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SOME HELPFUL HINTS FOR THE UPPER REGISTER

BY MARTIN SAUNDERS

One of the most common questions of middle school, high school, and even college students concerns advice on how to increase the upper range on the trumpet. Some teachers will tell a student that playing in the upper register on the trumpet is a “natural talent,” and that you can either do it or not. In my professional career, I have met many players who would probably not be considered “naturals,” yet played with a good tone quality and excellent trumpet range. These players often played musical exercises daily that helped solidify their upper range, and also kept them in great physical and mental shape. The key for them, and for you, is to practice **pushing the envelope** of your upper range on a daily basis. This should be accomplished gradually by playing scales that expand into the upper octaves, numerous arpeggiated exercises that climb upward, and etudes and pieces that expand into the upper register.

When you practice, scales, exercises, and music are the basic building blocks of endurance and range there are several fundamental ideas that can help to ensure that all of your practice pays off. The following list contains some helpful hints when working on expanding your upper register on trumpet:

- First, make sure you are warmed up. You don't need to spend forty-five minutes getting there, but you also do not want to start attempting to expand into the upper register if you have not played at all. My advice here is to warm up until your tone is energized and beautiful, and that you are comfortably ready to play.
- Take a good breath! This is vitally important. Inhale a full, relaxed breath, and then exhale through the trumpet and through your sound. Concentrate on sending the air through the trumpet as if it is a long tube, which is what it is, after all! Try to keep the same relaxed breath when playing in the upper register. When you start to expand into the upper register, your air should be slightly quicker, but not harder—do not mistake **blowing hard** for **faster air**. As you descend, the air speed will slow slightly but should remain supportive of the tone.
- When you play scales and ascending exercises, keep your vowel sound the same. Whatever vowel sound you use, “AH” for instance, do not let that vowel change when starting into the upper register. If you change the sound to an “EH” or “EE,” it can cripple your chances for success.
- Keep the embouchure the same in every register. Do not change or shift your embouchure to make the upper notes come out. This can cause some serious problems later on in your playing experience. However, the embouchure should not be held rigidly in place. A rigid embouchure will cause

the tone to suffer, and will ultimately limit upper range. Ideally, the mouthpiece should be affixed in one place, but the embouchure should remain somewhat relaxed to allow for flexibility and excellent tone production.

- Play with a fabulous tone always! When we start to work on any particular part of our playing (such as range), a common mistake is to focus so intently on working it out that we forget to make a beautiful sound in the process. Produce the best trumpet sound you can even while working on increasing the upper range.
- Pace yourself. Another common mistake in working on the upper register is not taking enough rest in between exercises

“...practice pushing the envelope of your upper range on a daily basis.”

and during the practice session. Balance your range expansion practice with playing other, more relaxing music in between the expansion exercises, such as lyrical etudes and pieces. Also, make sure to vary dynamics during these exercises—play musically!

- Imagine that your upper range already exists! This is a very important concept. In order for your body to help you produce the upper register sounds, you must give it a clear aural image of the sound you're trying to achieve. If you can hear it in your head, you are 90% of the way down the road to playing it.
- Listen to great trumpeters who have a solid upper register. Recordings are a great way to listen to good models of sound. If circumstances permit, get together with an established professional performer or teacher who can play well in the upper register. Lessons and personal guidance help immensely.

Developing a solid upper range takes time! Make no mistake; you will have to commit to practice on a **daily basis** in order for your range to grow and be consistent. The benefits to daily practice, however, will be worth it when your upper register starts to grow and becomes easier for you. Other aspects of your playing will also get better with daily practice.

Finally, believe in yourself! You can do it, with some hard work and commitment. In the words of basketball great Michael Jordan, “You have to expect things of yourself before you can do them.”

About the author: Martin Saunders is associate professor of trumpet and jazz studies at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia. Prior to teaching at Marshall University, Martin spent seven years in the Air Force Band program at Offutt AFB in Omaha, Nebraska. There he performed in the Concert Band, Ceremonial Band, and was the Lead Trumpeter and later Musical Director for the Noteables Jazz Ensemble.

