

Eric Berlin's Workshop

"To Err is Human"

This idea is something that trumpeters (and all brass players) have to accept. "I play trumpet, and therefore, on occasion, I miss. We sometimes miss more often than we would like of course, but we must accept this possibility if we are going to actually say something which anyone wants to hear. Too often, we get so caught up in hitting the right buttons and "not missing" that we forget that the point is to express something. Nobody pays anyone to merely get the right buttons down at the correct time. There must be much more to music or we would have been replaced by MIDI orchestras and that Toyota robot long ago.

The regular rattle and hum of my refrigerator, as I write this, is not something that I consider music. There may be some that challenge this, but to me, music is a method of communicating. As with any art, it begins as a picture in one person's mind, transmitted through an instrument such as a paint brush, pen, trumpet, or voice so that it can enter the mind of another through the eyes or ears so that the image can be shared.

The act of reaching toward perfection is important and admirable. This can be your practice room priority when you are working on your technique. But the purpose of perfect technique is its ability to communicate that which is uniquely human. That human component is what makes music more than just sound, but art.

As I write "To Err is Human" and suggest that humanity is what separates music from noise, I must also ask "What does it mean to be human?"

When I need a definition, my first stop is Merriam Webster's Dictionary. I must admit that a personalized edition sits on my shelf as a gift from a friend and fellow trumpeter who is an editor at large. Thanks Peter Sokolowski! Here, I find the following definition which speaks to me and what our job as artists is.

Human: susceptible to or representative of the sympathies and frailties of human nature

This definition describes what is most meaningful for us as artists. Accept that frailty and imperfection is part of what it means to be human!

When the wheels start to come off with my playing, my brain is most often wrapped in knots focused on "not



Eric Berlin.

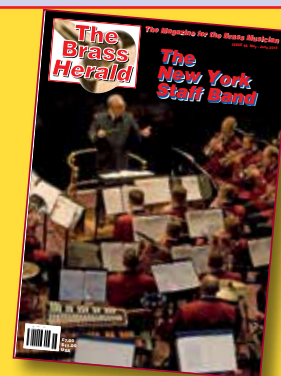
screwing up". In these moments, there is no flow, no expression and certainly, nothing worth listening to. While in this place, I can usually recite a laundry list of what I should NOT do and the consequences of FAILING to successfully navigate this minefield.

In those moments when I find myself so wrapped up in what "not to do", I try to catch myself and take a piece of sage advice from my mentor, Charlie Schlueter: "Give yourself permission to screw up." When I was missing everything, he could sense where my thoughts were. This simple reorientation of thought got me out of my own way and allowed the music to finally flow. The result of that permission was not

only more engaging music making, but more accurate playing. It worked while I was a student and still does today.

In your practice, make a point of setting aside a large portion of your session to just perform. This is a time to completely let go and trust the good work you have done. If the first time you do that is on stage, it will be a completely foreign experience. During this portion of your practice, allow yourself to truly separate yourself from judgement of good or bad and engage in "playing" your instrument. The only "mistake" in this portion of your practice is not taking a chance. Push the envelope of what you can express and see what you can come up with. See how many ways that you can shape that phrase. Charlie constantly encouraged us "never play it the same way twice". That experimentation is how you define who YOU are as a musician. Vincent Penzerella used to say to me "If you don't have your own personality, it is wrong." "Playing" your instrument is what we did as kids. Stay in touch with the essence of what made us love playing our instruments in the first place.

As you strive to build your technique, make sure that you keep in touch with the purpose behind it all. Force yourself to say something meaningful and unique when you have the horn on your face. Push yourself out of your comfort zone and "Give yourself permission to screw up". Embrace your humanity without fear. If you say something meaningful, the message will resonate whether or not you have perfect spelling, grammar and punctuation.



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