

Ladies and Gentlemen of the University of Michigan Trombone Studio (Go Blue!),

It is my pleasure to work with you this semester, and I hope with the limited time we can awaken some thoughts, perceptions, and discussions. Over the course of the semester, we will have 8 Studio classes. I will present a topic for discussion at each of these meetings. If you have ample time, it would be great if you did some preparation for these so we can have very lively discussions!

I'm going to do my best to present these topics in a logical order, but really that isn't necessary, or even possible. Non-linear thinking is a good skill to have.....this will make for good practice, right?

I'd like to address the following topics:

- The Big Picture
- Articulations, A Matter of Style
- Quality of Motion, What makes a Phrase do what it Does?
- Technology, Your Friend and Ally
- The Art of Teaching Privately
- Selling Yourself: Entrepreneurial and Professional Skills every Musician Needs to Master
- Ensemble Skills, Playing Well with Others
- ? (the last session we do together will be a Topic of your choice.....we'll have a vote)

Let's start with the "Big Picture".....or "What does the Future Hold?".....or "What am I supposed to do with this Degree?"

Chapter 1: The Big Picture

I remember as an Undergrad having a very vague picture of the future. All I wanted was to play trombone. If I could spend a lot of time playing, and get the bills paid, great! I wasn't very specific about the details. I'm sure you all have felt similarly, so let's begin there:

What is it about trombone playing that ignites your passion, makes you feel alive? Please take a few minutes and make a list of those things. (Go ahead and do that now, please, and read no further until you have your list in hand. We'll refer to it later.)

My list looks like this:

- sound intrigues me. The beautiful sound of the trombone seems inherently "good" and worthy of further exploration.
- striving towards musical goals makes me feel like I'm not wasting my life. Makes me feel like I'm bringing something good into the world.
- I like the people I play with. They're interesting and diverse.
- I like the travel opportunities.
- I marvel at the works of the Masters, and most of the minors. Musical creation strikes me as being one of the highest art forms....thus, one of the most noble human pursuits.
- making music involves the entire mind and body.

I'd be curious to know if any of you have listed something akin to: "my trombone will make me money, get me a job". Now, think about your friends studying Engineering, Law, Communications....somewhere on their list is likely to be a sentiment such as: "I hope to land secure employment, get a good job, etc.". Certainly they have passion for their studies. The most creative accountants are as creative as the best musicians. They also seem to have pragmatic expectations that their knowledge and skills will be marketable. See, they don't just want a job. They expect a good job that's rewarding and has interesting challenges. My hope for you is that you, too, have such expectations for yourself. How can you position yourself for such success in the marketplace? How is your vocation going to pay your bills?

First, remember always that what you do is make Music. Be sure of it, and do it in a multitude of styles. Make sure you are a trombone player, not a trombone operator. What's the difference? One uses technique to serve the Muse. The trombone player knows that at the end of the day, the communication they may have made with a listener is most important. They seek meaning in every phrase. They play with sincerity. They make strong efforts to connect with the listeners; to "tell a story". And....they're usually having more fun than the operators. Someone having fun is projecting a "vibe" into the room. That energy is real. That's the energy the audience came to absorb.

Think about it this way: people that listen to you are the ones who will buy tickets, CD's, mp3's, drinks at the bar, make bids at the silent auctions, buy T-

shirts and bumper stickers, lend rehearsal space, print free programs, buy ads, help promote... they pay your bills! You are a business. Your business is joy. Your beautiful sound had better speak to them in a manner in which they can relate.....which they enjoy (enjoy: take delight in). You can't play above them, down to them, beneath them, nor despise them. Play directly at them. *That* connects with other human beings.

Inherently, we know this. Yet, we often get mired in the muck. What I have discovered is that too many wait for too long for the "seal of approval". That may come in the form of a compliment from a teacher (you have a chance!), a call for a certain gig (you've really made it now), a rumor overheard (so-and-so said she sounded amazing!), etc. But there seems to be often a waiting period for many young players. They suspect that they're pretty good, but they await final decree from someone in the know. If you can appreciate that, I offer this advice: Life is way, way too short to wait around. I'd also offer this: that person in the know often ain't. When it comes to *your* music, nobody is more in the know than you. As your teachers, we can do much but we cannot know your heart. (somebody please ask me about jazzier Bob's lesson at this point in class, OK? Thanks.)

Arnold Jacobs spoke of "playing interrogatively". That is, playing questions instead of statements. I think that's a beautiful way of putting it. Not only do people really want to hear what you have to say, you'll be much happier playing in this spirit. Bobby Shew once said: "don't do anything *seriously*, but try to do everything *sincerely*." Another beautiful sentiment and one that I try to recall every single day.

Even very technical studies, which we all simply must do...injecting them with musical shape needs to be a habit. Make sure your technique is serving a musical end. Know very clearly (VERY clearly) in your imagination what the musical goal is, then seek and perfect the best techniques to convey it. By doing that, you position yourself to do well at auditions. The best jobs, the ones you want, will require that. Besides, when you get good at it, others will want to play with you and for you. People will want to listen to you and they would appreciate your opinion of their playing. They would like your opinion on a variety of musical subjects, as a matter of fact, and that's how musical traditions get passed. This will all happen because you are playing directly at your listeners and making real connections.

(In this context, a chipped note is likely to occur on occasion. As you trust more and more, blow more freely and easily, these will likely become more and more rare. But pretend I never mentioned this.)

Many of you probably play this way already by Nature. Never lose that Nature. Take both criticisms and praises with a grain of salt and keep them always in perspective. Do sincerely thank those that give praise after a performance. You have done your job well when that happens, obviously. Bravo. If this persists, you are likely to find yourself working a lot. But where and for whom?

It's a changing economy we find ourselves in, a changing marketplace. Not just for musicians, either! We're alive at a very interesting time for our country and our world. Lots of things about how we "go about business" are

being sorted out. While many people see gloom and doom, I rather see a restructuring and a needed shuffle to the order. One trend that I can see, and fully expect to grow, is an ever-increasing appreciation for quality. By that, I mean that most folks I know are taking stock of what's really important to them and their families. In doing so, most are realizing that getting everything as cheaply as possible has its downside. You get what you pay for, right? There are societal impacts that go along with our consumerism. Qualities of life are affected. It seems to me that many Americans are grappling with that conundrum. How does that relate to us as musicians in the marketplace?

Not long ago, synthesizers were set to take over the world. Fake horn lines were heard everywhere. They didn't sound any better, but they were much cheaper. Also, some ensembles decided it was easier and cheaper to play along with electronic instruments or recorded tracks as opposed to real people. Those trends are reversing. The Internet has made for some savvy music listeners (and watchers: YouTube) and they're beginning to know quality when they hear it. Music producers, a few that I've seen, are willing to dip into their initial profits to make a product that withstands scrutiny.....and withstands the test of time, thus making more money in the long-term (go figure!).

In my opinion and from what I have witnessed, we are becoming a society that once again more fully appreciates and enjoys the human interaction of Music. That *connection* is real energy. We tried for a while to allow electronic circuitry to satisfy our musical appetites, to no avail. Certainly, some creative music exists in the electronic realm, but we more often now use technology to assist, not replace, real musicians. We will always crave the performer-audience interaction. It's in our DNA, quite literally. When your audience arrives, they want an experience. If you can deliver, you can count on more audiences in the future.

Are there still orchestras, ballet companies, Broadway shows, and recordings that employ digital devices in lieu of real mammals? Absolutely. Truthfully, some are even used in creative, fulfilling ways. Are there still "pop" musicians capitalizing more on their image than their musical substance? Sure; but I see those numbers dwindling as I see new musical outlets and opportunities spring up. Pop music is what it is. Personally, I'm a fan. Much of my living, and a ton of my fun, has been made in more commercial environs. The attitudes that frown upon that I'll never quite get, but so be it. Musical taste is what it is.

There is no doubt in my mind, though, that the exposure to music via the Internet has educated the masses and continues to do so at exponential rates. Surprisingly, when I turn on the radio now and scan the stations, I hear a lot more interesting stuff! Great production. Some interesting harmonic things, good balances sometimes.....all good musical meat for my ears. There's more of it all around us than at any time in history. That's something to be thankful for, to be sure. I often wonder what Mozart, Bach, or Beethoven would do if put in such an atmosphere. (One thing's for sure, they all would've made more cash I bet.)

More and more people, as I say, are developing an eye and ear for quality. That means that better writers, recording engineers, software developers, producers, etc. are rising to the fore. That's good news for all of us, because this often results in rewarding collaborations and fun projects. Broadway shows, big

bands, studio recordings with real horns, TV programs with live bands.... all seem to be on the rise. Hooray!

What about the orchestral world? Many of you are destined for this world. The quality of that music will never cease to attract us, right? The joy of performing with a great orchestra is like few joys we will ever know. There are some harsh(?) realities for your consideration: (I mention these not to dissuade or discourage, but to inform and prepare you)

Fewer recordings, shrinking audiences, curtailed seasons, and depleted budgets are the norm. Every friend of mine playing full-time in an orchestra in the US has taken a pay cut this year. I have not heard of a single major orchestra raising salaries or increasing budgets. The future is not bright, especially when compared to the recent past. My advice in that regard comes from one of my mentors: "Great players will always be in demand, just make sure you're great", as Doc Marcellus once said. If it's not a salaried position to start, there are other opportunities to cover some bills while you practice, practice, practice (and learn some rep.). Local orchestras, community orchestras, in many cases, are indeed growing audiences. Per-service gigs are on the rise. Chamber music series are proliferating as people grow more and more connected to their communities and opt for "staycation" lifestyles. And you know what? They're getting their money's worth. As an artist in such a community, you can market your music directly to your neighbors and be engaged in the cultural life of your town. That's living the dream.....on the way to a bigger dream in many cases! (Moving from blessing to blessing, as some might say. And why not!?)

My point: your musical future as an orchestral trombonist may very well involve a lot of local orchestra and chamber gigs. It might involve commercial playing. Are you prepared? Are you ready to hustle? For the entrepreneurial spirit, which you better be, opportunities to create and share your music sometimes abound in your own backyard. Your communicative skills should not end when the horn comes down. It is wise to develop skills that will help you to educate and grow an audience. Be able to speak to teachers, parents, principals, conductors, city council members, corporate big wigs. Those skills are not learned in the practice room. We'll speak more of this when we get to the Entrepreneurial topic, but rest assured you came to the right school in that regard.

There are political realities in nearly every orchestra, too. Are you ready for this? (To be honest, it was at this point I had planned to launch into my tirade about "why do we sometimes treat each other with such disrespect in orchestras?", or "do we really pull ourselves up by putting others down?". You get the picture..... I have indeed witnessed some vicious behavior. I've seen once-proud men and women retire into hollow cynicism. And it can be heart wrenching. But, you know what? That's liable to happen anywhere and my only advice is this: The Golden Rule works everywhere, every time. Further, The Golden Rule is valid whether reciprocated or not.)

The pressures we put on ourselves to always be at the top of our game, coupled with the stresses coming from management to pinch every penny: these can often create a difficult working environment. When stress comes, you better

be ready to handle it. The happiest orchestral musicians I know have a variety of methods to handle stress. Some are into exercise (hiking, biking, running), some do meditation (good for the mind, body, and the trombone playing!). Most have interests and hobbies that take their mind off the stresses of the gig: woodworking, reading, car repair, collecting vinyl, etc. Such hobbies are great outlets for one's passion.

There are habits I've noticed, too, in the more ambitious players. In the mid-tier orchestras, one tends to find 2 types of people. There's the group of people who have found their bliss and are quite content on the present gig. Then, there's the group that is gunning for the "next level", often seeking to get into a "Top 5" orchestra. These musicians never seem to stop setting goals: recitals, solo recordings, side projects, etc. In many cases, I have seen them achieve their stated goal of making it to the highest level. In other cases, they're still striving. When you're striving so hard, it's easy to become impatient. Persistence, though, is a common trait among the most successful players. (Somebody ask me about Russ at this point in class, OK? Thanks.) Counting your blessings and plowing ahead are keys for success. One will keep you from getting "dark", and the other will move you to your next adventure. When stresses bear down, fatigue sets in, and darkness calls, I remind myself of the Big Picture. Life is short. Making music is a privilege.

And I often think of Music itself. What is it? What are the materials we use to create music? Is it simply organized sound? What differentiates it from noise? From whence does it derive its powers?

In a word, it's vibration. Nothing is heard that does not vibrate. Nothing is seen, felt, tasted, or touched that does not vibrate. When you create music, you make vibration happen. Know what else in the Universe vibrates? Everything! In the world of Physics, the superstring theory has shed a lot of light on this topic. It's a very compelling and inspiring explanation of the Universe, especially for us musicians. The theory, when grossly over-simplified, says that when you slice any piece of matter into its smallest parts, what you have are "superstrings". Take your trombone, for instance. Cut it in half. Cut it in half again, and again, and again. Once you reach molecular pieces, be careful when you cut, right? There's an awful lot of energy in a single molecule, or single atom. We have the worst evidence of this, eh? That energy, apparently, exists at the level of "superstring". That's when you can cut no further, at least with today's technology. A "superstring" is defined as: a hypothetical particle that is *the* elementary particle in a theory of space-time, or a hypothetical object consisting of a very small one-dimensional string that *vibrates* in ten (or more) dimensions.

When I first read the writings of physicist Brian Green (Google him! Then YouTube him), I was spellbound. I, like you, have always had a sense that Music held an almost supernatural power. Its ability to resonate in human beings from around the world, from all cultures, and throughout time was proof to me of its magical beauty. What superstring theorists like Mr. Green are saying is that yes, indeed, all matter is "composed" of vibration. I extrapolated that concept and made my own deduction:

All of the Universe around us (read: everything) is Music

Organized vibration. Everything. Even us and all our parts. We are musical events participating in an inconceivably large musical work. As to who or what is causing these vibrations, who is “composing”- that is far beyond the scope of this class, highly subjective, and intensely personal. Suffice it to say: the material (vibration) that you’re dealing with when creating music is the same material that is used to create everything that has ever existed or shall exist long after we’re gone. Now, if that’s not enough to make you show up at every gig with a humble spirit, ignited mind, and thankful heart....

As musicians, we are permitted to play with the building blocks of the Universe. If you prefer: we are re-enacting the very moment of creation on a small scale. I consider this a gift that is accompanied by some degree of responsibility. If you focus on that and keep that in mind, you’ll be happy (er). You’ll remember how fortunate you are. When you’re happy, you don’t bring negativity. You’ll smile. You’ll laugh. You can keep things in perspective. People are more apt to want to be in your presence, so you’ll get more calls for doing it again. From a purely technical standpoint, when you think about the profound nature of resonance and vibration, you’ll tend to play with a prettier sound, blend more easily, and the body will be less tense.

So.....Big Picture: musical opportunities abound because music is the essence of all. The world will always need it and crave it. To tap into the opportunities that await you and to make the most of them for a rewarding life, keep things in perspective, stay in the moment, and strive for the utmost sincerity in your sound.....let it be a reflection of you. Be bold, be adventurous, be flexible, be always at the ready.

Now, more harsh reality:

A percentage of you will not be playing trombone 10 years from now, I’m sorry to say. Life will lead you in other directions, or you may hit a wall of frustration that you simply deem unworthy of climbing. If the former, congratulations! Being true to oneself and listening closely to ones heart is the ONLY way to be happy. Nobody is making you do this but yourself, after all. Listen to yourself. I know many happy and terrific musicians with “day gigs”. You do, too, I imagine.

If the latter, I hope that before you put the trombone away, you consider all the blessings it has bestowed upon you. The people you’ve met, the places you’ve seen, the sounds you’ve made and heard, the feelings you have felt, and the thoughts you’ve had. Maybe by recounting those blessings more often and more fully, you can avoid this unhappy day. But realize that economic realities and time constraints can force you

to re-direct your focus. I have friends who have slammed the case shut in utter disgust (some after long careers and some with careers that never took flight according to their expectations). Those friends, I hate to say, were playing for the wrong reasons. They were seeking what the trombone could not provide. That has a bit to do with their training and the mindsets they established as students. In almost every case, these people were happier the *second* they put it down. That had nothing to do with trombone, and everything to do with their perspective. Luckily, I've met a lot of people who have found their way back in later years. If they could speak to you now, I wonder what they would say? Something to ponder, I suppose, before you slam the case shut. Time for a change of perspective?

If, down the road, you find that you just cannot make ends meet while playing trombone all day every day (it happens), but your heart is still in it, then I hope you'll be like my other friends: the ones who play whenever they can and shower the audience with a flood of great energy; the ones who don't consider themselves a failure in any way; the ones who cherish music as much as anyone; the ones who found peripheral careers and discovered talents they never even knew they had; the ones who know themselves well and are quite comfortable in their skin. These are some of my favorite people to make music with, in many cases. Happiness is what it is. (Insert Mark anecdote).

In any case, keeping the Big Picture in mind involves a whole lot more than the silly trombone. What kind of person do you want to be? What goals have you set outside of music? Have you written these down? Do you have a personal creed or motto? If not, what would it be? In your heart of hearts, what do you truly believe? Then.....how can the trombone add value to your life and the lives of those around you? Read your list again, as it might provide some insight.

You see, it works like this: opportunities and successes are magnetically drawn to people that emit POSITIVE energy. Energy is vibration. When you know yourself well, are in the moment, and have mastered enough technical aspects of the trombone to communicate what's on your mind, you are well suited for emitting immense amounts of positive energy. Ready? Set? GO!!!!!!

Food for thought before we meet again.....write me with questions or comments. Peace.

-Tom Gibson
9/1/09