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Better trumpet playing

A book concerning the mental approach of playing the trumpet

The importance of breathing, sound and efficient studying

Thirty general exercises

Fifteen exercises for a strong embouchure

Loet van der Lee

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Introduction

During my college years, study trips and concert tours, throughout the past 30 years I have had the opportunity to meet and get to know many great trumpeters. Aside the important questions concerning artistry, the basic technique was also always an important subject. How do you get the hang of it? Time after time we discussed how the system of making sound and checking it came about. To me it became clear that there is a fundamental skill that can be seen as a common denominator, concerning the trumpet technique. A simple foundation that can be applied to all genres. Applying this skill puts you in the position to play the instrument with a decent sound over a good range. Further elaboration also concerns the extremes such as developing a good double-tonguing technique and developing a very high and a very low register. It is up to the musician to afterwards apply their personal and own artistic input.

The important and general rule is that a trumpeter must prioritize their sound and feeling. If it sounds good and it feels good, it's all good. This rule is a simple and beautiful foundation with only a hint of Buddhist influence. Questions pop up immediately; What is a good sound and what is a good feeling and the answer to these questions expose the brutal complexity of this rule. The good sound of the trumpet is rich with overtones and is filled with the identity of the player. It can move, comfort, and amuse the listener, but also place sharp accents, in all common musical genres.

Society's need to experience and create music is unbelievably strong. Making music is boundlessly accessible. Language barriers, music genres, or cultural/spiritual backgrounds are not in the way of the creation of music. People of all layers of society and every part of the globe create – and enjoy – music as a defining component of their cultural and social identity. The participation of music in which there is experimentation with own ideas, stimulates creativity, enriches the soul and expands the cultural horizon. It brings people together, solves conflicts, and contributes to prosperity. As an outspoken advocate of creating smaller more reachable goals to achieve a bigger goal, in this book I will gladly put myself to the thorough investigation of learning how to play the instrument of the trumpet.

The reason that I as a young man of nine years old, chose for the trumpet to become my instrument, is a combination of coincidence and experience. The instrument was simply assigned to me at the local fanfare (De Vriendschap, of the town of Schoorl in North Holland). The realization that through creating a pleasant and personal sound, I had found an extension of my personality, made me never stop studying and playing the instrument.

I have gathered the most important subjects concerning the playing of the trumpet in this first part of the book and arranged them into short chapters. Thus, the first chapter is about the importance

of breathing and sound. There are also a couple of exercises to effectively work on your breathing. Included are a series of practical subjects and pointers with regard to all the important aspects of playing the trumpet. The chapter following is about how you can study effectively. These are general and practical explanations on how you can achieve a good result with limited time and effort. The second part of this book consists of fifteen practical exercises for a strong embouchure. Each exercise has an explicit explanation of its usefulness, necessity, and procedure.

Thanks to this simple instrument, in the past thirty years I have been allowed to travel the world and get to know different cultures and customs. Music is made with people, and you get to know them like this in a direct and sincere manner. It has also enabled me to leave my humble fingerprint of a mark through writing music and presenting it to the audience. I sincerely hope that anyone that puts in the effort to study this book and use the exercises, will, with a good feeling, become a more enriched musician.

SAMPLE

1. Breathing

The normal respiratory cycle is intended to provide the body with sufficient oxygen and sufficiently expel carbon dioxide. The breathing technique that the trumpeter must make their own, is one of the most important components of the trumpet technique. A good sound and a good embouchure will never develop without a continuous and well controlled breath current. A well-controlled breath support can ease the playing of the trumpet tremendously and learning how to breathe consciously and with control can have a tremendous impact on study habits and state of mind whilst practicing the occupation of a trumpet player.

Breathing is closely connected to the human being. There's a reason that yoga and Zen techniques make use of breathing to reach the core of the subconscious steering of the body. A human cannot survive without breathing. The sound generated by the grace of a breath is also alive and alike the breath itself, comes from deeply within the human that produced it. Learning how to deal with – and the control of – breathing is therefore of interest to someone that wants to create living music for the audience.

1.1 Controlled inhaling and exhaling

Breath support is how fast and how often you inhale and exhale with control. That sounds easier than it is because it embraces all the facets of control. It mainly concerns the tempo and volume. Because there is a (high degree of randomness?) inside of your body, we will among others use the abdominal muscles to exert influence and direction.

During inhalation, the chest expands and air fills your lungs. The diaphragm is an important muscle for respiration. This is a sheet of muscle that separates the thoracic cavity from the abdominal cavity. The diaphragm presses the ribcage outwards and simultaneously presses the abdominal organs outwards and down.

The muscles in between your ribs maintain the tension of the ribs, and that is how a negative pressure is created so the air can flow in through the air pipes. All the aforementioned muscles relax when exhaling.

The diaphragm returns to its rounded shape and the chest, affected by gravity, drops back down and presses the air out of the lungs. A common breath takes in around half a liter of air, yet a very deep breath can take in 1.6 to 2 liters more.

A trumpet player is taught to make use of their maximum lung capacity (volume). This is not always essential for playing, but good to know. The lower parts of the chest and lungs are much bigger than the upper parts. Besides, the so called floating ribs are located at the bottom of the ribcage. These can move freely. If you breathe deep and low, the chest widens and the diaphragm flattens. Because of this, the lungs can expand downwards. Also, the floating ribs can move outwards and thus the lungs can expand outwards. This is also known as thoracic breathing. In principle, in thoracic breathing the shoulders remain low. It is possible to lift them ever so slightly, but they must fall back into their previous position once you start to exhale.

To properly practice thoracic breathing the abdominal muscles must be relaxed. Optimal relaxation is achieved through a calm exhale. Once the lower part is optimally filled, the upper part of the lungs can fill up. Hereby the chest expands further, which puts the rib muscles under pressure. This is also known as clavicular breathing.

For a trumpet player it is essential to, in a way ('put pressure' on your lips.?) After all, the air has to be released as a constant stream with high speed and optimal control to make the trumpet playing possible. To achieve this, we use the diaphragm, the ribs and gravity. We're talking about exhaling through the instrument. In between playing phrases, it's important to just exhale (freely). Not only do you drain the damaging remaining air, but it also initiates the necessary relaxation.

Once your lungs are completely filled, you always directly exhale. When you flex the abdominal muscles, these exercise pressure on the abdominal organs, which subsequently exercise pressure on the diaphragm, and in turn exercises its pressure on the lungs. This is how the air from your lungs is released at a high speed. Where there is more or less pressure of your abdomen, there is more or less speed of the air. The speed of the air released from your lungs is determined by the amount of pressure of your abdomen. That's how you can indirectly control the (very powerful) diaphragm.

The respiration of a trumpet player is a natural given. The unnatural aspect is the maximum air intake and control of the outgoing airflow through use of the abdomen and in turn the diaphragm. The aim is to be able to go through the whole inhaling and exhaling process without interruptions, so relax (exhale), inhale low, inhale high and breath out. The moment you flex should coincide with the moment you breathe out. By inhaling and exhaling on the tempo of the piece you have to play, you're not only practicing your breathing, but also your timing.

To achieve a good control of your sound, you must have a constant airflow. You could compare it to a garden hose (windpipe) that's connected to an open faucet (airflow coming from the diaphragm). The water is released as a constant stream (good tone and control). If there is a kink in the hose (unnecessary tightening or cramp of the muscles), the water will be coming out hacking and stuttering (bad tone, no control). That's why it is important for a trumpet player to sit straight or stand. This results in the body and the muscles to be able to relax evenly and proportionally, whilst the airflow remains uninterrupted and can continue as a constant flow.

1.2 How do you learn to breathe correctly?

For adults, learning how to breathe ‘low’ can sometimes be experienced as unnatural.

As a newborn baby, you breathe like that unconsciously while sleeping. First of all, it’s important that you learn to relax. Your chest and stomach will only be able to expand and thus create tension if you relax. A good way to have someone experience and feel deep breathing, is to use the emergency breathing method.

EXERCISE 1

Breathe out calmly, audibly and gradually, with one hand on your lower stomach until there is no air left. This will create a kind of vacuum. You feel your hand sink. Then you inhale in only one try. The lungs will fill up and you’ll feel your lower stomach expand. The stomach will expand as a natural result of the inhalation. The stomach will stay in its place while playing a tone and thus won’t shrink back in.

EXERCISE 2

Sit on a flat chair with your knees next to one another, bend over and grab your feet. Now breathe in without raising your shoulders. (If you’re relaxed) you will definitely feel your stomach expand, since it’s impossible to breathe ‘high’ in this position.

EXERCISE 3

An easy way to activate your respiration is to take a couple of controlled breaths, of 4 counts in and 8 counts out, in a slow pace.

One problem you may encounter with low breathing is often how tense your abdominal muscles are as a result of nervousness, for example. You can flex and relax your abdominal muscles without taking in any air. You will experience how the relaxation feels and apply this to low breathing. The exercises of James Stamp (*Warm-ups + Studies for Trumpet*) are very useful for achieving that low breathing feel.

Playing the trumpet is a top sport and a top sport athlete will always present himself as relaxed before delivering a top performance. Examples of such relaxing are sitting 100-meter dash athletes, yawning speed skaters and marathoners that take a quick nap in the taxi to the starting block.

Relaxation should always be the focal point when applying these breathing techniques so there can be a subsequent transition into a great effort.