

Yamaha's "Day of Trumpets IV"

Trumpet Clinic
October 13, 2007
4:00 pm, New York City

Presented by John Hagstrom

These notes are meant to supplement the Yamaha video podcast of the trumpet clinic that I presented as part of Yamaha's "Day of Trumpets IV". They provide additional context to the topics discussed in the clinic and, in some cases, represent ideas originally included in the clinic but omitted from the video podcast due to time constraints.

John Hagstrom, December 10, 2007

Introduction

It was my honor and pleasure to accept Yamaha's invitation to present this clinic at their fourth "Day of Trumpets" event. I've performed with Allen Vizzutti on a number of occasions, and this was a wonderful opportunity to play with and learn from him again. He will always be influential as a musician and educator to me and countless other performers.

Although I've been fortunate to present at a number of trumpet clinics, this was the first time that my presentation was recorded for video broadcast. In this context, the masterclass format was less ideal; particular issues that might come up in performances by local students in front of an audience could be too specific or irrelevant for a wider audience after the event. As a result, my presentation focused on general ideas about teaching and playing that could be more useful to a broader group in the future. The hour-long clinic has been edited into a video podcast that is somewhat shorter than the original presentation. These notes are meant to supplement the video podcast and address a few details not discussed there.

My purpose in presenting these ideas is to help conscientious students discover common threads in the ideas they have already heard, and perhaps add context to those concepts. These materials are not meant to be definitive judgments about any topic. The most successful students are those who realize that everyone on the journey toward mastery of an instrument can choose to travel among a number of well-intentioned pathways leading toward their goals. While it is possible to disagree with the premises underlying any one path, it is not my intention to polarize any of them as wholly good or wholly bad.

I like to think of myself as being—if nothing else—a good student of other players, whether I studied with them directly or not. One of my main goals as a teacher is to encourage the idea of openness to new information that can find common ground with previous teaching and experience. As we continue to discover more optimal directions toward progress, we will also continue to grow and find the answers to the individual questions that each of us seeks to resolve, both personally and in performance.

Yamaha

The work and process that Bob Malone and I have invested over many years to discover and optimize the features used in Yamaha's Artist Model instruments are too voluminous to discuss here completely. However, two main ideas underlie the success of these projects. First, attention to detail and reproductive accuracy in Yamaha's preproduction process is the primary reason why these instruments have been able to capture the attention and preference of professionals and aspiring students everywhere. Second is the development of a successful design recipe that came about through a logical process of analyzing and investigating variables one by one and in various combinations. This is similar to a positive practicing model that is careful to retain what is working but allows for continuous experimentation to provide improvement using established standards of excellence as benchmarks for success.

No Specific Trumpet Instructions

Although this presentation covers general qualitative aspects of trumpet tone production, I do not intend to give very specific instructions about how to play the trumpet. Although this may seem counterintuitive, it is easy to misinterpret and be led astray by general verbal instructions about a subject as physical and individual as musical performance. For that purpose, it is better to attend lessons in which a teacher can play for a student and then analyze the student's attempts at specific improvements one-on-one. As a result, most of this class focuses on concerns of aspiring players aside from the actual physical gestures of playing the instrument.

Are you ready?

One of the most influential experiences on me as a student was in 1987 at the Eastman School of Music listening to Wynton Marsalis challenge the trumpeters to find our own answers to difficult trumpet problems instead of relying on him to attempt to describe his own techniques. Marsalis spoke about how we all may not recognize the answers we seek until we are "ready to hear it." From this perspective, we must always be on guard for how we might be standing in our own way and not be "ready" when the answers we seek are given to us. I have often realized that a big trumpet "discovery" I've just made was actually something I already knew but had been too impatient to work on with careful discipline earlier.

Warm Up Your Improvement Process

No matter the way in which a player intends to apply the skills he or she is attempting to master on any instrument, there are some basic strategic habits we can all develop more effectively to discover, retain and reinforce new insight as we practice.

Take a moment before each practice session to check for these ideas:

Clear Thinking Versus Superstition

It is important to make sure that we are not making false conclusions about what is responsible for any particular improvement or fault that occurs in our practicing. These miscalculations are often the result of trying to do too much at once and not proceeding toward our goals carefully. For example, a performer could judge a trumpet as inferior because he or she tested it on a musical passage in which mistakes were made in fingering coordination.

When we falsely associate some action or thought with what we believe to be responsible for our success, we are guilty of being superstitious. In the same way that some baseball players are known for wearing a special pair of socks or performing some ritual as a way to hit more home runs, we can all inadvertently start to do things we believe make us “lucky” as we attempt difficult tasks in our playing. A small amount of this kind of artificial support is acceptable if it helps your confidence in a moment of stress, but superstition that motivates performers to undertake large amounts of rote repetition every day before feeling ready to perform will likely be a barrier to good playing. It is always advantageous to reinforce the coordination of your playing, but overdoing this kind of behavior can result in fatigue that may cause problems in sound quality or endurance, for example. Think clearly when making decisions about your practicing.

Logical Problem Solving

The best way to retain a newly achieved capability as part of your playing is to have a methodical sense of how it was constructed. The need to understand specifically how a particular task is performed is different for each player. Most importantly, you must be able to find a path to arrive at the same consistent level of skill every day. As a young student struggling in school, it was obvious to me that my overall level of performance was not at the level of a professional. Yet it was comforting to know that my ability was consistent every day and that I was gradually building on it. Inconsistency in your playing can result from the absence of a logical approach that leads consistently to the same level on a daily basis. Be more logical and methodical if you are frustrated by skills that are intermittent.

For example, this is the approach I follow to rebuild my intonation and tone color control each day. As a second trumpet player, virtually every note I play in the orchestra is adjusted in terms of pitch and color to match the first trumpet and bridge that sound into the sound of the rest of the orchestra. This is an extremely important facet of my playing that must be in top form at all times. To control pitch placement and tone color independently, however, I must be able to navigate separately my skills controlling (1) the immediacy and constancy of my air and (2) my reactions to the vibrational resistance of the instrument. To do this successfully, I must solve any problem I encounter when attempting to deliver the air consistently to the instrument; and also clear any obstacle in how I react with agility to the instrument’s resonance reflection.

I must first calibrate and reestablish my air habits, and then also coordinate the timing of my reactions to the way my trumpet resists and reflects air and vibration. If I don’t target these two areas first, I am unable to attain the necessary agility I rely on to make independent pitch and color adjustments on the spot, both in rehearsals and performances. I solve this problem—successfully recreating my intonation and color control—every day, because I logically rebuild the skills that are the component parts of its consistency. Of course, none of this control will be useful if I am not also actively *listening* in every moment for a sound and very specific pitch that make the notes written in my part optimally compatible to the principal trumpet and the rest of the orchestra.

I use the logical method described above on a daily basis to control intonation and tone color independently. I’ve used this example only to provide a concrete illustration of my approach to solving one particular problem logically and methodically. However, I don’t expect that other players would necessarily control these aspects in the same way or that the verbal description of my method is the same as the verbal descriptions other players would use to explain their methods. It is

important to note that we ultimately learn to play through *listening and sensation*, and then some degree of intellectual understanding and description comes later.

Fear Management

Fear is a sensation we are very likely to experience when trying new ideas that can cause us to sound remedial during our practicing. This is normal. If we resist fear and react to it with superstition or aggression, we will be lessening the potential for our best efforts in the long run. Allen Vizzutti recommends letting performance or practice anxiety flow *through* you instead of trying to resist it as a way to make your own best effort successfully. I was able to play my best when auditioning for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra (CSO), for example, because I managed my fear successfully. You should *expect* that fear can and will be part of trying new ideas as you work crudely in areas where you may not have much natural ability.

As musical leaders, trumpet players can expect themselves to be tough and invulnerable, but every professional musician I know deals with some kind of fear or anxiety before big performances. The important thing to know is that fear is normal, and learning to manage it will be the key to your success. When professional musicians talk about fear, they use the vocabulary of “excitement” in playing or “feeling the energy” of a performing opportunity. They have reoriented their perceptions of any fear to be a force that is more active and positive.

As we all practice, it is important to be aware of the way that we manage our fear. When fear gets out of control, we can start to feel demoralized and think negative thoughts about much more than our playing. This is a poor habit. Check yourself frequently, and do not let fear get out of control. Become familiar with it and recognize it when it occurs, so that you can quickly identify it and channel it positively before it takes a negative path. The beginning of each practice session is a good time to give yourself permission to fail on the way to success. The healthy way to react to failure and fear is to look for the opportunity to make changes that help you improve in your next attempt!

Emotional Facility

In the same way that great actors have an arsenal of strong emotions they can tap into to bring their characters to life, you must prepare yourself each day to be able to conjure up strong emotions that facilitate authentic musical expression to your listeners. Composers often call on the trumpet to make heroic statements, and in some cases use the trumpet to call forces into battle. Composers also write passages for the trumpet that express extreme tenderness and convey deep vulnerability. If your interpretations of these passages are to have their maximum power for listeners, you must already be in a state of expressive commitment and then apply your instrumental skills to play the notes in a way that can arouse these feelings in your audience too.

There is no way insure that your listeners will feel the same emotions that you do in any moment of musical expression, but all listeners can sense commitment and urgency in the way musical ideas are communicated. This commitment engenders curiosity and connection that draw listeners into your performance. As you hold the attention of your listener over time in a continuous way, a certain kind of trust and power is built with music. However, that engagement starts with the listener’s decision to tune in to your message at the start. If you are not therefore starting your performance with a committed emotional framework already engaged, it is easily

possible to send a passive message to the listener that gives them permission to react to your music with little interest.

The antidote to musical passivity is an agile technical, intellectual and emotional facility to communicate the feelings contained in the music. It is important to differentiate these emotions from the ones you might be having as you evaluate your performances and the concerns you may have generally about your playing generally. The best musicians I have ever heard are those who can focus their listeners more on the emotions contained *in* the music and less on those *about themselves* playing the music. The building blocks of that skill come about as we work each day to create emotional facility that best serves our musicianship.

“More Air” is the *Effect* of Good Musicianship, Not the *Cause* of It

As I stated earlier, this presentation avoids giving physical instructions about playing the trumpet to an audience with a wide variety of ability and experience—because words can be easily misinterpreted and cannot communicate the concepts that demonstration, listening, and physical analysis can during the course of individual lessons. However, I do encounter one topic in my teaching that I can comment on qualitatively in this context: the concept that a player should strive to “use more air” without understanding that using more air is merely a way to set up a vocally balanced stability in collaboration with the instrument. The goal is stability, which can be understood as equilibrium—a feeling of being balanced.

Many young players do need to increase the quantity of air that they use to achieve better results. However, if the majority of your awareness is focused merely on the attempt to blow a huge quantity of air through the trumpet, you can lose physical efficiency along with the awareness of a vocal narrative as the true master of musical power. Clear thinking keeps the “song” of your musical spirit as your top priority. Having thought through what you want to express, your choices about the use of air can be a *reaction* that optimally serves your intention to capture your listeners’ interest and curiosity.

A myth about CSO trumpet tone production—past and present—identifies a hyper-extended use of air quantity as the reason for the intensity and center of the CSO trumpet sound. This is false. In the years I spent sitting next to Adolph Herseth, he would comment privately that air quantity alone was, in his opinion, a false target for a trumpet player’s focus. Herseth was always listening for a vocally imitative energy and expectancy as he played and led the brass section. One instruction that I would hear him give to trumpet players above all others was to strive to imitate the energy and nuance of singing in their sound and approach to trumpet playing.

This advice assumes, of course, that aspiring players will have had a strong exposure to excellent vocal models. Growing up, Herseth recounts that his mother had opera records playing virtually all of the time, and so a strong mental recall of great voices is second nature to him. Each of us should take a moment to assess what quantity of exposure we have had to great singers. No matter what our experiences have been, we all need to stay committed to a regular investment of time listening to great singers in order to increase our musical fluency. Musical vocabulary is built in much the same way that a child learns to speak and understand the terms, grammatical structure, and abstract ideas that any spoken language employs and expresses.

Instead, however, I often observe well-intentioned players focusing solely on the quantity of air that they use as the way to guarantee that they are getting a “good sound”. The use of air should merely be a *servant* to balance the resistance of the instrument on the way to achieving a *vocally imitative sound*. As your mental voice becomes stronger, it becomes much easier to make adjustments to achieve this goal, and I have found that students often solve their own problems of imbalance as they become more easily able to recall the sound of an excellent voice with great intensity.

No Musical Shortcuts

Don’t expect professionally competent musical proficiency without the complete investments necessary to form the habits that support its mastery. Compare this process to the process you must follow to learn a language successfully. The same is true with respect to the instrumental and musical skills necessary for accomplished trumpet playing at the professional level. “Just hear it and do it” works well if you’re already versed in the vocabulary necessary to make fluent musical statements. However, glorifying pure volition as the sole means to mastery is not the most effective path toward improvement.

In performance, your conscious energy should be consumed by the intention to fit into the context of the moment and to inspire the audience with the musical story you wish to convey. However, a long path of investment in mastering the vocabulary, grammar, syntax, etc., that is an essential part of any language learning is a prerequisite to arriving at artistic mastery. Of course, it is possible to express ideas in any language with a very limited vocabulary, but that level of achievement can also result in functional illiteracy when communicating in more complex circumstances is required. All of us must keep investing in the skills necessary to remain fluent in the language of music, as those who are highly fluent in writing and speech never stop reading, listening, writing and speaking. We cannot expect that we have finished learning what will need to know for a lifetime of communicating when we have reached a minimal level of functionality. Don’t inadvertently ignore the ongoing need to continue learning additional vocabulary, inflection, literature, timing, context, etc., just because you feel comfortable “saying” simple things in a fairly effortless manner.

Imagine a first-time student of French who is taught with a pedagogical method that provides him or her with strong images of all of the trappings of France—visual art, cuisine, architecture, thought—and then expects that he or she can move effectively on that path toward the ability to speak French fluently without providing a strong emphasis on building vocabulary or an understanding of grammar. This is impossible. We are all aware of the folly in expecting this kind of short cut when learning a new language.

Learning a mature musical language is no different. You must be on guard not to be deceived by the temptation of what at first may seem like a musical shortcut. Be committed to the daily and gradual work of learning vocabulary and reinforcing your ability to imitate and pronounce new “words.” Your fluency with this “vocabulary” should be refined to the point where it becomes relatively effortless so that you can keep your conscious mind focused on the expression of musical ideas in the context of each musical moment. That was precisely the path you took to learn to speak and write a language with the real virtuosity that you eventually gained as a mature communicator.

Don’t avoid this approach as “too analytical” or “too mechanical” any more than you would discourage a fifth grade student from his or her continued learning of basic mathematics or

memorizing the vocabulary for the weekly spelling test. While this work may not be particularly enjoyable to the fifth grader, it is necessary if he or she is to have any hope of completing a functional education in the future.

We will each have a different list of the skills or “vocabulary” required to attain and maintain professional viability (assuming that you are looking for that kind of mastery). The skills I addressed under “Logical Problem Solving” that I recreate daily for purposes of intonation and tone color in my second trumpet playing are very specialized and perhaps wholly unnecessary for a professional player in another situation. However, they make up some of the prerequisite “vocabulary” for the control I need to be an agile companion to the principal trumpet in the CSO.

What is a Good Student?

The best students are conscientious. They bring out the best in their teachers and generally are a positive influence on their educational environment, which can be just about every place they go! Conscientious means being “painstaking and careful, or having the quality of acting according to the dictates of one’s conscience. It includes such elements as self-discipline, carefulness, thoroughness, organization, deliberation (the tendency to think carefully before acting), and a need for achievement.”

A respect and willingness for the process of trying new ideas and considering unfamiliar information is equally necessary. Students must also invest in respecting one another and learning from each another in ways that add up to at least as much as they learn from their teachers. If there is a quality in the educational environments of the schools that produce the most successful students, it can be summed up in this instruction: *be conscientious and help other students to do the same as you all learn from one another!* This was the environment of the Eastman School of Music while I was a student there in the 1980’s, and also for Allen Vizzutti there in the 1970’s. Working together in this way can happen anywhere, and every student has the power to make a much better—or worse—environment for everyone attempting to improve.

I have been in contact with notable players and teachers who are distressed at the attitudes of many students they currently encounter. I have seen these attitudes firsthand in some of the students I have encountered too, and the best word to describe what makes these students difficult to teach is *entitlement*. In some cases, students do not intend to communicate the idea that they deserve thoughtful instruction and praise no matter how little effort they contribute. But in other cases, certain individuals are brazenly certain of the best path they should take toward mastery of information they have yet to discover. Just a few misguided individuals can completely spoil the chances for an otherwise effective educational environment for everyone else. Check yourself to make sure you aren’t holding others back, or that you may be improperly expecting your teachers to help you to reach your best abilities without experiencing any discomfort.

Effort is a necessary part of improvement of any kind. Discomfort can be a sign of growth. If you feel unchallenged during your student experience, you are surely not growing at any rate that is worthy of your potential. Schools may not always enforce the levels of challenge and accountability that students need in order to grow effectively toward professional viability. As a result, it is your responsibility to keep rebuilding your motivation and commitment toward learning and mastery.

Too often, students have made a game out of how little they can do to still receive a passing (or some other acceptable) grade during their public school education. When this attitude is brought to college—or eventually into a professional working environment—the results are less than extraordinary. Whether or not you ultimately keep your job as a student or professional colleague, this attitude will result in lost opportunities to make meaningful contributions to your own development and to the quality and relevance of your organization. The concept of aesthetic “profitability” can seem somewhat abstract in the world of the performing arts, but we can take some cues from the business world in how conscientious accountability leads to innovation and relevance both now and in the future.

Professional Realities

Students should pay close attention to professional realities, particularly to how much these realities differ from the way that they imagine professional playing as they progress through school. I am not criticizing the protocol that is a part of being a professional; in many ways, the decorum that is prevalent in professional circles is the best possible way to accomplish all that must be done within the time allotted.

However, professional music making is not a family. This is a good point to remember as you begin work in the professional arena of making music of any kind. The strong emotions contained in music can make you feel like you are part of a family along with the rest of those who are making the music. The people with whom you work professionally, however, may not necessarily be our loyal friends despite the shared background experiences and common acquaintances.

In school, students often do perform with friends who are a strong source of support through difficult times. School gives students second chances as a matter of course, and committed teachers often will sit students down and explain what went wrong and how to do better next time. This is not necessarily the case in professional circles, however, and most often a player who does not perform well is simply dismissed without explanation. If your playing or professionalism has not met the expected standards of a particular group with which you have been hired to play, the players around you may tell you that you sound good but privately comment among themselves about what they did not like in your performance. This happens frequently in professional circles.

Professional music making ultimately operates much like a business. It is up to you to be critically analytical of your own playing and aware of the areas in which you need to improve. By making sure to be competent and prepared in good faith, the professional environment can be made more collegial and collaborative. Unfortunately, even steadfast competence is not always enough, and for reasons that are truly unfair, players can be dismissed without a clear explanation. As students, we often come to expect fairness and suitable recourse when we feel like something unfair has occurred. However, as you’ve surely heard before, “life isn’t fair”—and professional music making is no exception!

Recover in a Healthy Way

Diligent work on any problem over a long period of time is stressful. Attempting to become a professional musician is one of the most stressful aspirations, especially given all of the unknowns and the few professional positions available. Feeling frustration disappointment, injustice, fear, and

fatigue can make you unable to continue your work until you recover. This is normal and inevitable. Some players do not recover and decide to pursue another aspiration that will provide the kind of satisfaction they have been seeking from music performance. A student's experience in school is the time to assess carefully how much work lies ahead and whether it will be worth the price paid for the efforts invested.

All of us have reached for unhealthy thoughts that comfort us under stress. How to recover with the motivation to keep moving forward always involves a choice. Resist making yourself feel better by making others seem worse. In other words, don't criticize others as a way to recover from your own stress. This is a very unhealthy habit to acquire and a very difficult habit to break. Rather than simply resisting the temptation, you should have an alternative way to recover at the ready. Healthy recovery alternatives should always be available—at your side and in a “holster,” ready to be drawn and used when necessary. Take some time to recover briefly several times a day before the stress of your work becomes too overwhelming.

Personally, I recover by listening to music that gives me a sense of possibility and inspires me to get back to the point where I believe that positive things lie just ahead. We are all different, and can recover in many different ways without resorting to tearing down the abilities and efforts of others. It is difficult to get through a single day without observing someone recovering from stress in this way—perhaps even ourselves. Resist the temptation to join in. The first step may simply be to gain an awareness that the opportunity to choose a better alternative is always available.

Getting Ready for the Future

What is the future of music making, and how we can rise to the challenges that lie ahead of us all? Trumpet playing attracts and develops leadership qualities in those who aspire to master it. My goal here is to challenge the problem solving skills you already possess to focus on the crisis we are all facing as musicians in the current environment.

During the 2004 International Trumpet Guild Conference in Denver, Colorado, Byron Stripling eloquently asserted that the future of music is in an “emergency” situation with respect to the state of public school music education funding and standards, as well as our cultural and economic climate. Because of the dire consequences for the future, Stripling urged his listeners to react to this crisis with the attention and urgency they would bring to any other emergency.

How do we react to an emergency? I suggest that we commit to any plan for remedy from three perspectives:

- *Stop* the emergency from continuing;
- *Repair* the damage already suffered; and
- *Ensure* that the same emergency will not happen again.

A fire must be extinguished before the affected structures can be repaired. Flood waters must be pumped out before the affected properties can be rebuilt. In the aftermath of any emergency, intelligent minds will conceive of ways to prevent them from causing damage in the future. This is the reason that flame retardant clothing and smoke alarms were invented, for

example, and why buildings are now built according to codes derived in part from the emergencies of the past.

Clearly, the decline of music in our culture and our schools is not directly comparable to the suffering that can result from a fire or flood. But the destruction of the collective empathy toward one another that music can facilitate has very serious implications. We all can contribute to the effort to contain the current damage. Becoming actively involved in local school board decisions about music is a possibility for everyone who lives in a public school district. Encouraging any young person to begin the study of an instrument can change the rest of his or her life in an extraordinarily positive way. Adults who took just a few extra minutes to encourage me as a child ultimately made the difference for me and encouraged me to keep playing when I felt discouraged--by helping me dream of what I could do with music if I did not quit.

As adults, we all have the opportunity at any age to share with young people our commitment to music and the real magic it has for us to be transformed by its beauty and inspiration. Part of the transformative power of music—particularly classical music—derives from the fact that it requires a longer attention span to absorb its duration. The experience of listening intently for more than just a few minutes is a skill gained through the study of music, and one that is rapidly being lost in a climate where the rapid fire of advertising images toward us at every turn encourage short attention spans and instant gratification. Music can restore our calm and reconnect us with the opportunity to pursue an evolving transformation instead of merely visceral snap judgments. It takes us on a journey that develops and returns to familiar territory, and brings us a sense of satisfaction that has been a constant for centuries.

To reestablish a love for classical music among many of today's young people may take some repackaging of the way that longer pieces of music are presented to them. As listeners develop the skills necessary to remain actively focused on the beauty of great musical masterpieces—short or long—the power that music exerts on the listener increases. As ambassadors for this transformative power, we must create a sense of curiosity for the way through which anyone can reap the rewards of their investment in active listening. If we expect that we can succeed, this is surely possible.

We must reproduce our interest and passion for music by passing it on to those who come after us. Children can learn how to use music to feel better and to connect with other cultures and time periods—but only if we can make them curious about all of music's possibilities and promise. One such effort in this direction is the “Dream Out Loud” program, an initiative I've helped launch that partners Yamaha with the CSO on behalf of music educators. Through the personal stories of four CSO musicians, the program illustrates the core values in an instrumental music experience and provides free posters to educators that contain pictures and positive messages from each of these musicians. These images, along with video profiles of each musician in a direct address to an intended audience of young people, are available on the CSO's website (<http://www.cso.org/DreamOutLoud>). In the profiles, the musicians encourage their audience to keep working at their instrument even though the path is often difficult.

We must all sharpen our skills to arouse curiosity about the reasons that we care so much about the beauty of music and the power it that it has for all of us, both now and in the future. As good students of those who have invested their passions in us, let's make it our business to leave things—the state of musical availability and opportunity—in better shape than when we discovered them. We can't really make a better investment. *Copyright 2006, 2007 by John Hagstrom, Trumpet Multimedia LLC*