

# SELECTING A MOUTHPIECE

by John Hagstrom

Selecting a mouthpiece is a very important step in one's development as a brass player. There are many, many factors to consider before making your choice, but none as important as this: Your mental image of EXACTLY what you want to sound like will have a much greater impact on your progress than ANY mouthpiece choice ever could. Listening to live performances and recordings EVERY DAY is just as important as practicing your instrument. By doing this you will be developing and solidifying a very precise mental picture of what you want to come out of your instrument when you play. When you try a new mouthpiece, you are judging whether or not that piece of equipment makes it easier or harder to produce the sound you imagine. No mouthpiece will consistently allow you to produce sounds you have not already imagined in vivid detail. If you don't have this kind of sound image in your head, your time and money are better spent on concerts and recordings than on a new mouthpiece (unless the mouthpiece you currently play on is physically injuring you on a regular basis, of course).

Once you have a good sense of what you want to sound like, you will make an informed mouthpiece decision if you:

- A. Warm up normally on your own instrument and mouthpiece.** This is very important. It is your reference point from where you will make judgments about unfamiliar equipment. If you are already warmed up when you arrive at the store or are at home and about to try new mouthpieces, spend at least five minutes playing on your regular equipment. Also, try to find a relatively quiet place free from lots of distraction. Money spent on a new mouthpiece you selected without doing this is almost always wasted.
- B. Stay away from extreme changes.** If a new mouthpiece you are trying is quite different from what you are used to and seems to suddenly give you new abilities you never have had before, those abilities are almost always short lived and gotten at the expense of some other qualities in your playing that you may not be able to judge in the surroundings of that moment (such as: tone quality; ability to blend with other instruments; endurance over the course of an entire day or days; intonation; and projection). People who come home from the music store with an extreme mouthpiece change that they swear has given them miraculous new abilities are usually playing on their old mouthpiece again one week later because they find that the new mouthpiece hurts their playing more than it helps it. If your teacher or colleague is recommending that you switch to a wider, narrower, deeper, shallower, etc. mouthpiece, they may be right. Just make sure to move in that direction in a sensibly gradual way.
- C. Rest frequently between trials.** This is especially true if you are looking for a mouthpiece that gives you better control of the upper register. If you are getting extremely tired and still trying to make mouthpiece choices, you will almost always end up with something that allows and even encourages you to overtax your chops. If you find yourself in this situation, do not fall for the illusion that the particular mouthpiece you are trying is helping to solve your range or endurance problem. It is merely enabling the bad habits we all resort to when we get fatigued to work for a longer period of time, after which we are even more tired than usual, and thereby taking an even longer time to recover.
- D. Take a blind test.** DO NOT buy a mouthpiece because the person selling it to you says you sound great on it. Once you think you are sure you have something you feel is much better than the old mouthpiece, have someone put either the new or the old mouthpiece in your horn and give it back to you with your eyes closed. After trying it for at least one minute, tell the person helping you which one you thought it was and give the horn back (without looking) to have them switch it (or not switch it) and try it again. Do this at least five times, and have the salesperson (if you are in a store) take the test along with you if they have time (and are not the person doing the switching). At the end of these trials, check to see how many times you were right. If it was less than half the time, you should probably put your money back in your pocket and head for the CD store....
- E. Give your new mouthpiece a chance.** Even the most beneficial choice of mouthpiece will take some time to get used to. If after a few days you are beginning to doubt whether you should keep playing on the new equipment, wait at least two weeks before making a final decision. This will give you time to get used to any small changes in the way it feels on your lips and the air support it requires. If your lips are hurting after this amount of time, or just feel very uncomfortable, it may be a sign that you would be better off with something else that is closer to the dimensions of your old mouthpiece.

Finally, learn something from every trial of every mouthpiece you try, even if it is a mouthpiece you do not like. Instead of just tossing away models you do not like, make an attempt to describe to yourself or to someone else exactly why you do or do not like it. Eventually you will start to see patterns of similarity in what works and what does not work for you. Over a period of years you will become an expert on what works for you and save yourself needless frustration and expense. The people selling mouthpieces are doing their best to help you, but they can be even more helpful if you have a very specific knowledge of your preferences and what you are trying to accomplish by looking for a better mouthpiece.

Are there secrets to playing higher, faster and louder on a brass instrument? The answer is that there may indeed be some tips you were unaware of, but the path to professional success involves much more than just the physical mastery of one's instrument. While there are no shortcuts to achieving consistently excellent results when playing an instrument, the following information is designed to target areas of awareness that can eliminate a lot of wasted effort. Guidelines for the formation of healthy practice habits and attitudes are covered along with insight about how to keep a team spirit with one's colleagues when conditions are stressful.

# MUSICAL AND BRASS PLAYING INSIGHTS

BASED ON MY EXPERIENCE IN THE  
**CHICAGO SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA**  
By John Hagstrom

## -Mentally internalized musical discipline-

This is simply the mental image of what one would like to sound like, but it is not so simple when one considers the degree of detail and intensity necessary to have this image lead the player to improvement and excellence. One of the primary concepts behind the teaching of Arnold Jacobs (former CSO Principal Tubist) is to first imagine what it would sound like if you could play a particular piece of music better than you or anyone else had ever heard it played before. You are not just imitating a sound, but actually creating a concept prior to attempting its execution. This requires more intense mental envisioning because the player is combining the ability to imitate the best of what has been heard before with a creative augmentation of those sounds.

- Artistic ownership must occur to be professionally convincing and competitive.** It begins when your image of what will sound better is not just an imitation of what you have heard before, but also something you have conceived of yourself.
- Image intensity is as important as image quality.** This means that the intensity of the musical voice in one's head must be able to drown out what may or may not come out of the instrument. It is not enough to let your musical image be triggered by the first notes you play. Instead, get the sound going first in your head and then join it with your playing. Proficiency in this area leads to much less dependency on the physical sensations of playing and allows the player freedom to be more interactive with other musicians.
- Progress is the result of new awareness in balance with repeated experience.** The first step is to be aware of what improvements you are looking for and having the intensity of concentration to sustain that conception as you make repeated attempts. When you are successful and are able to recreate your success over and over again, new habits begin to form, but they are crude at first. It generally takes a year to take yourself from crudity to mastery when forming a new habit. Mastery is what is needed to be professionally competent and competitive. It is when you can perform a given task consistently well under pressure- without having a second chance.
- Healthy failure leads to change.** It eliminates what will not work, but only if you understand what you are going for. A failed attempt can provide much information about what a successful attempt sound look and feel like, because there are always successful components in unsuccessful attempts. The key is to throw away what does not work without throwing away what does work, and this is done by keeping your awareness and concentration on what it is you are really striving for. Otherwise, failure will be unhealthy.
- Unhealthy failure leads to fear.** These fears include the fear of what others will think of your unsuccessful attempts; the fear that you somehow may not be good enough to keep pursuing musical study; the fear that you will not be able to motivate yourself to continue due to the fact that you don't sound "good" all the time. All of these fears may be real, but they are also nonproductive and stand in the way of real progress and mastery.

## -Specific concepts of brass instrument tone production-

- Song and Wind-** This is the title of the book chronicling the life and teaching of Arnold Jacobs, but it is also significant because it describes the very next action you take after your mental image is securely formed. This is the action of the movement of the air. Everything else you do physically is in some way a reaction to the action of the air. This is especially true with respect to articulation. It is important to note that your body must be in a position of leverage to react to the air with consistently accurate intensity. A good analogy for this is to think of a baseball catcher. The catcher's job is to react to the pitcher's action by closing his glove at just the right instant. His action at the moment of impact is relatively small, but this is because he has put his body in a position of being able to resist the energy of the ball without losing his balance. This position has come about because of his prior experience (and likely initial failure) catching the pitch. He is reacting to his prior experience, but also to the action of the moment. This is a good way to think of the action of the tongue and the lips as they react to the air, and it also explains the reason why it is so effective to slur a musical passage before you attempt to articulate it. You are insuring that consistency is created by keeping your air action a constant, and that the reactions to it have ample opportunity to accurately balance the weight of that action. There are many ways to misunderstand this concept, and those misunderstandings result in the majority of what prevents people with otherwise strong musical images from achieving what they desire.
- The biggest misconception of Chicago Symphony high brass tone production:** It is that we are blowing huge quantities of air through the instrument in the way that the trombones and tuba do. This is false, but it is not hard to see how this misconception starts and spreads. Everyone has been told at one time or another in their training to use more air support, which gets distilled down into "Use more air!" At first, our sense of what it feels like to use more air is rather crude, but our efforts in that direction pay off handsomely. Tone and consistency improve, but the improvement is the result of the air being put into the position of starting the sound, with the lips and tongue being much more of a reaction to the air. Even so, the player may improperly conclude that it was the quantity of air that made the difference, when it really was the immediacy and the compression of the air that were responsible for the

improvements. In fact, the trumpets and horns are blowing much harder than the trombones and tuba, but much less air **quantity** actually goes into the trumpet and horns, especially in the high register. The goal of efficient high brass tone production is to have the action of the air at the beginning of the tone generating process. Combined with a strong and healthy mental image of what the player is trying to sound like, the lips and tongue will gradually begin to react in balance with the air to create the desired sound.

**-Things to be aware of as you apply these ideas to specific aspects of your playing:**

- Endurance**-Work on the **duration** of how long you want to last before its intensity of volume, articulation and range. Your body must first get used to how long it has to work before it can deliver high intensity for long periods. Play simple exercises and melodies so you can successfully last longer. Most people get bored and are unable to do this because they lack the patience. Remember that the only way you can communicate successfully to your body that it must be able to last longer is to gradually give it tasks that are beyond your current level of stamina. Be patient and gradual.
- Volume**-The key to this is **balance**. **DO NOT** blow harder (or softer) than you can actively resist and balance with your tongue position and your embouchure. When you do find an efficient balance, it is better to play for longer periods at about 80% of your maximum (or minimum) volume, making sure to evenly sustain every note. In many ways expanding your maximum volume is like weight training. Don't work out with your maximum weight for more than just a few minutes. The goal is to spend more time at a lower volume that is still high enough to tax you without the risk of injury. Make sure to always let the energy of the air start the sound, whether you are articulating or not. Remember also that there is effort and strength required to play softly with decisive energy. Work to find how you can play extreme dynamics with control and not force.
- Range**-Do not work on your range without working on your endurance and volume as well. Otherwise, you are increasing the risk of hurting yourself, which can happen in a split second and take a long time to heal. Many people are told that mouthpiece pressure in the high register is to be avoided at all costs. However, high loud percussive brass playing does require a certain amount of pressure. How much is too much? Once again, the key is balance. If your lip is getting cut or is in pain, it's too much. It is usually the sudden changes in mouthpiece pressure that do the most harm. If you can keep the pressure you use fairly uniform in all registers, you probably are pretty close to a balanced and healthy amount. Tongue position is also vital to increasing one's range (upward AND downward). If you can whistle a scale and be conscious of your tongue position changing, you can begin to get the idea of how your tongue needs to focus the space in your mouth to get the optimum sound and ease of high register playing. It is important to note that the way your tongue position forms and changes is also a reaction to the air.

**-Interpersonal strategies that lead to professional excellence and personal satisfaction-**

- FUN**- When people find out that I play in the Chicago Symphony for a living, the most common response I get is "Oh that must be fun!" While there are certain playful and amusing moments that come with a job in the CSO, the overall one-word summation of my experience is most definitely not "fun". It is not "fun" to constantly be held to the highest critical standards with only one chance to get it right. But as for challenge, discipline, fulfillment, and pride of workmanship and emotional expression, there is almost no equal to the experience of working with world-class musicians every day. You might expect that the majority of the enjoyment of my job comes from the notoriety and the applause from four concerts every week, but this is not the case. The majority of my enjoyment comes from productive interaction with the other people in the orchestra in a way that leads to great music making and my own personal peace. The following are the main concepts behind my enjoyment and satisfaction as a Chicago Symphony member, and they also happen to be good principles to help a person to get along with just about anybody:
- Learn from the experience of others and bring out their best**- You can learn something from everyone. In some cases it's how **not** to play, or what certain habits can lead to. Whatever your opinion of how your colleagues play or act, it is vital to behave in a way that brings out their best for the sake of the group and the music. This really does give you more enjoyment than just saying whatever you think. Bringing people together feels better than getting your own way.
- Don't "stake your turf"**- Often, interaction with other musicians (and especially trumpet players) can quickly turn into "the battle of the resumes" (Where do you play? Who have you worked with? Where did you go to school?). The participants in this game battle for dominance using their experience as ammunition, but nobody really ever wins anything because this game has nothing to do with real progress on anyone's part. It's all about the contest, which may indeed be cleverly disguised as polite conversation. Before you engage someone like this, commit yourself to these points, and even the most arrogantly self-entitled person can be diffused:
  - I will show them respect
  - I will reinforce their strengths
  - I will learn from their experienceIf the person you are interacting with still insists on belittling you, the ownership of the resulting shame is theirs alone.
- Embrace the power of unity**- As a section player especially, this is a real necessity. If I were to always be campaigning for my own artistic attachments, I would spend most of my time feeling defeated. Instead, I get enjoyment out of reinforcing and magnifying the artistic choices of others. The brass section in the Chicago Symphony is a textbook study in how the whole can be greater than the sum of the parts. One of the most attractive qualities about listening to the Orchestra is that it has a collective unity of style and sound, not because the members have no will of their own, but because they value unity over individual artistic attachment.
- Remember that no one is invisible**- We all have been guilty of being hypercritical of others as though we had never made a mistake ourselves. The current climate of our culture encourages everyone to have an opinion and share it openly, whatever it may be. Too often, however, mere observations turn into full-fledged value judgments on someone's character. Resist the temptation to take part, and when others around you do it, try to be a force for balance (even humorously- "boy, it's a good thing we're perfect") Many times the cause of someone's stage fright is the realization that they will be held to the same impossible standards that they themselves hold others to. When you start to support others for the best they have to offer, chances are you'll feel better about yourself too.