

Care and Feeding Of Your Lip and Skills When Time Is Limited.

By Floyd E. Friedli, Ph.D.

Being a non-pro trumpet player is a tremendous source of pleasure and frustration. Brass instruments, particularly those with small mouthpieces like the trumpet or French horn, require a fair amount of practice to maintain a decent level of playing.

My wife is an excellent pianist, but if she were to not play the piano for a month she could still play well and use the entire range of the instrument. Not so with the trumpet! I love to play the trumpet and golf. If I don't play golf for a month, I may even play better because I forgot my bad habits. Not so with the trumpet! Below I offer information and suggestions for warming up, practicing, surviving long rehearsals/gigs, and keeping your lip while traveling.

The warm-up

Many of us consider the warm-up the most important part of the playing day. Some trumpet players warm-up their lips to assure flexibility. Because I'm not a large person and have small lungs, I concentrate on my lungs and diaphragm. If my breathing is good, everything else falls into place. I don't worry about my lips or fingers as they will figure out what to do. Most of us hate long tones, but they really are very beneficial. Everyone should do long tones or a version of an exercise that simulates a long tone. I do worry about my tonguing, however. I am now 64 and as I have gotten older it seems like my single tonguing has slowed down a little bit. Now I have to exercise my tongue and warm it up.

I used to warm up with a lot of low notes that felt great as my lip was loose and very relaxed. One of my teachers convinced me to warm up on the staff between the two Gs. He did not like getting his lip too loose as he thought that hurt his range. Below is my current warm-up:

- Stay between the two Gs for at least five minutes.
- Triple tongue on C until 60 to 80% of my air is gone, then continue to hold the C in long tone fashion. Repeat 3 to 5 times.
- Pick another triple tonguing exercise where the notes change. Repeat or extend until 60 to 80% of my air is used and then hold the last note for as long as possible. Repeat 3 to 5 times.
- Feel free to throw in some actual long tones anytime. Clark Studies also make excellent long tone simulation exercises; hold the last note.
- Do a few light lip slurs. Pick a few of your favorite groupings and hold the last note in long tone fashion. Too many lip slurs wear out the non-pro player for the rest of the day.
- Play a lyrical piece with a lot of long notes. I tune up my instrument and usually play *Ave Maria*. With this I can work on my breathing, my tone, my phrasing, my cut offs, and occasionally check the tuner to make sure I'm staying in tune. On a good day I can make it all the way through the piece, but most times I stop halfway through and rest 30 seconds. I have to make sure my breathing is correct and I'm not using too much mouthpiece pressure. Never strain yourself or use much pressure early in the playing day. Now I'm ready to play.

Practice and playing time

While some professionals play a lot, between two and six hours a day, I was told by a previous teacher, who played professionally often, that he preferred to play fairly hard about two hours a day maybe six days a week and have one day off.

Non-pro players usually can't come anywhere close to this amount of playing or practice. A player's natural talent, lung power, available time, and goals determine the minimum amount of practice needed to play reasonably well. I found I need to play a minimum of three hours a week to keep my skills current and I may play up to six hours a week if time permits.

Practicing with the purpose

Every practice session should have a purpose. Many times for a brass player, the main purpose is not only to work on endurance and range, but also to try to go beyond this aspect. After a good warm up, pick out something that needs help. These are good ideas:

- Identify trouble spots in a performance piece. I'm paranoid about screwing up, so I really beat a tricky spot to death – extra slow, slow, at tempo, 5-20 times a day for many days. If allowable, I write "idiot" notes in the music - tricky accidentals, measure when horns or the singer comes in, hard to find repeat or sign/coda markings, etc.
- Play a technical exercise or piece to improve those skills.
- Play another slow lyrical piece where you can focus on tone, phrasing, breathing, expression, loud/soft volume, and intonation.
- Sight read and practice rhythms. I like *Rhythms Complete* by Colin and Bower and *The Complete Sight Reading Etude Collection for Trumpet* by Mark Ponzo.

The technical piece may be an Arban's exercise (I like the arpeggio drills), Clark studies, or I prefer an actual solo. I try to keep 5-7 solos almost performance ready and another 5 somewhat in shape. Exercises can be boring and I do better trying to make music from a solo I like that is in my ability range. I practice pieces that I could play in public with a little cleaning up and I also practice pieces that are a little too difficult for me to ever play in public. The difficult pieces help stretch my limits. In my practice room, I can sometimes play the first movement of the Telemann Concerto in D or the first movement of the Fasch Concerto in D. In a public performance, nerves and poor breathing would take away the high F on the A piccolo.

Remember to take breaks and not prematurely wear out your lip. Sometimes I will practice 20-45 minutes straight, but more often I will take multiple breaks. Alternating practice with a task you need to do can keep the lip fresh and allow you to play much longer with minimum pressure and keeping your physical technique correct longer. In my "broken practice" sessions, I will:

- warm up
- do something else for 3-10 minutes
- practice 5-10 minutes
- do another task
- practice 5-10 minutes
- repeat a few more times

The other tasks might be paying bills, lifting weights, emptying waste baskets, ordering items online, checking emails, or cleaning the cat box (wash your hands!). It works for me to practice, do a set of bench presses, do a set of arm curls, practice, do a set of bench presses, do a set of bent over rows, practice, etc. Obviously, this type of "broken" practice requires that you focus your concentration when to get back to it. For me, the task breaks allow my brain to relax then re-focus again. But each person is different and needs to find what works for them.

Know your limits and don't practice too much and certainly don't injure your lip. Find the

system the works for you - 20-30 min every day versus 1 hour every other day. Again, I assume your schedule is tight and you are not going to play or practice 2 hr a day. My practice depends on my schedule. Provided, I didn't have a performance Saturday night, I usually practice the hardest on Sunday evening 45-60 min. Then 20-30 minutes most other days if time permits and I don't have a rehearsal or a performance. Since my wife teaches piano lessons in our house Mon-Thur from 3:30 to 9, I can't practice then unless I go to the far top floor bedroom. If you have young children who go to bed early, your practice time is seriously limited so you have to be motivated and creative.

Each day try to decide if practicing will make your playing better or worse. Sometimes after several days of hard playing or practice, it is best to take a day off and let your mind and lip recover completely.

Short emergency practice

Most of us are busy and a number of amateurs or non-pro players don't find time each day to fit in a decent practice session. I personally think a quick 15 minute practice or even 5 minutes is a **big help** to endurance and range. In the 5 min practice, you cannot really practice anything, just work on keeping your lip in shape. I do my typical long tones or tonguing long tones for 1-2 minutes. For a 5 minute practice then I go immediately into my "high note slurs" - C to high C (C, E, G, C) and back down tonguing at the high C. I do that 4-6 times in one breath and hold the lower C a few beats. Then I repeat going B to B for another breath and then Bb to Bb on another breath. If I am feeling strong, I go C# to C#, the D to D, Eb to Eb. Then I start over with the C to C set and repeat until my lip is shot, but not injured.

If I have 15 minutes, then I will add a lyrical piece and/or a technical piece or etude to round out the practice. I will put the "high note" workout either before or after the other pieces depending on what feels appropriate for the lip that day.

Try my "emergency practice" sessions. Many times, I will have a decent practice session planned, but something comes up – lawn project took longer than expected, I had to run to the grocery or hardware store, etc. Rather than skipping the trumpet, do a short session.

Equipment

The trumpet and mouthpiece that worked for you in college when you played a lot may not be ideal for your present situation. Having the right trumpet and mouthpiece for your ability, preferences, music needs, and practice time is critical to getting the best results. The current variety of manufacturers, designs, metals, bores, tuning slides, bells, lead pipes, weights, and finishes is really confusing, but allows a player to find a horn to their liking. Compare a light easy to blow trumpet to a heavier instrument with slightly bigger bore for sound quality, projection, range, and ease of keeping in tune. It is great fun going to the ITG Convention with your mouthpiece and trying out 20 horns for an hour or so.

The right mouthpiece is also critical to get the sound you want in the range you need. I play a fairly big deep mouthpiece, a custom Schilke 16D4C which is roughly similar to a Bach 1 ½ B, but with a flatter rim. With the deep cup, I chose to trade range for a better sound. For jazz or pop work, I switch to a similar, but medium depth mouthpiece Mr. Marcinkiewicz made for me. A flatter rim really improves the endurance for the amateur player.

Surviving long rehearsals or gigs

If you are an occasional player, maybe you have endurance to play 30-45 minutes comfortably. But what do you do if you have a tough 2 hour orchestra rehearsal or a 4 hour cocktail/dinner/dance gig coming up? Obviously, practice as much beforehand as possible, but

that may only increase your endurance some.

In most orchestral music, the trumpet only plays sporadically and a normal concern is to count correctly and not get lost before the next “loud” entrance. However, if your upcoming concert is challenging from a range or endurance standpoint, planning is important. Spreading around the workload among the capable players really helps. The system below worked best for me for tough orchestra rehearsals:

- Get a good, but gentle warm up
- Don't be a hero, if there are too many high parts, play some of them on a piccolo if there is time to switch between instruments.
- When the trumpets are in unison, lay out and let the other person cover the melody. This saves lip and makes sure there are no tuning conflicts.
- Remember it's a rehearsal, play the key parts on time and well, but if your lip is dying, skipping a few unimportant notes or measures can make the experience better for everyone.

The above illustrates the advantage of playing in an amateur orchestra with limited trumpet players where you can't get fired.

Our eight piece combo loves to do wedding gigs with a 1 hour cocktail party, a 1 hour dinner set and a 2 hour dance session. We two trumpet players cannot last 4 hours. However, with careful planning it can work out. Doug, the lead trumpet (and group leader) plays 1st when there are 2 trumpet parts and does the improv and harder solos. He also plays bass and sings to add variety and get his mouth away from the trumpet. I only play trumpet, so I play on 95% of our songs - background rhythm with beeps and bops, the main melody when the singer takes a break, counter-melody, chord notes, etc. With careful arranging so the trumpet gets adequate breaks, you can play a long time. It seems strange, but playing a church hymn in the middle register with no breaks is much harder on your lip, then playing loud and moderately high for 4 measures, resting for 4 measures, and playing loud and moderately high for 4 measures again.

Practicing while traveling - pocket trumpet silent mute

For 12 ½ years at the end of my career I was a salesman traveling about 2 days per week. On a normal week, if I had no performance coming up I would not worry about missing 2-3 days of practice as I would play hard before and after the trip. However, on a few occasions, I would have a tough orchestra performance or a long 8-piece combo gig and could not afford to lose much endurance or range. In those cases I would pack a friend's pocket trumpet and a Yamaha Silent Mute into my suitcase. It fit nicely leaving room for my clothes, etc. I would take a folder of key music passages that I wanted to keep ready to perform and some classic Arban's exercises. On the trip, I wouldn't have much time, but I could fit in 2-3 10-20 minutes sessions in my hotel room. I would turn on the TV for background noise, put in the silent mute and play. This really helped keep my performance and confidence at a good level.

Maintaining your lip while on vacation

Taking a pocket trumpet on a busy vacation is not practical. On a daily basis I worry about my breathing and not my lip strength. But when you can't play at all your lips deteriorate quickly. Isometric exercises of tightening and loosening your lip with or without a pencil are useful. Think of bringing your lips to the center or almost pursing them hard and holding that position. I now take the P.E.T.E (Personal Embouchure Training Exerciser) lip exerciser on vacation and try to use it 1-3 times a day for a few minutes and it seems to really work.

Performance Time

Save your lip and don't play the day before a taxing performance. If you are only playing one solo or light parts, then rehearsing key parts is a good idea. But, if you will be playing hard tomorrow, don't play at all today! If others in your group want a rehearsal, keep it light focusing on the entrances and keeping parts tight. Playing some parts an octave lower helps. Lay out on non-critical parts.

On the day of the performance, warm up early and thoroughly. Lots of deep breaths improve your breathing and calm your nerves.

Author's Background

Dr. Friedli graduated from the College of Wooster with a major in chemistry and a minor in music. He then received a PhD in organic chemistry from The Ohio State University. While at OSU he studied the trumpet with Tom Battenberg, then professor of trumpet who is now the principal trumpet in the Columbus Symphony Orchestra and the Pro Musica Orchestra. Floyd currently plays in the Cardinal Health (amateur) Orchestra, the Dublin Brass Quintet, and Project 75 an 8-piece combo that does wedding receptions, festivals, dances, etc. As a chemist, he worked for Sherex, Witco, Goldschmidt/Degussa, and Akzo Nobel in various R&D, management, and sales functions for 36 years until retirement. He holds 7 patents and has written 2 books *The Hammer and the Frog*, *God Watches Out For Me* and *The Pope's Piano*.