

Eric Berlin's Workshop

Upside Down (Descent with Intent - Part 1)

This is going to seem like a rather dramatic idea, so buckle up.... I believe that beginning trumpet players would be more successful if we started them on a high C. Yes, a high C. During the first decade of my career, at times I taught 60 young students each week and saw some really terrible setups. At the college level I see how an inefficient initial setup can persist. This article is my musing about what could happen with a dramatic shift.

We begin students in the lower register because it gives the largest margin of error to successfully get a sound out of the instrument. I often demonstrate this by playing with the horn off to a far side of my face or using my tongue as my bottom lip. Combine an improper setup with a fingering chart of "right answers" instead of a focus on the pitch and sound produced and we have a recipe for possible disaster.

Regardless, a kid can play "hot cross buns" in his/her first lesson with lips set improperly, but at what cost? Once the inefficient embouchure is established, a student begins to work with it, or more precisely against it, to navigate the simple tunes in low part of the staff. This inefficiency works, with some effort, for the limited bugle range of the instrument, but not much else. In addition, as each new note given to a student in our beginning method books is higher, students get the obvious impression that higher is harder; compounding physical obstacles with mental ones. With an improper setup, ascending to the upper



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register becomes a battle of pressure, tension and struggle.

Fast forward to the aspiring music major entering college. Each year at auditions I see many beautiful musical souls struggle to express themselves through crippling fundamental embouchure issues. It appears that those who succeed as great brass players have found a more efficient setup by 1) fortunate accident, 2) uniquely outstanding early instruction, or 3) had difficult work to retool once they reached college.

For you trumpet players (other brass players can try it in their own ranges), do an experiment - take a full breath, play a low C (concert Bb) and sustain it. Observe the feel of the lips, the aperture, firmness of the corners, the mouthpiece pressure etc. Sustain and then ascend up the scale two octaves and gauge the difficulty. Now, start on a C (concert Bb) two octaves above and slur the scale down to that same bottom pitch. Observe the feel of this low C and then ascend back to the original note. As long as you have enough air left, there is a pretty good chance, even for us seasoned professionals, that the high note will be easier to reach when it was the starting pitch than when we set up two octaves lower. How different did the two low Cs feel? What does this tell us?

I believe I was fortunate enough to find a functional setup by accident, but I did then get great instruction as I became a more accomplished player. The first time I had any real awareness of embouchure was as a senior in high school when Frank Kaderabek told me to *firm my corners before putting the mouthpiece on*. I remember trying to imitate my teacher's embouchure in a mirror and magically adding an easy fourth to my upper range.

At New England Conservatory, my primary mentor Charlie Schlueter told me to *grip the air* as a way to keep the aperture together. Watching him warm up over the years was also enlightening, aside from his incredible focus on breathing, he "checked the templates" by playing very soft air attacked notes in the upper register above high C.

At a masterclass at Boston University during that time, I heard my late colleague Rolf Smedvig explain: "It is easy to teach kids to play trumpet; say MMMM, firm the corners, put the mouthpiece on and blow." This of course comes straight from his mentor Armando Ghitalla.

A decade later, Vince Penzerella gave me a more detailed understanding and a brilliant illustration of the embouchure as a donut. If the hole is too big, we squash the donut to make the hole smaller. This is at the root of pressure problems. It was his instruction to *think of high C as neutral pressure with a small aperture moving forward to descend and simply retracting back to a point of rest to re-ascend*. He also reinforced Arnold Jacobs' concept of *bringing the resistance to the lips* and that *the embouchure should be formed before the mouthpiece is placed*.

In one of the priceless conversations I have had with Doc Severinsen, still the ultimate trumpet geek now at 88 years old, he described his current quest for the elusive perfect embouchure this way: "You know how sometimes you are working on an engine in your garage and decide to tear it all down, clean it with gas and start over? Well, that's what I have been doing and you know what? It all comes back to what Benny Baker told me all those years ago: firm here (pointing to his corners) and loose here (pointing to the centre of his lips)."

Whenever I find that I need to adjust a student's embouchure, these are the words of wisdom that guide me. What they all have in common is that they set to an embouchure with firm corners and a smaller aperture. When the embouchure is formed in this way and THEN the mouthpiece is applied, what results is a high pitch that often surprises the student. That becomes home base for all further work.

What would be possible if the wisdom of these giants could be applied to beginners? Ponder this until the next issue when I will give ideas of ways to refine whatever embouchure we have with these principles in mind.



The Brass Herald Editor with the great Frank Kaderabek in Banff in 2008.