

Practice Routine for Brass

Introduction

Brass players of all ages and ability levels depend on a consistent practice routine in order to develop and sustain continued progress with the skills necessary to play their instruments. While the length of a practice routine will depend both on the experience level of the musician as well as the amount of available time for it, it is important to cover a broad base of aspects of playing regardless of the length of a practice session.

Brass players should be sensitive to the physical demands they are putting on their bodies both in practice and performance. An ideal practice session should incorporate regular intervals of rest, emphasize a healthy and pain-free approach to technique, reinforce and expand on aspects of playing which are already working well while also seeking to make improvements in weaker areas. Most importantly, a practice session should seek to unify the physical, mental, and expressive aspects of playing a brass instrument.

Warm-up

We can think of the warm-up part of a practice session as a “systems check.” Brass playing is so unlike any other physical activity that our body regularly does that our bodies are often not quite ready for it without some degree of preparation. Once everything is working reasonably well we can move onto other parts of our practice session. Some days a warm-up will only need to be very brief. Other days we might benefit from a more extended warm-up.

Sound Production

The first goal of any warm-up should be to get our lips producing sound as easily as possible. We should begin on whichever pitch and at whatever dynamic makes sound the easiest for us. In this stage of a warm-up we should be most aware of our posture, how we are breathing, where we are setting the mouthpiece on our face, and how we are forming our lips. In general we should be more concerned with the ease at which sound is produced and less concerned with the overall quality of that sound. Once the sound starts reliably being produced we can gradually begin to shift our focus to getting the best possible quality of tone. Once we are getting a sound we generally like and are able to do so with ease, then we are ready to work on flexibility.

Flexibility

The second goal of a warm-up is to start transitioning our sound into other registers and dynamics. Slow and narrow pitch bends and lip slurs can be a good way to approach this part of a warm-up. We should be seeking to expand an effortless and beautiful tone into the tessitura range of our instrument. However, it is best not to push ourselves into extreme registers and dynamics during this part of our warm-up. Once we get the tone that we like in that middle pitch and dynamic range we use the majority of time when playing our instrument, we are ready to work on articulation.

Articulation

The goal of working on articulation in a warm-up is to be able to get our best possible sound started as easily as possible. Rather than work on rapid tonguing exercises, we would be better off tonguing slowly in a quasi-legato style on repeated notes throughout our middle register. We should strive to let the tongue separate the tones without interfering with the overall sound production. We should also strive to move the tongue as minimally as possible to get the results we want. As this starts to work, we can repeat the notes fewer times and eventually not repeat notes at all. As this begins to get easier, we can experiment with more staccato tonguing where the airstream actually starts and stops between the notes. Once all of this is working, we are ready to push toward increasing our range.

Range

The goal of working on range is to expand how high, low, loud, and soft we can play without interfering with the overall sound production. We should approach playing higher and lower both via slow slurs and various tonguing exercises. We should approach playing louder and softer both via measured crescendo/diminuendo exercises as well as repeated note tonguing exercises. It is important not to go too far too fast when working on range. Instead, we should work little by little until expanding feels easy and effortless. We should end this part of our warm-up when we start to feel just a little bit tired. Once a warm-up is complete, it is important to rest for a bit before moving on to fundamentals practice. This gives our body a chance to more fully acclimate to what we just did.

Fundamentals

Working on fundamentals is different from a warm-up. While the purpose of a warm-up is to ensure that everything we physically rely on to play our instrument is working, the purpose of fundamentals practice is to work out the types of patterns and exercises which tend to be common to many pieces of repertoire for our instrument. Fundamentals practice includes

working on scales and arpeggios in various patterns and also etudes which explore some of the technical challenges unique to our instrument. Through devoting some of our practice routine to fundamentals, we can minimize the amount of time it takes us to learn our repertoire.

Scales

A great deal of Western music is made up of major, minor, and chromatic scales. We should learn all the transpositions of these scales in various patterns throughout the full playing range of our instruments.

Arpeggios

In addition to scales, a great deal of Western music tends to be comprised of major, minor, augmented, and diminished triads, and major-major, major-minor, minor-minor, half diminished, and fully diminished seventh chords. We should strive to master every possible transposition, inversion, and pattern of these basic harmonies throughout the entire playing range of our instruments.

Etudes

In addition to scales and arpeggios, many etudes have been composed to help us work out specific technical challenges unique to our instruments. We should constantly seek out etudes which help us work out the weaker aspects of our technique and devote time during each practice session to working on them.

Repertoire

Repertoire is a borrowed French word which means “the music that we know” or in our case are in the process of learning. We should remember that everything in our practice routine should ultimately be aimed at helping us more fully master our repertoire. Our repertoire is ultimately what guides our practicing choices. It falls into three main categories.

Personal Development

We work on certain pieces of music because they are challenging us to grow in some important way. These are usually pieces we do not intend to perform in public. If we are studying with a teacher, these are usually the pieces assigned to us. Working on this type of repertoire tends to be difficult and at times frustrating. However, in the long run it is what pushes us to become better. For this reason, it is important to always have repertoire like this in our daily practice routine.

Upcoming Performances

We work on other pieces of music because we have scheduled performances which involve them. This category of repertoire includes any music for performing ensembles in which we are a member. It also includes music for any upcoming solo performances. We simply must practice this music because it is an external expectation placed on us by others. During the busiest playing seasons of the year, it can be tempting to only work on this music because it has a due date. However, if we spend too many consecutive practice sessions working on this music to the exclusion of the rest of our practice routine, we will soon notice that many bad habits have begun to creep back into our playing.

For Fun

Last, it is important that we remember to play something for ourselves every now and then. Making music is one of the greatest joys life has to offer. It is important to always remind ourselves of that, especially when we've had a stretch of a few weeks that feels particularly stressful. That said, it is also tempting for some of us to devote too much time playing music which is fun at the expense of music that will help our long term development as musicians. Therefore, keeping everything all of these things in balance is the surest key to our long term success.