

Eric Berlin's Workshop

Practice Space - Physical Space

This is the first in a series of articles I am calling "Practice Space" which will discuss techniques for effective practice. It seems only fitting to begin with the physical characteristics of an optimal practice space. Everyone's circumstances are different, but you may be able to incorporate some of these ideas to improve your own space.

In the late 1990's and early 2000's I spent countless hours practicing in an amazing church in the Boston suburbs. A good relationship with the clergy and organist scored a key and security code which allowed me to practice late into the night whenever I could. It was in this space that the most dramatic improvements in my playing were made. What I found in those magical days was not only a space which made me sound good, but a place where I could truly remove myself from all distractions and focus entirely on the task at hand. Practicing at home or in my office has always been difficult with the constant reminder of and ease of access to the rest of life. There are always emails to answer, laundry, dishes and the worst distractions of all, the television and computer. This place was a true sanctuary!



An ideal practice space.

This space was the ultimate embodiment of what I believe are the best attributes for a trumpeter's practice space:

1 Size

2 Isolation

3 Resonance

1 SIZE - Find a larger space if you can. Let's face it, nobody likes to practice in a small room.

This is largely for your own protection: as trumpeters, we produce a lot of sound. A former UMASS student did research on noise levels at the Royal Academy



Eric Berlin

Photo: Andrew T. Foster

of Music in London as a result of the European Union's new standards for workplace noise levels. Upon his return, he gave a fantastic presentation to the entire student body on the result of his findings. Trumpet and trombone rank as the loudest acoustic instruments and cause the most damage to our hearing.

The most interesting thing to me was that the person suffering most from a lead trumpet was the player him/herself, not the bassoonist in front. Putting out this much sound in a small room only adds to the impact.

A larger room also helps you hear your sound more realistically. The physics of the trumpet do not allow us to accurately hear our own sound directly. We must wait until the sound is reflected back to us to hear it and that

perception is skewed by the internal compression from producing the sound itself. The best option is to record ourselves, but there will be more on that later. In most small rooms engineered for practicing, the environment is acoustically dead and designed to absorb those frequencies which we yearn to hear. I spent many hours in these rooms and didn't realize that I was playing louder and working harder to get the sound I wanted to reflect back to me to no avail. To avoid this pain, when you need to use one of these rooms, I recommend using

ear plugs and tune in completely to the sound in your own head. You would be amazed at what you can accomplish!

2 ISOLATION - If you can find a room which is physically removed from the distraction of other people and distractions of your own making, all the better. This is often unrealistic, but can often be accomplished in other ways. While at the New England Conservatory of Music, we would often hang a jacket over the door window to shield us from the prying eyes of those looking for a friend to talk to. It is best to leave the laptop and smartphone behind or at least powered off.

3 RESONANCE - In contrast to most practice rooms, my practice church had a four second reverb that allowed me to play arpeggios and hear them ring as a vertical chord. Nice way to find out if you play in tune with yourself! Not everyone can find a church with four second reverb to practice in. (Doc Severinsen is a big fan of stairwells too!) However, small rooms, carpeting, acoustic tile and low ceilings deaden the sound. Although harder surfaces will make the space louder, it helps give a more accurate picture. If a space forces you to play harder to get the sound you want, you will ingrain bad habits and possibly injure yourself.

With all of this said, making an absolutely perfect practice space in one's home is difficult. Do the best you can. As for my own space, I laid claim to one quarter of my basement for my dedicated practice space. Finishing the space was not difficult as 3/4 of the basement walls are concrete. The fourth wall still had exposed fibreglass insulation. My first step was to enclose the insulation and make a hard reflecting surface. With plastic sheeting and a staple gun, I laid a vapour barrier to further insulate and protect the new wall I was about to install. To create a better reflecting surface, I used furniture quality plywood sheets which I cut to fit. Regular plywood would have been okay, but for \$5/sheet difference, I felt the smoother surface would not only look better, but may reflect better. Once these sheets were attached to the walls, the experience of playing became MUCH easier.

Once we have the physical space, we need to equip it with a fourth component which can be brought to any space:

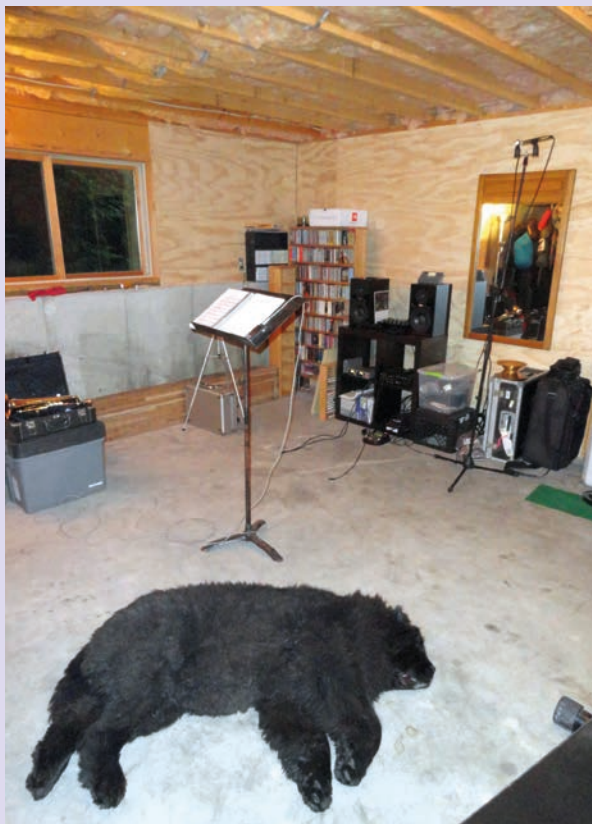
4 TOOLS - Stock it with what you need to improve and objectively assess your progress.

- * Mirror
- * Metronome
- * Tuner
- * Chromatic Drone
- * Amplified speakers or headphones
- * Recorder!!!

A mirror is important especially as we are looking to change physical habits, especially posture. Metronome, tuner and tone generator are important ways to hold ourselves accountable to something objective. Most important to everything in coming articles is the inclusion of a recording device of some sort.

In my home practice space, I have a rather elaborate setup including a mixer to channel a drone and metronome into some very powerful studio monitors and a pair of good condenser microphones feeding into a digital recorder. I also have a very good pair of studio quality headphones.

It is not however imperative that you invest in the above to be productive. In fact, many of these functions can be found in inexpensive or free apps for your iPhone or other smart phone. My iPad has replaced much of my more cumbersome equipment, but I sometimes want to have more than one thing at work at a time. Supplementing a good digital



Improved space and practice buddy, Tessie.

recorder and quality earphones will make your practice time in any space more productive. Especially if you can capture your sound in a resonant space, listening back to your practice recordings, you will be best able to understand the result of what you put into the horn.

So, find a good space to practice where you will be as far from distraction as you can manage and then equip your space with the ability to record and assess yourself while the instrument is not on your face.

(adapted from original post on americantrumpeter.com)

Next post: Practice Space - Mental Space

Yamaha Performing Artist Eric Berlin is Principal Trumpet of the Albany Symphony Orchestra and Boston Philharmonic Orchestra, Associate Principal Trumpet of the Colorado Music Festival Orchestra, a member of the Boston Modern Orchestra Project, Artist/Teacher of Trumpet at the University of Massachusetts and member of the Board of Directors for the International Trumpet Guild. In addition to his titled positions, he has performed with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, New York Philharmonic and

Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra. He has commissioned, premiered and recorded numerous works for trumpet and can be heard as soloist on MSR Classics and Albany Records. www.americantrumpeter.com

Centre Stage Percussion

Earlier this year, a new percussion brand was launched by Martin Gernon and Jon Davies, aimed primarily at bands and orchestras. Centre Stage Percussion was born!

Building on the success of the now market leading Centre Stage Uniforms brand, Martin, a life long percussionist in many leading UK bands, most recently The Fairey Band, and Jon Davies, one of the most eminent bass players in the UK, teamed up and set about designing a set of instruments that would not only sound incredible, but also had the robustness and build quality to be thrown on and off band buses the length and breadth of the country!

Rather than offering the range through distributors and music retailers, they chose to sell direct to end users, thereby keeping prices extremely competitive.

Martin comments: "The starting point for our range of instruments, which go from drum kits, concert snares, hardware and mallets through to full orchestral standard tuned percussion, was to have a point of difference. There are a lot of

good instruments in the market place today, but not many produced with the passion and care for sound that we instilled into the design, and not many built with robustness in mind. It takes a different instrument from one which is permanently situated in a concert hall to one which will clock up several thousand miles a year in travel!"

The brand values instilled at Centre Stage Uniforms of price, quality, service and choice have definitely been carried over to the percussion business.

The sheer quality of the instruments has been recognised by already attracting some famous endorsees. Paul Patrick, Principal Percussionist at the BBC Philharmonic endorses the full range, whilst the world famous Black Dyke Band, newly crowned British Open champions, exclusively use Centre Stage sticks and mallets for all their performances.

Martin's business partner Jon Davies explains: "We wanted a range of instruments that we would be proud of, would be happy to play and recommend ourselves ahead of other famous brands

and would create an identity for Centre Stage Percussion. Since launching in January, many professional and semi-professional players have tried the instruments. The unanimous response is that they are excellent and not only compare favourably in terms of sound quality with our major brand competitors, but also represent incredible value for money! With endorsees such as Paul Patrick echoing this, we are confident that the range stands up to the most professional of scrutiny."

The full range of instruments includes full professional marching percussion, drum kits in maple and birch shell finishes, concert snare drums (including hand hammered copper, which is exquisite!), cymbals, hardware, professional timpani, tubular bells, marimbas, xylophones, vibraphones, glockenspiels, concert bass drums, incredible gongs and tam tams, congas, bongos, hand held percussion, and an incredible array of sticks and mallets.

All instrument ranges are held in stock with fast delivery.

For further information, please visit the website at www.centrestagepercussion.com or call on 01422 882885.