing more than a matter of semantics: of what we call the primary and alternate positions of a given pitch**. With a little practice it can become automatic. However, it is not my intention for the trombonist to be doctrinaire, dogmatic, or inflexible. There are exceptions to every rule.

There are several different schools of thought concerning trombone positions. The two extremes can probably be found in statements by Reginald Fink: "Use the positions which use the shortest amount of tubing whenever possible,"[1] and by Tom Malone: "Move the slide as little as possible. Do not move the slide unless it is necessary."[2] These two views may not always necessarily be mutually exclusive, but Fink goes on to say, "I would caution you about using too many alternate positions. Intonation, tone and security must not be sacrificed for easier right arm work."[3]

In my studies with John Swallow, he insisted that a musical line be played as far as possible in the same "air chamber"

(harmonic mode, or partial), sometimes resulting in the use of alternate positions. He was especially adamant that half steps be played in adjacent positions for smoothness and uniformity of timbre. The intention here is to systematize these principles.

The system I propose is based not upon tube length or on movement of the right arm, but on tonality. In other words, the student should learn *keys* rather than just positions of notes. Even today the great majority of music performed is still in a tonal idiom, so using key to determine positions should have a great deal of applicability.

As we all know, a scale is a particular arrangement of whole and half steps. In the major scale the half-steps fall between scale degrees three and four and between seven and one. In tonal harmony each half-step has a particular function: the seven-to-one semitone is the resolution of the leading tone; the half-step between three and four represents the resolution of the seventh of a V[7] chord (the fourth degree of the scale) to the third of the tonic chord. In each case one of the tones of the adjacent semitones has a definite tendency to resolve to the other, so in order to accentuate these tendencies, especially in a legato style, the two notes of a half step should be connected. The same premise can be applied in a general way to all semitones: a half-step is usually the resolution of an active tone of some kind, whether it is a leading tone, seventh, flat ninth, augmented sixth or any such resolution.

In the matter of connecting the half steps, the trombonist can take a hint from what has long been the practice among string players: "The fingering should be such that the leading note and tonic are on the same string, thus fulfilling the requirements of harmony that the leading note should lean towards the tonic, and ensuring that they have the same tone quality."[4] This same uniformity of tone quality is easily achieved on the trombone by playing the two tones in the same harmonic mode (which is our equivalent of a "string").

In addition to uniformity of tone color, the practice of playing half steps in the same harmonic mode requires the use of a legato tongue, which can be much smoother than a natural break. Those who may still be reluctant to use alternate positions may benefit from advice from Edward Kleinhammer: "There are occasions when an alternate position would be of great technical value, but is avoided because of its strangeness or stuffiness of sound. These valuable alternates can be cultivated as 'friends' of the player by the simple practice of playing the tone first in its familiar position, carrying over the sensation and tone quality of the prime position to the alternate position."[5]

Part of our problem with alternate positions goes back to what we learned as beginners, especially when we were told to play d[1] in first position and later learned flatted fourth as an alternate position. However, since the first two keys most often learned by beginners are B-flat and E-flat it would be more logical and consistent to introduce the D in fourth position as the primary position. The first position D can be introduced in the context of the key of F (chances are the student will have discovered it on his own). Fourth position D has the two-fold advantage of connecting the D-E-flat half step and less slide movement. Therefore, in the keys of B-flat and E-flat, the primary position for d[1] is flatted fourth, with first position being the alternate.

This idea is hardly new. Maurice Faulkner states, "The youngest of students can learn the auxiliary positions, both close and extended, and should study them in order to improve his ear, tone and flexibility,"[6] and Marvin Rosenberg is of essentially the same opinion: "Because alternate positions are an integral part of superior technique, beginners should use them almost from the start."[7] Jeremy Kempton quite validly points out that ". . .if a student is not taught alternate positions early in his career he becomes more reluctant to learn these positions later."[8] (I have encountered graduate students reluctant to play d[1] in fourth positions.) Kempton later goes on to

Example: 1

Example: 2

Example: 3

Example: 4

Example: 5

Example: 6

Example: 7

Example: 8

SEMPRE ff

practically state the premise on which this article is based: "Because the best position choice depends on the *context* [emphasis added] in which it is used, avoid telling the student there is only one correct position for each note."[9]

The only problem with Kempton's last statement is that if we teach a student three different positions for f' (for example) and let him make his own decisions about the context, chances are there will be just enough hesitation, especially in sightreading, to momentarily throw him off. My premise is that in tonal music we already have a built-in context: the scale. If the student learns a set of positions for each scale which places the half-steps in the same partial of the overtone series and uses these positions while playing in that key, from the very beginning, he will be using many of the so-called alternate positions *in context*, without having to make any split-second decisions. This process is closely analogous to the pianist learning each scale as a set of finger patterns which determine his fingerings while playing a piece of music. It would also provide the trombonist with another advantage which the pianist has: that of each key having its own particular "feel."

In addition to establishing tonality, this tonal system offers many potentials for an expressive and facile legato style. The trombone, being the only wind instrument capable of a true glissando, is also capable of a legato approaching the smoothness of a vocal legato. Since the legato tongue can be much smoother than the natural slur, the trombonist can use alternate positions to a double advantage. First, he can avoid "the roughness which the quick shifting from close to far positions will produce,"[10] as illustrated in Example 1.

Example 1:

Carl Maria von Weber,
Romance, mm. 43-44

Secondly, he can take another hint from the practice of string players: "In a singing passage I. . .would use fingerings for the purpose of tone color."[11] Example 2 shows such a passage where uniformity of tone color is achieved through alternate positions.

Example 2:

Camille Saint-Saëns,
Cavatine, mm. 48-51

The practice of using alternate positions

to take advantage of natural slurs for intervals greater than a semitone will give the trombonist a great deal of facility in rapid slurred passages (see Example 3).

Example 3:

Johannes Rochut,
120 Melodious Etudes from the Vocalises of Marco Bordogni, Vol. 3, No. 96, mm. 94-95 and can also contribute to an easy, relaxed swing style (see Example 4).

Example 4:

Thad Jones,
Tiptoe, mm. 93-95

The ultimate determination of the position the trombonist uses should be musicality and tone; "correct fingerings are not enough if they are merely the most efficient, technically. One should ask, do they give the right expression for the phrase, and is it suited to the style of the composer?"[12]

Just as in mathematics, no closed system is complete within itself, no one system in music will be without exceptions, especially if expression is the determinant. The first exception is a matter of equipment: on an instrument without an F-attachment it is impossible to play A# and B in the same harmonic mode (however, this is one argument in favor of the F-attachment).

Another exception involves high register security. It is often much more difficult to produce a good legato tongue than a natural slur in the uppper register, and so if the alternative is between a lip-slurred half step and a cracked note, the choice should be obvious. An illustration of this option is the second trombone solo in the Mozart *Requiem*. The ideal positions in this passage (see Example 5).

Example 5:

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart,
Requiem: Tuba Mirum, mm. 17-20
just may not be secure enough, and it is better to be safe than sorry.

The short grace note, even at the interval of a half-step is much more successfully executed as a natural slur; indeed, this is another opportunity for using alternate positions (see Example 6).

Example 6:

Johannes Rochut,
120 Melodious Etudes from the Vocalises of

Marco Bordogni, Vol. 3, No. 95, mm. 96-98

Two final exceptions to the proposed system that do not necessarily involve connected half-steps are against-the-grain passages (see Example 7).

Example 7:

Frank Martin,
Ballade, 3-5 mm. after rehearsal 11 and the harmonic tremolo (see Example 8).

Example 8:

Andrew Imbrie,
Three Sketches, second movement, mm. 118-120

The trombone is a melodic instrument, and the trombonist therefore must always be concerned with a sense of musical line. The tonal approach to slide positions provides a way of giving a melody linear direction through uniformity of timbre and smoothness of legato. Since the trombone is capable of the smoothest legato of all the wind instruments, this capacity should be used to all possible musical advantage.

Allowing tonality to determine the ideal positions would also make slide positions more automatic. Such an approach would greatly facilitate sightreading, especially in some of the more "difficult" keys such as G-flat and B. The slide, which has often been a source of awkwardness in trombone playing, can become a mechanism of fluidity and flexibility, and above all, musicality.

Endnotes

[1] Reginald H. Fink, *The Trombonist's Handbook* (Athens, Ohio: Accura Music, 1970), p. 73.
[2] Tom Malone, *Alternate Position System for the Trombone* (New York: Synthesis Publications, 1974), p. 9.
[3] Reginald Fink, op.cit.
[4] I. M. Yampolsky, *The Principles of Violin Fingering* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 57.
[5] Edward Kleinhammer, *The Art of Trombone Playing* (Evanston, Illinois: Summy-Birchard, 1963), p. 62.
[6] Maurice Faulkner, "Developing Facility in the Alternate Positions," *Instrumentalist* 23 (November 1968): p. 61.
[7] Marvin Rosenberg, "Alternate Trombone Positions: First Year of Study," *Instrumentalist* 26 (May 1972): p. 72.
[8] Jeremy Kempton, "Alternate Positions on the Tenor Trombone," *Instrumentalist* 34 (February 1980):p. 5.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Maurice Faulkner, op. cit., p. 62.
[11] Joseph Fuchs, quoted in Samuel Applebaum, *The Way They Play*, vol. 1, p. 38 (Neptune City, New Jersey: Paganiniana Publications, 1972).
[12] Louis Kauffman, ibid., vol. 1, p. 87.

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