

Playing Lead Trumpet

By Paul Baron

Playing lead trumpet in any size group comes with responsibilities. The lead player is not the person who can play the highest and loudest notes, but the person that leads the other players in the trumpet section, and in ensemble passages with other sections as well. Playing lead trumpet, and this is also true for other section leaders when the lead trumpet or trumpets aren't playing, means showing by example so that the others can follow with confidence. This article also covers some etiquette for the lead player and section players as well. A good ensemble is one that plays well together and not just a bunch of individuals playing at the same time. A good lead player will lay down the articulation, intonation, volume, time, phrasing, and style in such a way that the section players can easily follow with confidence. I feel that the last word, confidence, is very important to musically convey and help the sections play more confidently as well, and a part of the job I take very seriously. Playing lead is not about ego but about confidently leading the way so that the ensemble plays better together.

First of all, let's address the role of the lead player. As stated above, playing lead is not about playing the loudest and highest notes, although that's often what is required. It's also not about who can hold over the longest on the last note, although a small amount of that is traditionally and stylistically correct. Playing lead has a responsibility to the music and the ensemble, and a good lead player can raise the level of the band and pull the ensemble together. When I play lead, I feel that my job is to help the section and ensemble play confidently as well, and in doing so, I have to lay things down the same way every time. As far as articulation is concerned, I have to quickly decide how I will play the accents, when notes will be cut off, how much to articulate or slur certain passages, and be consistent with my interpretation and play like parts the same way every time. I feel that brings the section and ensemble together quickly, assuming they're following, so they can almost intuitively know where I will be placing things as we come up to them. Conversely, if I play a whole note and cut off on one the first time, four the next, and somewhere between on the third time, it makes playing with confidence more difficult and the ensemble sounds loose in always trying to second guess where I might put things. If I play that whole note to one every single time, the group will know when we start that whole note, that it'll cut off on one and the ensemble sounds much tighter.

It's also the job of the lead player to help the section play better in tune and therefore the lead player has to have impeccable pitch. The things I listen to most intently are the bass, that's the foundation of pitch for the group, and the fixed instruments like piano and guitar. If those instruments are in tune, and presumably they are, then it's my job as the lead player to lay it down in tune in relation to those instruments. Many lead players take for granted the job of laying down good pitch in favor of high notes, "better sharp than out of tune" is an old saying that comes to mind, but a good lead player is one who can still hit all the high notes, but with good intonation and sound. When the lead

player is laying it down, the rest of the section can play their parts more confidently, and that solidifies the section and the whole rest of the group. Something that is also important to note, and will be covered in more depth in a separate article, is the use and intonation problems associated with certain mutes. You need to identify the problems and adjust accordingly. Some, like many of the Harmon mutes, are sharp, whereas the cup mute can be flat, especially in the upper register.

Dynamics is something the lead player also dictates and as the lead player you need to pay close attention to the dynamics on and off the page. The written dynamics are important and so often the lead player will ignore these and continuously play loud. While this might be impressive on an athletic level, it really takes away from the music you're playing. The composer and/or arranger went to great lengths to dictate dynamics and therefore it's important to give the dynamics and music the respect they deserve. The audience will soon get bored and tired of being beaten over the head with loud dynamics all the time if there aren't softer dynamics to break up the monotony. Two examples of big bands I like but that illustrate my dynamics point are the bands of Count Basie and Stan Kenton. Both were capable of playing very loud but where the two bands differed is in the lower dynamic levels. Basie's band had the ability to swing very hard at almost a whisper and then really turn up the heat and hit the loud dynamics very hard. Then they'd come back down and had you waiting for the next big hit. At times, Stan Kenton's band played loud and louder, and then when they really got going, loudest!!

I'm going to include time, phrasing, and style all in one paragraph because they really do all tie together. Time is something that can be both innate and learned. To work on developing good time you need to spend a lot of quality time with a metronome and internalize the time so you're really feeling the beat so it becomes second nature. Practice all exercises and music with a metronome and you will be ingraining good time into your body. Another good exercise in developing good time is to think of subdivisions of the beat. If you are playing something in straight 8th note time, think 16th note subdivisions as much as possible to keep the time steady. This is especially good when you're playing quarter notes, half notes, and especially whole notes. Think of it this way; at a slow tempo there is a long time between beats and an even longer time between whole notes. If you are subdividing 16th notes in your head, the distance between the 16th notes is a lot closer and easier to keep steady than the distance between 1/4s and whole bar lines. The notes between the beats, and even the down beats, can be placed in basically three different spots in relation to where the drummer and bass player are laying down the time. In a Basie-type swing, it's characteristic to "lay-back" on the beat, meaning that you place the notes slightly late. There is a definite difference between dragging and slowing down, and "laying back". When I talk about laying back I mean keeping good time but just sitting slightly behind the beat. This gives the notes and lines a fatter swing feel and is more stylistically correct in a Basie-style swing. Playing right down the middle on the beat is the most common placement for the notes and requires no less confidence in good time. This would be more appropriate in rock, bossa, ballads, and so on. In salsa, samba, and more driving rock you want to feel like you are pushing the beat slightly. What I mean is to be very aggressive with the time and push just slightly ahead of the beat without actually rushing. These are tough concepts to write about and there is

really no better way than to listen and immerse yourselves in the styles of music you are playing. As a lead player, you need to be confident in the style and that means really doing your homework and listening to recordings. You need to give the music the respect it deserves and as such know and really feel what the music is about. It would be stylistically wrong to approach a modern medium up tempo tune in the style of Basie, and conversely wrong to be pushing the beat on a Basie tune. I remember having a discussion with a symphony trumpet player about playing jazz and his ideas about swing. He truly believed that swing was simply “*playing dotted-eighth and 16th note rhythms, and missing and leaving out a few notes here and there*”. A very short sighted comment for sure, so make sure to study the music and the recordings, or at least recordings of similar styles.

This last paragraph is on etiquette and attitude. As I’ve said, playing lead comes with a responsibility and getting a section to follow and play together is not just a matter of playing higher and louder. You need to play the part well for sure, but you also need the respect of the section so they will want to follow. This means coming to the rehearsal or job musically and physically prepared, and playing in such a way that is easy and straight forward to follow. It also means not showing off and hanging over on phrases. If you are really doing your job as a lead player, your playing will speak for itself, and there won’t be much need for discussion. As far as attitude is concerned, the way you carry and conduct yourself says a lot about the way you will be viewed and can make a big difference in your employability. Come into the rehearsal or the job with a good attitude and ready to play. Respect the players around you and the music you’re playing. There will be times when the music is not exactly to your liking, so you need to find things that will keep your head in the game. At these times, I have to remember that I’m very fortunate to be doing what I love, playing trumpet for a living, and that there is always something to be learned from most every playing situation. Sometimes it’s just a matter of a work out for your chops, but that’s still valuable exercise. Sometimes it can be a test to how well you can get through the job with a positive attitude, and that will certainly be noticed and you may find yourself on more jobs as a result. A good attitude means your nicer to be around and more likely to get hired more often.

Playing lead trumpet can be a lot of fun, musically and physically challenging, and very gratifying as well. It can also elevate a band and pull things together to help make a band sound great, so enjoy yourself with the music and your job as lead player, and live up to the responsibility that goes along with it.