

Choosing The Right Mouthpiece

By Paul Baron

First of all, the title is a little misleading. It should read “Choosing The Right Mouthpiece For You And Your Needs”, or “Choosing The Right Mouthpiece For The Job”, but then I’d have to make the title font smaller and I think the size 18 font works. This is a good time to mention that I’m not an expert in mouthpiece design, but as a trumpet player I’ve spent many years and considerable amounts of money searching for the “right” mouthpiece. Trumpet players can be a very strange group, always searching for the “answer” to all their playing problems, or the “secret weapon” mouthpiece that will instantly transform them into Maurice Andre or Maynard Ferguson. In fact, Maynard Ferguson’s mouthpiece is such a specialty piece that most couldn’t even play it! That’s definitely true for me. But Maynard got the sound, feel, and resistance he liked. Unfortunately, and much to my disappointment, that “secret weapon” mouthpiece doesn’t seem to exist. But the mouthpiece that’s best suited to you and your needs can be a matter of knowing what those needs, both physically and musically are, and playing the mouthpiece that’s best suited to those needs. Then it’s up to the player I’m afraid. Nothing can compare to, or equal, good old fashioned practice. It took me many years to figure that one out. *“You mean there isn’t a perfect mouthpiece for me that will make me sound like Wynton Marsalis, Clark Terry, Maynard, and Bud Herseth all in the same mouthpiece and be able to change sounds in an instant?”* Apparently there wasn’t. Nevertheless, with the help of some very brilliant mouthpiece makers, lots of money, time and frustration, and many years playing in varied different musical styles, I have come up with some thoughts which I know will help you move more quickly through the mouthpiece journey and choose a mouthpiece more suitable for your physical and musical needs. Since I’m not an expert, what this article will hopefully do is break down the process of choosing a mouthpiece rather than talk about the technical points of the various aspects of the mouthpiece itself. There are detailed articles about alpha angles, rim contours, cup depths, and descriptions on throat and backbore sizes, and many if not most of the mouthpiece makers have this information on their web sites. As a player, what I’m going to do is take you through the process I’ve gone through myself to help you more quickly and easily choose the mouthpiece that’s best suited for you, hopefully saving you money, time, and frustration along the way.

Choosing the right mouthpiece for your physical needs takes into account a number of variables including the size and shape of the lips, size and shape of the oral cavity, teeth size and alignment, and any number of combinations of the above and some I’ve most likely left out. That part is the hardest to write about or advise on. The easier second part is choosing the right mouthpiece for the job or style of music you most often play, and possibly some alternates in order to move from one style to the next with the appropriate sound. I’ll attempt to break down the variables and talk about each separately in order to help you choose a mouthpiece best suited to your body and music.

First of all, you need to experiment and find the rim size and contour that feels most comfortable for you. No one can tell you what the most comfortable rim for you is going to be; only you will know what feels best. For some, a narrow rim with a substantial bite helps them feel more “secure” with note placement and with their attacks. Some prefer a wider, flatter rim with less bite to help with endurance and upper range. This can take some time to determine which rim type feels best, but what I found that helps is to try and block out thinking about the other variables, the cup, backbore, and throat, for the time being. This is sometimes difficult because obviously all the components add up to complete the whole mouthpiece and determine sound, projection, timbre, endurance, range, etc. For now though, try not to listen too closely to the sound but pay more attention to feel how the rim sits on your lips and how it aligns with your teeth in regards to high points, flat sections and so on, paying close attention to the inside diameter for comfort on the lips and teeth. The outside diameter is important as well, but for me, the inside bite and diameter is more crucial. Ask yourself if it feels like the inside bite of the mouthpiece is sitting squarely on a high point on your teeth or evenly distributes the contact pressure. Does it feel secure on your lips, or do you have the feeling that it “floats” around and doesn’t feel like you can hit notes accurately? Again, this is somewhat difficult since the rest of the mouthpiece variables factor in, but try to ignore them for now. Now ask yourself if you feel like you have enough buzzing surface of the lips inside the mouthpiece, or if it feels too restricting and is being cut off. Once you come up with a rim that, at least for now, feels comfortable and allows for an unrestricted buzzing surface, it’s time to decide how you want to sound and pick the mouthpiece that helps you get that sound through the horn with the most efficiency. Within reason, we will all sound like ourselves on any equipment we play, but I think the choice of mouthpiece, and horn as well, that most efficiently and easily lets us achieve our sound goal is the best way to go.

The next part of the mouthpiece to decide on is the cup. You will want to ask yourself what kind of sound you want and what is most appropriate for the music you’re playing. Do you play mostly symphonic, big band, chamber music, small group jazz, lead and commercial, show bands, marching bands? Answering these questions will help decide what you are after in a mouthpiece and tailor the cup to the music. If you play mostly symphonic music you may want to start with a larger volume cup with less resistance for a darker timbre. If you’re playing mostly lead and commercial, you may find a shallower cup with more resistance gets a brighter sound and crisper attacks. Having just said this, it’s important to know that none of this is absolute and there are many players that play what are seemingly either too large or too small mouthpieces for the music, according to what many might think inappropriate or unorthodox. The mouthpiece that is best for you is the one that helps you sound the way you want and in keeping with the sound for the music you’re playing. Large for one person might be perfect for some, and too small for someone else. What is good to know is that changing the depth and shape of the cup can greatly change the resistance, timbre, feel, and comfort level of the mouthpiece and therefore overall sound. Generally speaking for most people, playing a shallower cup helps in the upper register by adding more resistance to the air stream and makes for a brighter sound. It can also make lower playing a little more difficult if the cup is too shallow. Playing a larger cup helps get a darker, warmer sound

and makes low register playing easier; conversely playing in the upper register might be more difficult with that larger cup. Again, these are generalities and an accomplished player can usually play their entire range on any size mouthpiece, but depending on the musical needs and the ease of getting the sound they want with the most amount of efficiency, they will choose the mouthpiece accordingly.

Once you've chosen the rim that feels most comfortable, and a cup you feel most efficiently and easily allows your sound to come through, you'll want to look at the backbore and throat of the mouthpiece. A larger tapered backbore will generally give you a wider fatter sound. It will usually make your sound darker as well and it can also cut down on the projection distance if there isn't much resistance. A narrow backbore will tighten the focus of the sound and can increase the projection but you will lose some breadth to the sound. It's best to match the backbore to the cup and tie this in with your sound and what most easily allows you to get the sound you want. Symphonic players often choose larger backbores with larger cups for a bigger, broader, and warmer sound appropriate to the music. Commercial/lead players tend to want tighter backbores to add resistance to help get a more focused and brighter sound with less breadth but more focused projection. These also work well on microphone playing since the sound is so focused and directional and will pick up more easily. For most players, a mouthpiece that is suited to a wider range of styles and therefore easier to change the sound is the best way to go. For example, a Bach 3C size is a pretty common width and depth, and many people can make this mouthpiece work for commercial/lead and classical. I've always subscribed to the idea that playing the mouthpiece that makes the job easier works best for me, so for lead/commercial I use something comparable to a Bach 5D, and for classical something comparable to a Bach 3B. Again, there are those that play extremely large or small mouthpieces with great success, but I've written about some generalities and some good guidelines that have helped me, and seem to be common to most professional players and our needs.

The last aspect of the mouthpiece to decide on, and not necessarily in order of importance, is the throat size. There has recently been a trend towards larger throat sizes and many players, myself included, have opened up the throats of our mouthpieces to get a bigger sound. One size larger usually broadens the sound but be careful not to go too far. Many of us have opened up the throats too far and ruined perfectly good mouthpieces. The idea that one size bigger is better must mean that three times bigger is three times better, right? Unfortunately this is usually not the case. My suggestion if you want to experiment with opening up the throat of a mouthpiece is to get two identical mouthpieces and keep one stock, then only open up the other piece. This way if you go too far you still have a working mouthpiece. I experimented going the other way with smaller throat sizes. I found that by playing a smaller throat size it helped counter some tendencies that I and others experience in playing in the outer registers of the horn. Many of us tend to play sharper as we get into the upper register and flatter as we get to the bottom registers. The reason for playing sharper is that many times, especially for less experienced and stronger players, there isn't enough resistance in the apertures to play really relaxed up high and many compensate by pinching too much causing the pitch to get too sharp. In the lowest registers a larger throat size doesn't offer the resistance to

keep that part of the horn from playing too flat. In playing a smaller throat size I've found that for me it counters those natural tendencies and keeps the upper register from playing too sharp and the lower from playing too flat. I did have a change in sound at first when I switched to the smaller throat, but after about a week my sound was the same and I found my aperture could relax more and let the resistance come from the throat in the mouthpiece.

Having this information and the self awareness of your physical and musical needs will help with the process of finding the best mouthpiece for you. It also helps the mouthpiece manufacturer if you can speak to them and be able to more accurately describe your needs and wants, and in this way they can help you purchase a mouthpiece that will be more suited to your needs. The rest is up to you and the practice studio. Happy mouthpiece hunting.