

Getting Your Buzz On

(a friendly warm-up for trombonists in today's world)

Welcome to another PDF version of the Podcasts, ladies and gentlemen. This is an explanation of Episode #123, which can be accessed via the internet at:

<http://tbonegib.podbean.com>

Hopefully, upon reading this, the video will make more sense to you.

Thanks, by the way, to all who have written, responded, donated (!), and reacted to recent episodes. There is an abundance of Trombone Love around the world, as it happens. Ours is a wonderful community, we must never take that for granted, eh? Many of you are reporting to me that we have entered an interesting time. It seems lately that the global economic/political turmoil is weighing upon more and more of us. Reports are coming our way from around the trombone world:

Gigs are becoming fewer for some of us. Seasons shorter. Hours longer. Students, often burdened at home by a parent losing their job, are canceling their lessons. That's putting a lot of stress on many people in our communities. Orchestra players are dealing with some very harsh realities and in many places are opting for pay cuts, altered programs, fewer guest artists. Patronage in many places is way down. Academic positions are more frequently being filled as one-year interim gigs. As the supply side climbs, the wages often fall. Undergrads are thinking hard about their futures. Argh! So many of you have reported such things. One could reasonably argue that times are tough for many trombonists. I would argue that trombone players are tough, too.

This story will pass. This era will end. This phrase will cadence. The symphony will go on and I'm guessing return to the Major in glorious fashion. Let's not forget that we've been through this kind of thing again and again. A lot of our viewers, in fact, have seen worse things in their lifetime.

I am with the optimists on this one, as you may have guessed. It's an optimism, I hope, that falls short of idealism and functions from the realm of positive realism. I am reminded of FDR's words, which ring so well across the intervening decades, "the only thing we have to fear...."

Recent emails, phone calls, conversations, and observations have hinted that fear is creeping among us, though. We don't like it one bit. Not in ourselves and not in our friends. Chins up, bells up, everybody! Tempered steel is stronger, after all. Music only benefits, it seems, from personal struggles. It's all good and we're all gonna be better for having this experience. It's already happening....that is inspiring. I've seen more gestures of good will and kindness on a daily basis around here. Plus, I have met a lot of "born-again" trombonists who, sometimes unexpectedly, have found more time to practice! That's a very good thing. It seems, too, that those who have it really good are realizing that more deeply and are benefiting from that realization. Music and the trombone are even more important to our lives, maybe? That's a very, very good thing. In other words, in a sea of bad is an ocean of good. It's completely dependent upon your perspective.

Perspective is one's reality, after all. So, here are some basic principles I've been kicking around in my head that I would like to share. In sharing, maybe my experiences can help someone else. In many ways, though, this is meant as a reminder to myself. Here goes:

- Music is reflective of the life experience. Boring lives make for boring music.
- Music is more varied and more delicious than ever before. There literally is something for everyone. Despite all rumors to the contrary, my very carefully scrutinized empirical evidence proves that the laymen is a better listener and a more knowledgeable audience. A better *appreciator*!
- When stresses increase in our lives, we had better become better managers of stress. Breathing well really helps manage stress. Good breathing habits are encouraged via the trombone.
- Within you is a sensitive, deeply feeling, highly emotional, very vulnerable Self. Right next to them stands a Smiling Warrior. They both have a right to be heard. They both bring their brand of Love.
- Worry (future) and regret (past) are clear indications that you have left the "now". Life functions more effectively and completely in the now. A good musical experience is one that happens in the now. A good musical performance is one that happens in the now. Music leads us to the now, whether studying, playing, discussing, pondering, or listening to it. (Ideally, much more listening than anything else. Sometimes we simply need to listen).
- Revered structures, in many cases, have proven faulty. Economists, politicians, financiers, all are reevaluating structure. Why not us? Maybe we, too, can move on to new experiments in our daily habits and make some new discoveries for ourselves. Change, whether good or bad in your view, is and shall always be. A better coping mechanism and more harmonious alignment with that simple and unalterable fact might do us good, no?
- Ensemble playing (from 2 to hundreds) is perhaps the most life-affirming endeavor ever devised. From it, the purest joys can be extracted. The most glorious achievements can be done. The strongest feelings of community can be had. We have all felt that at times. We all are capable of feeling it every time. It's a matter of choice. Perhaps we have become complacent?
- At some point in your musical development, an obligation to share is attained. Be a teacher. Call, email, or Facebook your teachers and thank them for what they've done for you; then share your experiences with others that might look upon you as a leader.
- String Theory. That damned String Theory. I won't insult you by giving my unschooled version. I would refer you to physicist Brian Greene and his colleagues. Some of you have heard this from me before, but I *swear* there's something there! The universe vibrates. The Harmonic Series is real. Dissonance and consonance are significant. Creating good vibrations not only resonates in our beings, it *means* something. I just don't know exactly what. I am hopeful that one of you will write a dissertation to enlighten us all! In any case, it lies at the heart of matter.

With those thoughts in mind, then, I am experimenting in my daily practice. Often, I find the disconnection between the mind and body puts me in a less effective, less efficient mode of playing. I hear it in my students, too. Remember the teachers who preached to us “SING your part!”? Or the jazz educator that warned “learn to transcribe”? “Play what’s in your head”? Those teachers knew that your music gets better when completely understood in the mind. Transcribing, singing, humming, dancing, conducting yourself....all of this helps to enrich your understanding of the music. I have taken to doing more and more of it, as have my students.

Fertilizing the “story-telling” elements of your music is a healthy practice, too. Like a good novelist, try establishing a sense of time, place, character, and plot to your etudes and excerpts! Attempt to suck us all into your story as you play. Inevitably, your phrases will assume more “life”. At the same time, your enjoyment grows as your self-conscious fears subside. It’s a win-win! (More on this subject in a future episode, surely.)

To establish a healthy mind-set and more quickly build the mind-body bridge, then, I have modified my warm-up as of late. It has become more of a free-for-all. I take a minute or so to quiet the head, then just pick up the horn and make noise. Make vibrations. Don’t think. PLAY. For how long? Who knows. How loud? Whatever. Fast? Sure. Lip slurs? Love ‘em. Triple-tongue? Why not. Over chord changes, drones, or along with other musicians present? OK!

You get the idea. This is *your* time. Enjoy every savory drop of it. The joy is the point. The only goal here is to re-acquaint your Self with the LOVE of trombone. How it feels, how it sounds, how it smells, how it looks. The center of your brain that has directed hours and hours of your practice- namely, the analytical and logical brain- is not welcome here and now. If you are so inclined, deal with it later. For now, though, play in a way that could easily be mistaken for: meditating, exalting, dancing, or praying.

Think about the person deep in a meditative state, or a prayer. What physical signs are observed? Calmness, no furrowed brows, relaxed bodies, gentle breathing patterns, a clear gaze, hints of a smile. When you have been in such a state, what mental and emotional cues have you felt? An intuition of “peace”, maybe? Stillness? Brotherhood? Love? Confidence? Balance? It seems very obvious that this is a state of mind that we should seek as often as possible. Judging from recent conversations, many of us could benefit from it. Why do we sometimes forget when we pick up the trombone? Why do we allow the thing we love to *add* to our daily stresses? Makes no sense.

I don’t have an answer for that other than to say we are too prone to leave the now and too anxious to bind ourselves to a single perspective. Thankfully, we have the Trombone to lead us out of this darkness. That’s what I’m letting it do each morning nowadays: wake me up and tune me up. In the process, I am giving thanks as sincerely as I can muster. Thanks for life, thanks for music, thanks for it all. It feels really, really good. That is precisely the point. In my own playing and that of my students, I have noticed a tendency to forget. Physical, financial, and

emotional stresses have only exacerbated the issue and that is why I have strengthened my resolve. After all, I *am* thankful for the trombone. The rest of the day always goes better when I start with this reminder. Truthfully, every phrase is better when born of this mindset. Our favorite players are good at staying in that mindset. That's what makes them our favorite players.

Far from being a waste of time and an exercise in esoteric hollowness, this simple practice is transformative. I call it "getting my buzz on", because that's what it is. My lips are buzzing, my body is buzzing, and my mind is buzzing. Later on, after you've "gotten your buzz on", you will dig in and get down to the necessary business of building your technique. You will most likely discover the techniques coming faster now. A lot of you will discover that you hear the music more clearly in your mind, thus having a more concrete concept of what you're trying to *project* into the world. In other words, you will have a stronger impulse than ever to hone your technique and invent a few. Musical ideas will enter your calm mind and you will feel the need to express them. That may be in the form of a lip slur, a scale, an articulation, a phrase contour, a dynamic swell....but the bottom line is you will discover and perfect the technique to make it come out *just* right. Just the way you hear it.

It's tough to stay there, though, in that state of mind and that state of being. It's tough to keep your buzz on. I know this and I suffer lapses all too frequently. Especially when I worry or harbor regret. When the buzz is on, I don't have those thoughts. That's where this "warm-up" routine is helping....I hope it helps you, too.

Video episode #123 shows my process. It's mine. You do what you do. Follow your instincts, quiet your mind, calm the body. I welcome you to peer into my head, as I welcome any comments you might have and/or experiences you are willing to share. Chins up, bells up! Let's make some noise.....enjoy the video.

-Dr. Tom