**It’s a Tuba Thing**

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For many band directors, teaching tuba players and general tuba pedagogy can be very a very daunting endeavor. While working with various band programs throughout the state of Texas, I find a lot of questions about how to effectively teach tuba players so they can play with bigger more resonant sounds and have more clarity so they can provide a better foundation for the entire band. Sound quality, clarity of articulation, and smooth slurring seem to be among the biggest challenges young tubists face. To overcome these obstacles, tubists often need tuba specific instruction. This is because playing tuba playing is extremely different than the other instruments in the brass family. Variables such as size of mouthpiece, volume of wind needed, and shape and size of instrument provide a need for specific pedagogical ideas that would only apply to tuba. The purpose of this clinic is to identify those areas in which tuba specific concepts would be beneficial for tuba and how to effectively implement these modifications into a full band setting.

**Problem Areas for Tubists**

Tubists tend to have three performance areas that are most problematic:

1. **Overall tone development** (avoiding small, tight, and pinched sounds)
2. **Clarity when articulation** (fuzzy and/or cracked notes)
3. **Smoothness of slurs** (bumping of notes and fuzz between notes)

The root of these problems often stem from three aspects of playing that often requires tuba specific pedagogy in order to be effective for the student. These three areas of concern are:

1. **Breathing**
2. **Embouchure formation and development**
3. **Articulation Issues**

**Breathing (Moving Wind)**

Breathing and wind usage are probably the most vital aspects for tuba players because it is the fuel that makes everything work. We don’t get sound on an instrument without the vibration of the lips and the lips don’t vibrate with wind moving across them. Just like in an automobile, the motor doesn’t run unless the fuel is effectively delivered.

The way wind needs to move across the lips is different for each brass instrument in terms of wind volume (quantity) versus wind speed (pressure). Trumpet for example needs high wind speed but low wind volume. Conversely, tuba requires high wind volume but low wind speed. In spite of these differences we often teach all brass musicians to blow in the same manner which is usually better situated for high brass rather than low brass. The end result being, tubists that use too little wind volume and too much wind speed which can lead to small and pinched sounds.

In order to use more volume, we must make sure the student is taking a full and relaxed breath at all times. To be able to do this, students must fully expand their lungs every time they take a breath. This will require the student to allow their lungs to expand and collapse as they fill and empty their lungs. If this is not happening then students are only partially filling up their lungs and the result is the student will have to use extra tension to get the lips to vibrate thus resulting in overall sound issues. On the exhale students should flow the wind across the lips in such a way that the lungs simply collapse until they are empty. Do not try and control the exhale, just flow (the resistance from the lips and mouthpiece will regulate the wind). Higher brass instruments require a more refined control of the exhale to get the wind speed right but for tuba it is all about quantity of wind moving across the lips.

When working with students I really stress the importance of working on the *Breathing Form*as laid out in the book **The Breathing Gym** by Patrick Sheridan and Sam Pilafian. There are 4 parts to the form:

1. Posture (you can read an article I wrote about this subject at <http://banddirectorstalkshop.com>)
2. Shape (always utilizing an “Oh” or “Whoa” shape when inhaling and exhaling)
3. Even and constant
4. Smooth change of direction

I find that when students can master the breathing form and make the primary focus of the breathing process at the lips that tuba playing becomes much easier and most sound and smoothness issues go away.

**Embouchure**

The purpose of the embouchure is to focus the lips in a manner that allows them to vibrate effectively to produce sound. The different instruments in the brass family require a different amount of surface area of lip to vibrate. Trumpet requires the least amount of surface area to vibrate and tuba requires the most. Since the embouchure helps define this surface area, it is only logical that the embouchure required for tuba would be very different than the embouchure required for trumpet. Tuba players require an embouchure that is much more relaxed and an aperture that is more open. I tell students to think of the bottom side of the corners of the lips to be anchored against the bottom teeth. This allows the middle of the lips to be free and flexible to vibrate and produce to best possible sound. If the tuba embouchure becomes too firm (especially on the top side of the corners of the mouth) the lips will be stretched thin have too much tension thus reducing the vibrating surface area. This will result in poor sound quality and loss of clarity since an overly tense embouchure won’t allow a thick column of wind to move across the lips. Another way to think of it is water moving through a pipe, the larger the pipe the more water that can be moved. If the end of the pipe is restricted too much, the water has nowhere to flow. This concept can also be applied to the tuba embouchure. To get the wind to flow, the embouchure must be relaxed enough to get the right sized aperture.

**Articulation Issues**

The majority of articulation issues for tuba students are usually a mixture of poor wind flow and an overly tense embouchure. Wind flow is the key to great clarity. If the wind isn’t moving with enough volume or there is too much tension in the lips, poor articulation clarity is the result. There are a couple of tricks that tuba players can use to help with this issue. The first one is to make sure that the syllable for tonguing is always “toh” or “doh”. If the vowel gets too high, the tongue stays in the middle of the mouth thus reducing wind flow. The other exercise that seems to work well is to have tuba players perform wind patterns off the instrument for any sections that need more clarity. When I use wind patterns in my own practicing I remove any embouchure formation on purpose during the exercise. This will promote more wind to flow across the lips. Once applied back to the instrument, the embouchure goes back into place automatically but the increased wind flow from the wind patterns will be added. Practicing tongued passages slurred will also help with clarity. A final item that can cause clarity problems is when the fingers and the tongue are not aligned. Wind patterns while fingering a passage can be extremely helpful to remedy this issue.

Here some great books I recommend that can provide greater detail on many of the concepts presented today:

**Teaching Brass** by Kristian Steenstrup

**Also Sprach Arnold Jacobs** by Bruce Nelson

**Arnold Jacobs: Song and Wind** by Brian Frederiksen

Thank you all for attending this clinic. If you have any questions or want further information please feel free to email me at [scott.roeder@utrgv.edu](mailto:scott.roeder@utrgv.edu). As a Buffet Group USA Artist that performs on B&S Tubas, I would also like to thank them for their support which allowed me to present today’s clinic.