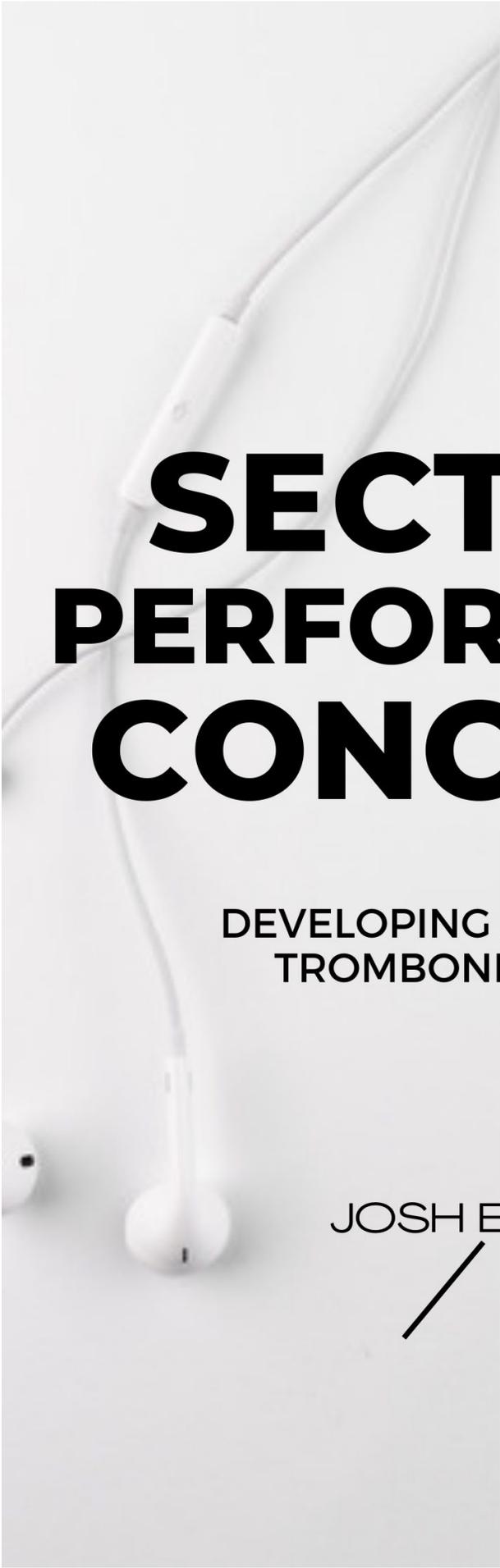


A red circular logo containing the text "JB MASTERCLASS SERIES" in red, uppercase letters.

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A vertical, grayscale photograph of white earbuds with their cables, positioned on the left side of the page.

SECTION PERFORMANCE CONCEPTS

DEVELOPING A COHESIVE
TROMBONE SECTION

JOSH BYNUM



NEVER LOOK AT THE TROMBONES – IT ONLY ENCOURAGES THEM: ADDRESSING SECTION PERFORMANCE CONCEPTS FROM BOTH SIDES OF THE BATON

As with most sports, playing in a large musical ensemble is a team endeavor. The key to success is making sure everyone understands and embraces their role. The primary function of the trombone section is to provide a foundation of sound to support the melody. In other words...HARMONY (and all that goes with it) is our focus.

Keeping with the sports team analogy, the trombone section is the offensive line of the large ensemble. We function together, and depend on one another for success. There is very little acclaim credited to individuals, as we are recognized as a unit.

The goal should be to develop strong individual players, who really enjoy playing together (whether block chords, *tutti* passages, or contrapuntal activity). The best way to build this type of unity is through playing chamber music, helping them understand WHY their part is important to the composition, and having them listen to world-class trombone sections and chamber groups together.

Important Fundamental Aspects of Section Performance:

- Intonation
- Balance and Blend
- Dynamics
- Articulation, Note Length, and Group Pulse

Intonation

According to Jay Friedman (principal trombone, Chicago Symphony Orchestra), “In the Chicago Symphony Orchestra low brass section, we believe that just intonation is the single most important aspect of achieving the most beautiful and resonant sounds a section can produce.”

For something so important, time must be spent in helping young players develop better ears, and understand tendencies.

In order to improve section intonation, two issues must be addressed and reinforced:

- **Good ear:**

- In order to play in tune with others, each player must learn to play with consistent good pitch.
- Developed through slow practice (scales and chords) with a tuning drone.
 - Learning to play IN tune requires being able to recognize when a pitch is OUT of tune.
 - Tuner = **See** when it's in tune | Drone = **Hear** when it's in tune
 - Help students understand that YOU cannot fix the pitch. Their responsibility
 - Tune with the ensemble – not just with the tuner
 - Emphasize that the trombone is a tuning slide
 - Pitch corrections should NOT be employed by manipulating air or embouchure

Also, they must learn to play in tune TOGETHER. Learning each other's tendencies can be very beneficial. Simply playing together outside the rehearsal situation goes a long way toward understanding each other and establishing a group concept. Play the following:

- Scales (with drone)
 - Intervals (including unison and octave)
 - Chords (static and shifting)
 - Chorales (iso-rhythmic and homophonic)
- **Basic knowledge of chord construction and partial tendencies:**
The major third is lowered fourteen cents while the minor third is raised by sixteen cents. Perfect fifths are slightly raised by two cents, and minor sevenths are lowered thirty cents.

In order for a chord to be properly tuned, a hierarchy of importance for each voice should be determined and addressed in the following order:

- Unisons
- Octaves
- Fifths
- Thirds
- Sevenths
- Non-chord tones

Without establishing the outlining foundation of any chord (octave/fifth), the remaining voices will never be in tune. Also, while thirds, sevenths, and non-chord tones provide color and variety, the ear will automatically identify these chord members without extra volume.

It is equally important for each individual to fully understand the intonation tendencies of the various partials of the harmonic overtone series. The following figure shows a harmonic series built on BB-flat, along with the corresponding pitch tendencies



Be sure to point out that the partial intonation tendencies mirror a perfectly tuned chord. The root is in tune, the fifth is raised, and the third and dominant seventh are lowered. Also in order to help students better understand the overtone series, point out the multiplier of 2 (in locating the next occurrence of a particular pitch).

Combining the knowledge of chord construction and partial tendencies will be very helpful when addressing intonation in a musical context. For example, if the major third happens to also be on the sixth partial...it must be lowered even more than normal to compensate for the partial tendency.

Be sure to highlight a practical application of this knowledge. Have your students discuss their parts together in order to determine particular chords and how to tune them properly.

Balance and Blend

Generally, the terms “blend” and “balance” are used interchangeably. These concepts are most certainly linked together. However, it is also important to understand the individual qualities of both.

Balance can be defined as the harmonious arrangement and proportion of every voice. Reinforce the concept of sounding as one (**like an organ**). In many cases, what is perceived to be bad intonation is actually a matter of poor balance across the section.

An ideal balance will build from the bottom of the section. A common issue with trombone sections is the under-supported middle voice. Having a solid middle can allow the sound more resonance. The upper voice should not need to force the sound. Very often, the tessitura of this part can help with projection.

Factors to take into account in order to improve section balance:

- Uniform strength across the section:
 - Tendency have diminishing strength top to bottom – leads to a bright sound
 - Place strong players across the section.
- Unison versus Harmony:
 - Unison Passages = Same Slide Positions
 - Unison – High: Bass Trombone should allow tenors to dominate
 - Unison – Low: Tenor Trombones should allow bass to dominate
 - Harmony should always be played with a fuller dynamic
- Tessitura of each part:
 - Especially when chords are spaced far apart
 - Upper register projects easier than lower
 - Third or Seventh in lowest voice is most difficult to tune and balance

Blending involves combining elements, or qualities, to create a pleasing and harmonious effect. In order to blend properly, the section must play so that the parts are indistinguishable from one another, but rather sound as if one instrument is producing the three voices (**again – like the organ**). For this type of synergy to exist, everyone needs to have the same “sound concept” in mind.

Factors determining the quality of a section’s blend (for better or worse):

- Color and Quality of each person’s tone.
 - Bright vs. Dark (both have merits and problems)
 - Thin vs. Rich
 - Pinched vs. Open
- Balance of Volume and Note Shape
 - One person constantly playing over or under the others
 - Bricks of Sound with consistent volume: No “Twah” or other shapes
- Myopic approach: Not hearing those around you. Playing with “blinders” on.

- Equipment:
 - Uniformity not a necessity, but could produce positive results.
 - Drastically different equipment can be counterproductive
 - Similar bore size (.547) – Avoid “intermediate bore”

- Stand Placement:
 - Avoid playing behind or under the stand
 - Avoid playing into the floor
 - Have students sit away from stand (can help posture and breathing)
 - Have stand to the right of slide

Dynamics:

The effectiveness of a section’s dynamic range is really dictated by playing with control at both ends of the spectrum. Our tendency is to avoid softer volumes. Consequently, there is very little variety in how we play. We must individually work to increase our dynamic palette in order to be successful as a section.

Listening to the great orchestral trombone sections (CSO, NY Phil, Philadelphia, ASO) it is amazing to hear the extremely wide dynamic range. The louder end is made even more impressive when compared to the controlled softer playing.

Factors to consider with regard to Dynamics:

- Think in terms of air column size, speed, and temperature
 - Louder Volume = big (column), warm, and slow
 - Never Forced – helps keep pitch from going sharp
 - Softer Volume = laser-like (concentrated), cool, and fast
 - Always Constant – helps keep pitch from going flat

- Upper parts are easier to play when there is a cushion of sound from lower voices.
 - Especially in softer passages

- In tune, balanced, with resonant sound will always project better than just playing loud. This style of playing is also how to project the sound at even the softest dynamic levels.

- Softer dynamics do NOT mean moving less air. If anything, quality breathing becomes even more important to stabilize and warm the sound. Also quality breathing will help the section move together.

- Serve the musical good: Understand the section’s role in any give moment.

Articulation, Note Length, & Pulse:

A solid fusion of these three aspects of performance is essential for good section work. Without a uniformly consistent approach to the beginning, middle, and end of each note...the section will always sound like individuals rather than a unit.

Factors to consider with regard to Articulation, Length, and Pulse:

- **Articulation:**
 - Broader style is preferable as a default style
 - Louder = less front necessary – avoids explosive attack
 - Softer = needs more front to speak
 - Syllable is variable – depending on range
 - Mid Register – AH (front ¼ of tongue strikes behind upper teeth on ridge)
 - Upper Register – EE (back of tongue raised – no longer using tip)
 - Low Register – AHW (back of throat opens – tongue lowers)
 - Tendency for most students (and suggestions):
 - “Twah” – non committal beginning and release
 - Explosive attack with immediate decay
 - For both – Needs to be a BRICK of sound (beginning to end)
 - Focus on STABILITY: Full sound before leaping (bridges the register)
 - Faster passages = shorter duration (no flow)
Shorter markings = overly percussive (no pitch)
 - For both – causes section to rush as well as tension in slide
 - Ideal slide movement = relaxed but tied to rhythm (**not fast or slow**)
- **Group Rhythm:**
 - Dictates when to breathe together
 - Determines attacks and releases
 - Awareness of breathing and cues from principal player
 - Internal subdivision is essential
 - When trading off a melodic idea, work slowly for seamless transition
 - Be sure to focus on keeping uniform articulation and length
- **Breathing:**
 - Breathing should be tied to pulse and style
 - Breathing with pulse allows for a definitive point in time to begin
 - Breathing in style prepares us for what we are about to play
 - Placement and fullness of breath determines quality of section articulation
 - Continuous movement of air in and out – don’t hold before releasing
 - Place tongue when inhalation **becomes** exhalation
 - Constant compression between two breaths – allows for stability
- **Releases & Note Length:**
 - Very little focus given to releases – very important but overlooked
 - Tight or Tapered – depends on the markings and style

- Important to sustain notes for FULL value – which helps dictate release
 - Stress the importance of full value (half note – off on three, etc.)
 - When playing tied figures – sustain (especially if chord changes)

Building a Better Section Through Chamber Music:

Ideally, we as educators are creating students with a good balance of solid fundamental musicianship combined with musical curiosity and sense of personal responsibility. Providing students with an opportunity to practice and perform chamber music really embodies the best of this philosophy.

- Learning to work as a team – be a guide, but not a director
- Point the way, but have them do the work – musical terminology, phrasing, etc.
- Help them implement good rehearsal strategy – focusing on aspects discussed earlier
- Focus on listening and reacting to one another – having ears to hear everything
- Learning to breathe and move together – without a conductor
- Elevate their idea of what is “good” through extensive listening:

Trombone Chamber (Quartet & Ensemble):

Aries Trombone Quartet
Four of a Kind
Trombones de Costa Rica
Viento Sur Trombone Quartet
Vienna Trombone Quartet
New Trombone Collective
Trombone Unit Hannover
Chicago Trombone Consort
Slide Monsters
Minor 4 Trombone Quartet

Brass Chamber (Quintet & Ensemble):

Mnozil Brass
Center City Brass Quintet
American Brass Quintet
Empire Brass Quintet
Brass Ring
Meridian Arts Ensemble
Canadian Brass
German Brass
Summit Brass
Spanish Brass