



YAMAHA

Educator Series

WIND INSTRUMENTS



Skip Gray

Skip Gray joined the faculty at the University of Kentucky School of Music in the Fall of 1980 and holds the rank of Professor of Music. His duties include giving lessons on the tuba and euphonium and directing the University of Kentucky Brass Ensemble and the UK Tuba-Euphonium Ensemble. He is also Principal Tubist with the Lexington Philharmonic. In May 1992, Mr. Gray hosted the International Tuba-Euphonium Conference held in Lexington at the University of Kentucky.

Mr. Gray has performed solo tuba recitals and presented clinics throughout the United States in cities including New York, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, San Francisco, Phoenix, and Cleveland. He has commissioned and performed the world premieres of many new works for tuba including Lifepoints- a composition for solo tuba, percussion, and electronic tape accompaniment by Scott Wyatt at the 1990 International Tuba-Euphonium Conference in Sapporo, Japan. Mr. Gray performed another world premiere in December 1990 at the Midwest Band Orchestra Clinic in Chicago of Fantasy for Solo Tuba, Brass, and Percussion, a work written for him by Allen Vizzutti.

Taking the Steps Towards Better Tuba Playing

By Skip Gray

Over the past thirty years, tuba playing has changed greatly. The perception that all a tuba player can do is “oom-pah” has been replaced with an appreciation and understanding of tubists’ artistic capabilities and the true beauty of the instrument. A primary element in a tuba player’s advancement is hard work. This combined with development of playing fundamentals specific to the tuba will result in the ongoing improvement of players who will reach continually higher musical planes.

1. Improvement of breathing – quality and quantity

In producing a good tone on the tuba, it is absolutely essential to take full, relaxed breaths. Tuba players need to be constantly encouraged to breathe often, without any excessive bodily movement or tension in the shoulders, throat, or face. In order to play the tuba well and with a good tone, the lungs should never go below half capacity. When tuba players go “below half a tank” of air, negative physical aspects begin creeping into his or her playing including pushing from the diaphragm, closing the throat, and raising the tongue position (thus interfering with the airflow and sound). It is also much easier and quicker to fill the lungs from the halfway mark than from empty.

2. Expanding expressiveness – playing melodies

Melodies are the true essence of music and the tuba is a beautiful melodic instrument. Regrettably, tuba players encounter very few melodies in method books or band parts. Just as with most other instrumentalists, tubists should have melodic material and play it everyday. Some good published sources of melodic material for tubists are 60 Musical Studies (vocalises of Concone and Marchesi) edited by David Kuehn (published by Southern Music) and 43 Bel Canto Studies by Marco Bordogni (published by Robert King).

3. Clean articulation – using the right syllables

In all brass playing, the supported air stream produces attacks. The tongue merely shapes the air stream at the beginning of notes. The basic syllables for good articulation on the tuba are “DOH” and “TOH”. Use of the long “O” vowel keeps the throat open for better inhalation and exhalation. The long “O” vowel also pushes the jaw downward producing better intonation as well as a fuller sound in the low register. The “DOH” syllable is used in the vast majority of tuba playing while “TOH” is used when harder attacks are desired. In order to establish clean articulation, tuba players should be encouraged to use the “DOH” syllable and practice slowly in order to attain all note centers and control of finger-tongue coordination.



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4. Developing ease on the instrument – refining the basic vocabulary and grammar of music

In order to speak fluently and effectively, it is necessary to have a well-developed vocabulary and thorough understanding of the grammar of a language. Similarly, to perform with ease and expression on a musical instrument, the basic syntax of music must be well engrained. Scales and arpeggios comprise the fundamental structural aspects of most music that we play and, to advance on a musical instrument, it is essential that scales and arpeggios be practiced daily and mastered.

5. Practice makes perfect

And speaking of practice... there is an old adage among brass players that states “a little bit of practice everyday is much better than a lot once in a while.” Because playing a brass instrument well requires training muscles to respond consistently as well as building muscle stamina, they must be exercised daily. Irregular practice simply mandates too much “relearning and rebuilding” to effectively lead to better playing. Regular, daily practice reinforces newly acquired technique and allows the player to more easily build upon it as well as strengthen his or her ability to play for longer and more trying periods on the instrument. But solely spending time on the instrument is not enough. Practice time needs to be organized so that the player is both reinforcing previously acquired skills as well as learning new ones, thus advancing on the instrument. Each practice period should be structured to place effective attention to various essential aspects of playing.

6. Use good equipment and keep it in good condition

It takes a great deal of skill, time, and material to build a tuba. This is why tubas are expensive. Over the past ten to fifteen years, design improvements have resulted in instruments that play more efficiently, in tune, and with a beautiful sound. Tubas are truly an investment and need to be well cared for and regularly maintained. Dents are not only unsightly but also demoralizing for the player who must use the instrument. In addition to proper instrument care, regular attention to the tuba mouthpiece is essential. In order to minimize sickness and infection, mouthpieces should be cleaned daily. Check that there are no nicks in the rim. These not only harbor bacteria but can also physically damage the player's lips. Check that the mouthpiece shank is round and fits firmly into the mouthpiece receiver on the tuba.

7. Listening and going to concerts

If you want to become a better musician, you need to listen to a lot of music. By attending concerts and listening to recordings, we absorb new musical ideas. It is also good to have a diverse listening diet that ranges from classical to jazz, opera to pop, with all of the other styles in between! Most musicians have one or two “unforgettable concerts” that they have attended. Keep music alive and support other musicians by going to concerts regularly.

8. Conclusion

Playing the tuba can bring a lifetime of fun and enjoyment. It is even more gratifying to work towards attaining higher levels of performance and making music on a more elevated plain. By taking the steps towards improvement, playing the tuba will be an even better experience for you!

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