

Care and Feeding Of Your Chops

By Paul Baron

The idea of organized purposeful practice was not something that had been given to me when I was a younger player, but has taken a lot of trial and error to come to an understanding, and I think through that process, I can share some of the mistakes I've learned from. That's not to say I didn't have some good instruction along the way, but the concept of how to lay out a progression of exercises where the flow and order had as much to do with the development of chops, has proved more helpful than the exercises alone. I was given a number of very good exercises to work on but not necessarily laid out in a logical progression. As well as learning from many mistakes, I've had the great fortune to sit next to some of the best players in the business and absorb what I could from their knowledge and experience. As well, I had some good friends that had some very good instruction and were kind enough to share their experiences with me. Also, in studying martial arts, particularly the study of the Japanese martial art of Aikido, I began to equate and assimilate some of the lessons of Aikido into the treatment of my chops and trumpet playing. The biggest realization came in the idea of efficient use of energy and the flow of that energy to the task at hand, making music. Many of us, me included, fall into the trap of using more arm strength and force to play, especially for upper register playing. I have also found myself blowing too hard at times to compensate for sound issues in performance, loud bands or section mates, or orchestra pits that are very "dead" and seem to absorb all the sound. At times when I haven't been in the best shape, I've also mistakenly tried to force the notes out by using larger amounts of air, instead of a more concentrated faster air flow. As I tried to compensate by over-blowing, I got the results I was after, temporarily; I could hear myself more, but that was short lived as the downward spiral began. Before long, my range had dropped, the amount of vibration I got from my lips decreased and I was soon back to the same place I was before; not able hear myself well, but then I had less upper register left. In this article I'll share my experiences and hope to offer insight into some ways to care for you chops.

As I said, some of what I learned was through Aikido, and what helped me most was the idea of **BALANCE**. The idea that all energies have to be balanced is the same idea as the Newton law of physics, *for every force there is an equal and opposite force*. That is certainly true in the amount of pressure used in playing. The more arm pressure you use, the more your teeth will push back, in a matter of speaking. Unfortunately, there's some tissue between that will take the brunt of that physics lesson. I can't tell you how many times I've fallen into that trap and had to re-learn the lesson, only to recover and make the same mistake again. I found that by "**holding back**" on the volume of air to about 85 percent, assuming zero is not blowing at all and 100 percent is over-blowing and forcing everything I had to give through the horn, my endurance, range, center of pitch, articulation, etc, greatly improved. Ironically, by playing more efficiently and focused, the volume was actually louder as well. The horn is built to play centered and responds much better with that approach than the "*strong arm method*" that so many of us try using. Playing in this way also means that I won't be too beat up for the next playing day.

Sometimes with a long playing schedule there's just no way to avoid some serious fatigue, but playing more efficiently will really help, and the recovery time will be much faster.

Practicing in a **BALANCED** manner is very important. Playing such a physical instrument as the trumpet means we are in a sense athletes. Some styles of music are certainly more athletic than others, but if we use some common sense and approach the trumpet with more knowledge as to the athletics involved, we will play more efficiently. With regards to the tools we need to play music and to the care and preservation of those tools we can think less about the athletics and more about playing the trumpet and making music. I don't think any of us would go to a gym and put on the heaviest weights we can possibly lift, and attempt to push that weight continuously for two hours and expect to be able to do much the next day. Nor would we one day decide to run a marathon without first building up to the distance. Many younger, and not so young players, do exactly that on the trumpet though. When things are going great we sometimes feel like we're unstoppable and don't pay attention to the proper mechanics of playing, only to pay the price later. Or we decide to try the new routine and push it to sheer exhaustion, and then when things don't seem to work as well the next day, decide that the routine is not the right one. Rest is often times a neglected part of the practice routine. Remember that muscle is built by exercise **AND REST**. It's the rest period that allows the blood to return to the lips and flush the built up lactic acid, and return the muscles to a more useful relaxed and flexible state. It's essential to practice all aspects of playing because in a professional situation you never know what might be thrown at you. Balancing loud and soft playing, low and high register practice, long tones and articulation studies, and flexibility exercises, will make you ready for almost anything. Of course we do run across some music where the saying, "*the pen is mightier than the chop*" from time to time, but being prepared for anything will make playing more relaxed and enjoyable. There are a number of very good routines available for purchase or download, and I think it's important to experiment with many of them to find the one most beneficial to you. Stay away from the ones that offer a quick fix, or guarantee a double C in fifteen minutes of practice a day. There are no methods that will immediately transform your playing and instantly give you a six octave range. If there was, I'd be first in line and everyone would have a six octave range. Often times, and for me this is true, a combination of different exercises from different sources works best. Sometimes I do a combination in one practice session, or use one method or routine one day, and a different one the next day. I've found some work different aspects more or less than others, so I'll use a certain method for its main benefits, and another to round out my practicing. You need to give the routine or method a respectful amount of time to see if it's a good match for you, or if there is a portion that really works for you. Mouthpieces are as individual as the players themselves, and in a lesser degree that is true for exercises and practice routines, and your needs. I think what is universal is the need to **BALANCE** your practice and not neglect an aspect of playing that you will undoubtedly encounter on the job at some point. I've found that balancing my practice routine with my playing schedule is important as well, and changes and evolves depending on my work schedule. The routines that have been most beneficial for my development and maintenance are Bill Adam's routine, and the book by Laurie Frink called "*FLEXUS*". Both of these

methods have a very logical flow and use many of the staples and foundations found in the books of Schlossberg and Arbans. What I like about both is that although they differ in some ways, they cover the entire range of the horn, and address all the aspects of playing in very logical and balanced routines.

Once you've found a routine that really works for you, whether it's a conglomeration of routines or one in its entirety, I think it's important to have a goal for your practicing in mind. Ask yourself what you need more work on, what part of your playing is lagging behind more than other parts, and put more effort to improve a little each practice session. If for instance, you are working on Clarke's study number two and want to develop faster fingers, I suggest using a metronome and write down the tempo you can play the exercise flawlessly. Chances are this is probably a little slower than you've been practicing the exercise. That is your starting point, and from there play the exercise through at that speed flawlessly, and then the rule of thumb is to "bump" the speed up two or three notches each practice session. Once you're able to play the new speed flawlessly, it's time to "bump" it up again.

If you want to develop your high range, I recommend keeping a log of your daily progress. Play your exercises in the logical flow, but attempt to play up to your "**target note**" from many different angles everyday. It doesn't matter if you make it everyday but the attempt, if done correctly, will still be strengthening your chops, and once the vibration does happen, you will have built up the strength to play the note because of the attempts. By "**target note**" I mean the very next note up from the highest note you can comfortably count on as the top of your useable range. And by useable range I'm talking about the notes you can count on ninety percent of the time and at the end of a practice session or job. You should first start playing relaxed glissandos up to the note. Keep the air flow constant and remember not to over-blow and force the upper notes. Play the gliss from one octave below, up to the note and back down. If you find it difficult coming back down, it could mean that you are forcing the upper note and have "spread" your chops with too much pressure or air, or both. Try relaxing more and blow through the gliss up and down keeping in mind that although there is an upper "**target note**", the real target is the lower note at the end of the phrase. This should help relax the upper notes and smooth out the gliss with a more even air flow. Also, try playing softer and make your goal to get a vibration all the way through the gliss and not be concerned with volume at this point. Once your lips are used to vibrating on those upper notes, increase the speed of air a little, not the amount or volume of air. Think of accelerating the air faster through the horn for upper notes. This will keep the compression needed for those notes and the notes will get louder without forcing or using too much pressure. Remember, faster air not more is the way to approach it. When you feel more comfortable playing up to the "**target note**", start practicing slurred scales up to and back down from those notes. Keep in mind that a steady air flow is essential to playing those notes in a relaxed and efficient way. Once you feel comfortable and have succeeded in slurring up to the notes and back down with an even and relaxed air stream, play those same scales tongued but with the feel of the slur and the constant steady air flow. The next way to approach the "**target note**" is from a further distance below. Try practicing arpeggios slurred and then tongued. Then practice an exercise starting, for instance on a middle C, then D, and

return to C. So the exercise would be, middle C, D, C, E, C, F, and so on up to the octave high C and ending on middle C. Transpose this exercise to C#, D, and so on up to the highest scale you can get the full octave. Through this exercise try to keep the lip movement to a minimum and keep the air flow constant. Use the lower note as a spring board to make the larger leaps. Accelerate the air just before and through the leap up. When you are able to play comfortably up to that “*target note*” on that exercise, it’s time to pick a higher “*target note*” and go through the same process. Again, keep a log with your progress. In this way I think it keeps you moving forward, or in the range expansion exercises, moving upwards.

Continuing along the path of **BALANCE**, a concept I like to think of in regards to balancing the mouthpiece placement on the chops is the idea of a four legged table. Using that analogy, if one of the legs is uneven, the table will not be balanced. Furthermore, the shortest leg will have the least amount of weight burden whereas the other legs will have to compensate but taking up more of the pressure. This translates easily to mouthpiece placement and the balance of the mouthpiece on the chops. If there is too much pressure on the upper lip, the lip vibration will be hindered and the sound will be pinched and weakened, and to make up for the lack of vibration, the common tendency is to blow harder. The discussion of over-blowing was mentioned above so I won’t repeat it here, but suffice it to say that it starts a process of diminishing returns. Sometimes the adjustment is so subtle but can make a huge difference in the efficiency of the buzzing surface and is definitely something to mention and be aware of. Some methodologies state very specific placement of the mouthpiece on the chops, (two thirds top, one third bottom, 50/50 etc) or angles for certain areas of the range. I do not subscribe to this since everyone is individual and there is no one perfect placement. The one that works the best is the one which is most efficient where the most results with the least amount of effort is achieved. If you are aware of the air moving through the lips with the most unhindered vibration and have a balance of the mouthpiece on the chops, you are playing the most efficiently. By keeping the air flow constant and accelerating through the horn, and using the concepts of minimal effort for maximum output, the mouthpiece will gravitate to the best placement.

The above methodical process for improving your fingers and range can easily be translated to any part of your playing that you want to improve. The last thing I’d like to address is sound. This is a good time to ask yourself if you have the sound you want, or if there is a sound that you aspire to have. One of the best tools for me was listening to the players whose sounds I most admired. When I first started practicing the Bill Adam routine, I started every practice session by listening to Charley Davis, one of Bill Adam’s best and most successful students, and whose sound I really admired. Of course, Charley sounds like Charley, and I sound like myself, but his sound was something I aspired to have, and with internalizing his sound, my sound started taking on some characteristics. I have a number of influences so my sound is mine with the influences mixed together. By making listening a regular part of my practice routine, I had a *sound* goal as well as the goals of developing range, fingers, tongue, etc.

Now that you have decided on a routine and path for practicing, have some clear goals for that practicing, and have internalized the sound you are striving for, we should address the concept of **BALANCING** your practice schedule. It's important to remember to **REST** in your practice routine. Rest as much as you play. I've found it more beneficial to practice in many shorter sessions than the combined time in one sitting without rest. When you are starting a chop building routine, start with ten minutes at first, rest ten minutes, play another ten minutes, etc. for an hour. When this is comfortable, play in periods of fifteen minutes on and off, gradually increasing to an hour and a half or two. You can also stagger your practice schedule to an hour in the morning with appropriate rest periods, another hour later in the afternoon, and another later in the day. This has really helped me build strength and stamina but not beat myself up and lose the suppleness and flexibility to play delicately as well. The Bill Adam routine I mentioned above is ideal for practicing with another player, since ideally you should play and rest equal amounts of time, and playing with another ensures that rest time.

I hope this article proves helpful, and if I can just stress a point one last time, I can sum it up in one word, **BALANCE**. Smart and purposeful practice will be more beneficial than just locking yourself away in the practice room for many hours on end without a balanced approach in mind.

Enjoy your progress!!!