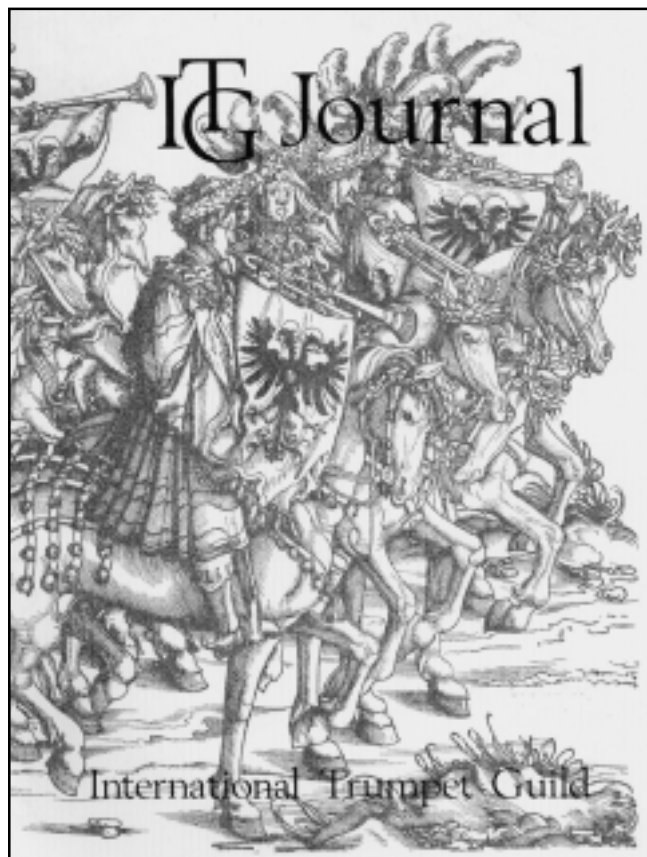


*Reprints from the*

# **International Trumpet Guild Journal**

**William G. Lucas – *The Orchestra Audition* (May99/38)**



*to promote communications among trumpet players around the world and to improve the artistic level of performance, teaching, and literature associated with the trumpet*

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# The Orchestra Audition

WILLIAM G. LUCAS

**T**he audition is a process intended by design to be the fairest and best way for any organization to determine which candidate is the best of the best. Arguably, it is the most important process that separates those who have jobs from those who do not.

Preparing and successfully winning an audition can seem very complicated to some and simple to others. How many of us have wondered, or are still wondering, just what it takes to win a job in a major or regional orchestra today? There seem to be many different repertoire lists and different opinions about acceptable sounds and styles. There are also many nonmusical variables – the stresses of traveling, trying to practice in a hotel room, and even the hassle of getting a quad trumpet case onboard an airplane. It seems the audition system must be unjust since so many trumpeters capable of successfully holding a position in an orchestra somehow find themselves losing out at auditions. However, auditions are here to stay as orchestras tend to be slow-moving beasts that do not adapt quickly to new ideas. Realize also, that the majority of orchestra musicians today have been placed as the result of winning an audition. That being the case, most of these players will admit the system is not perfect but is still the fairest way to win a job.

I hope to offer you a better look at what auditions really are and how to increase your chances for success. Some of what I have to say you will agree with and some you will not – that's okay. Like most orchestral trumpeters, I have lost more auditions than I have won. As a result, I have learned there are no magic wands, only hard thoughtful practice and good preparation. Success is possible, but what is more possible is increasing the odds that you will play well at any given audition. Do that, and your odds of ending up on the paycheck side of the audition screen can increase enormously.

## **Auditioning: What It Is and What It Is Not?**

Simply, auditions are tests not only of ability but also of nerves, conditioning, and preparation. Auditioning for anything puts yourself in the middle of a somewhat hostile environment, for as orchestral candidate number 249, you will rub shoulders with many other good trumpet players who are there for one reason only, to beat you and win the job.

As trumpeters, we are accustomed to enjoying a

special camaraderie among our kind. However, at the audition, you must have only one goal in mind, to get the job. This does not suggest anything other than to be polite at the audition and save the merriment with other candidates for after you win the job, not before. You must train yourself to assume a proper balance between business and pleasure. It is common wisdom not to hang around backstage with the other candidates as you wait your turn. You will only waste energy trying to be cordial.

Auditions rarely run on time. If you find yourself waiting, leave and come back in time to warm up. Ask yourself, "What would an expert business head like Donald Trump do in this situation, hang out backstage telling silly stories or be off in the wings focusing himself on his strategy to win?" To win, you must stay focused on the job at hand.

Putting it another way, it's okay to be a cat. Cats are known by many to be soft, interesting, and desirable house pets. They are also known to be very independent and aloof. Call a cat by name and see what it does, it does what it wants. Our society openly welcomes cats into our homes even though these same creatures mercilessly destroy small furry rodents and birds with glee. While we find a way to overlook this as instinct, as trumpeters we must also learn from the cat, being cool and aloof before an audition, a predator while on the audition stage, and relaxed and friendly afterwards.

Auditioning is the fairest selection process, although it can seem unfair or even be unfair. It is certainly an imperfect process (I am one of those orchestra musicians who has obtained orchestral employment as a result of a blind audition.) Auditioning is not necessarily a determination of musical ability, but is more a determination of your ability to audition. In any case, in order to eventually win, you must learn to use every audition to your advantage. Telling yourself that you lost one because the audition was "rigged" might in fact be just the case, but telling yourself that you lost because you demonstrated your need to improve in certain areas will make you a better player. You'll be happy about being a better player at your next audition.

## **Fight or Flee**

In any situation that our mind senses to be hostile, the body reacts adversely to external stimuli. This phenomenon is known as "fight or flee." Essentially,

we are programmed to make a decision: whether to stand our ground to the death, or to run like mad away from danger. In an audition sense, there is no danger, but our minds don't readily sense that. Our mind only reacts with the primitive instinct for survival. Since, by virtue of our very existence, we are all descendants of the fittest and most capable, this can be a very strong instinct indeed. It can be so strong that it becomes an overpowering, even paralyzing state of mind that stings failure into every note we attempt to play. In order to be successful, we must be able to control that instinct, even learning to use it to our advantage.

### Stack the Deck

Auditioning is as much a test of nerves as it is a requirement for orchestral employment. It is a process that you will most likely have to endure, successfully meeting all challenges posed to you as a result. Get over it. While auditions are by their very nature extremely competitive, they are also controllable to the extent that it can be highly likely you will eventually succeed. In any event, you need to understand that all things being equal, the odds are heavily stacked against you at any audition. Your chance of winning is one out of the total number of applicants. Based solely on math, it is not likely you will win.

If this simple mathematical exercise doesn't feel quite right, you are correct, there's more to it. Remember, I said, "all things being equal." You no doubt understand you could probably play better than some of those 250 applicants. Things are already unequal then, and that is exactly the key to winning – upsetting the balance between you and your opponents. At any audition, the odds are that someone will win, and if you think and follow some simple rules to stack the deck in your favor, there is no reason why it can't be you.

How many trumpet players do you know that you truly consider to be thinking musicians? The number who are thinking auditioners may yield an even lower number. Going to an audition without every single excerpt committed to memory, without feeling like you will be glad, yes, glad that the audition committee has requested to hear every *Zarathustra* call is a gamble. Going to an audition without feeling like the job is yours, even before you get there is a risk, and risk is your enemy. Risk is what you want to limit and is what you must attempt to erase. Limiting risk will exponentially increase your chance for playing well and accordingly, your ability to win. Think of it this way. If you were the only trumpet player who obtained the exact audition repertoire in advance, how prepared would you be sure to be? No matter what your answer or your supporting logic, preparation is the first step towards limiting risk.

### Mental Preparation

Consider this scenario: suppose I have started a new orchestra, and I am interested in hiring a first trumpet. You are interested in playing first trumpet and learn that all you have to do to be hired is come and play a simple audition.

The image shows a musical score for a trumpet part. At the top, it reads "Symphony No. 1" in red. Below that, "Trumpet 1 in C" is written on the left and "William Lucas" on the right. The music is on a single treble clef staff with a 4/4 time signature. A single quarter note is written on the staff, with a red "mf" dynamic marking below it. At the end of the staff, there is a double bar line with a red "fine" marking below it.

Thus far, what don't you know about this scenario? You don't know when, where, who else I am inviting, how good my orchestra is, or what your pay will be. All right, suppose I said, "I am inviting no one else, I will pay \$80,000 a year, and all we do is perform Brahms, Bruckner, Strauss, Mahler, Coltrane, and Lucas. Oh yes, you can come and audition for me here in my hall in Detroit any time you like. Still interested?"

In this scenario, it is fairly easy to imagine that you will play really well, and essentially, you could conceive you already won this job before you even play a note. In fact, this audition is going to be fun, because you are so sure you will win.

Although you don't know the acoustics of my hall, you imagine pretty closely what it will be like to audition for me here, even without a trumpet in your hands. In other words, you can imagine auditioning in really defined detail without ever doing it. This concept is known as "imaging." Notice that when you "image" yourself playing a "G" from a certain excerpt, you never miss it in your head and it is, above all, always really easy to imagine yourself playing it.

Suppose the repertoire list becomes harder little by little. After several steps, I now require you to play the *Leonore* call. Has your confidence about winning this audition changed? Are you still looking forward to playing for me as much as you were? Can you still image every note or does your imaging begin to fall apart, even a little? If it does, where does it? Do you find yourself now imaging mistakes? What happens if we progress with this game to *Petrouchka*?

The only problem you cannot solve is the problem you refuse to recognize. You need to learn to be wholly objective as you find that even in your head a particular excerpt can seem to be difficult. You must learn to correct this by beginning with easy "excerpts" and progressing to those more challenging. In the same sense that you could easily image playing the "G" in the first excerpt, you must be able to easily image playing any and all the excerpts on a prepared list. Through consistent and thoughtful practice you can note that mental picture for good.

## Imaging

Many sports professionals talk about the “zone.” The zone is described by many as a place where you see events unfold before they actually happen. Time seems to slow down and every detail seems crisp, clear, and easily obtainable.

The United States Women’s Olympic Rowing team reportedly imaged their entire race from start to finish while sitting together in their row boat. This included crossing the finish line and accepting the gold medal. It is important to see yourself through to this kind of success. As you learn this technique, image yourself as the owner of the job you are auditioning for. See yourself accepting congratulations from the audition committee, the maestro, your friends, and your family. This is where you may learn that as an individual, you are perhaps afraid to succeed. Many things will change for you when you win that shiny new spot in an orchestra. Imaging your way to success will allow you to understand where you have confidence and where you do not.

As you become comfortable with the notion of having the job you want, take the next step, which is to convince yourself that you have already won the job. It was a great experience and you are simply going to relive the experience on Monday morning because you enjoyed it so much. While this may seem like a stretch for some, do not underestimate the power of mental imagery. The more you become aware of this aspect of trumpet playing, the more you will recognize its presence in the words of the sports greats and in much of the words of our great pedagogues.

## Peak Performance Techniques

*Peak Performance* is an excellent book by Charles Garfield PhD that I highly recommend to anyone auditioning in the performance arts. Essentially, it explores the training techniques of Soviet weight lifters, many of whom reached legendary status in the early ’70s. Buy the book, do the exercises, and see if you don’t do better at everything: tennis, golf, trumpeting – whatever.

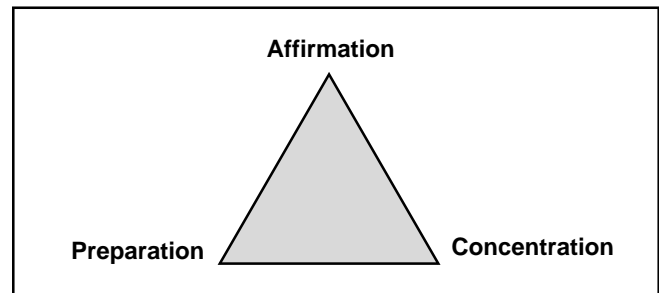
The main focus of this book is the understanding of “you” as an individual in the “zone.” To quote the great Nolan Ryan of baseball pitching fame: “Tunnel vision is how I explain it. You get into a rhythm or groove... you know that everything is going right and you become isolated from all outside distraction... there is only you, the hitter, and the catcher. It is the most satisfying feeling that I have ever known.”

Certainly all of us display moods of happiness, contentment, and even anger at some time. In each of these situations, we know who we are at that moment, and we learn how to deal with these emotions. Peak performing is no different. As you complete the exercises in this book, you will begin to recognize

common traits to you as a peak performer. You will begin to see another side of your personality emerge, one that is capable of extraordinary feats, deep levels of concentration, and nerves of steel. One that you will rely upon as an audition candidate putting you a step or two ahead of most of the rest. This is a tool you will find to be invaluable to the prospect of upsetting the “balance” at the audition and a tool you will rely upon as a performer in the orchestra.

## Be Your Own Judge: The Art of Self-Affirmation

Our society tends to feel a little funny about the most important piece of mental preparation, the art of self-affirmation. If I were to say, “Man, I really hosed that concert last night!” somehow, I am a very cool guy. However, if I exclaim, “Man, I played really, really great last night!” you begin to think I am egotistical. But perhaps it is the truth; perhaps I did play a really great concert last night. We must learn to accept that it’s okay to be your own judge. In fact you need to become your own judge in order to be successful at winning. You must be objective and tough, but when you do well, you must be free to acknowledge it.



If Bud Herseth heard you play and said, “That is the greatest playing I have ever heard,” you would no doubt be elated beyond belief. Why? Do you know Herseth personally? Do you know anything about him except what you have heard on record or live in concert? Perhaps yes, perhaps no, but surely, you are not as familiar with his beliefs as you are your own. Why should you feel better for him to tell you that you are great than for you to feel that way yourself? Of course, the answer is because you rightfully look up to him as a trumpeter, and as a result, you have given him the power to “affirm” your ability. Give yourself the power to congratulate yourself when you play well.

## Give It Everything

If after all this mental preparation, you are to lose anyway, then what? Simple again, self-determine your loss now. That way if you don’t win after all of this affirmation, preparation, and concentra-

tion, you will simply barf and move on. That's what I said, get sick and recover, we've all done that. Tossing your horns over a bridge or chucking mouthpieces out of hotel room windows will do nothing to solve the real problems you have with being able to win the next one.

If before the audition you get a little voice in your head saying, "Well, what if you *do* lose, then what?" Don't argue with yourself, just let it go. You will find yourself convincingly trying to believe that losing this audition means that you will lose everything. All that will happen if you lose is this: You will barf and move on to the next one. Remember, give this audition absolutely everything you have.

### **Physical Preparation**

Okay, this is simple. Get a notebook, put paper in it, and write stuff in it. It never ceases to amaze me that business students always have pen and paper ready to jot down notes yet music students act as though the notion of taking notes is absurd. Write things down! Take notes while you listen to music or during practice sessions or of what you think of after practice sessions. Take notes during lessons – the lessons you take as well as those you give. You'll be surprised at what you have to say. Give your notebook a name, and before every audition read every word of it. Take notes after each audition about what you were asked to play, how you played, what you thought about the entire experience, and suggestions you might like to make to yourself the next time you audition. Write down what you wore, what you had to eat and when, and other details that sticks in your head. You may find out later that these little details can be the keys to unlocking your potential for real success, no matter how irrelevant they might seem at the time.

### **You Are What You Eat: An Athlete's Guide to the Trumpet**

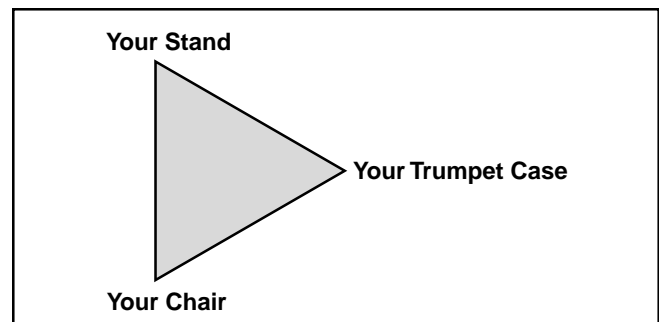
The next step in preparing yourself physically for an audition is to realize that as a trumpeter you are part athlete. To put it another way, you are what you eat. The best time to discover this is now, not the morning of the audition when you ask yourself at breakfast, in some strange hotel restaurant, "Gosh, what should I order this morning?" As you prepare for this audition, you should experiment and take notes in your notebook about what you had to eat the night before a practice session, breakfast, or lunch and how you felt. Runners carbo-load with pasta before a race. What happens when you do this? I found bananas to be my food of choice while I waited off in the wings before I had to play on stage. Figure it out now, not at the audition.

### **You Are What You Wear**

For many, clothing can be an expression of you and your mood. What should you wear to an audition? While standard business fare may be acceptable in professional terms, you will need to be comfortable as well as confidently attired to play your best. Buy a new tie, don a new or favorite sweater or dress before you walk out on stage for your next audition. Whatever it takes to help give you an edge to how positive you feel about yourself. Remember, salesmen who frown usually sell nothing but frowns. As an audition candidate, you are selling yourself with every note you play. Wear clothing that will lend you an edge.

### **You Have Control of More Than You Think: The Audition Triangle**

Practice whether you will sit or stand and how far from your bell the stand will be placed. Don't wait until you are on stage to realize you can't find the valve oil in your case. Put everything in place now – horns, mouthpieces, oil, and mutes, and leave them there. As you practice excerpts you will not need to think about where to find your tools. Last, locate your instruments next to you as shown.



This is what I refer to as the audition triangle, and you will set it up day after day as you practice mock auditions. You want to have a reference to familiar surroundings at an audition, a sort of tunnel vision as described by Nolan Ryan – just you, the music, and your instruments. This way, you will have extra mental capacity to cope with common audition unknowns such as room acoustics and temperature.

### **AuditionMasterPro: The Program**

In the late 1980s, I wrote a computer program named AuditionMasterPro that assisted me in winning auditions. I have explained it to many students, friends, and colleagues who now are successfully employed by various orchestras world-wide. I repeat though, there are no magic wands, only diligent, thoughtful practice. In order to stack the deck in your favor, you must practice taking auditions. Auditioning is not necessarily a determination of musical ability but is more a determination of your ability to audition.

## Know Your Music

The first step is to prepare your music, for this you will now become a librarian. Each excerpt should be formatted on a single piece of paper. It should include the title and should come from an actual trumpet part and not an excerpt book. You should simulate as closely as possible what a real audition will be like, and orchestras rarely use excerpt books for audition music.

Expectedly, not every note of a required symphony will be asked for at an audition. However, many trumpeters are often surprised when the triplet runs from *Don Juan* are called for right after the lyric solo from the first page. Certainly, to practice each and every note from each and every required work is mathematically impossible.

To solve this, first assign a “frequency” number to each excerpt. If an excerpt from a required work is expected to be asked for at an audition, assign it a 1. If an excerpt may or may not be asked for, assign it a 2. If an excerpt has a low probability of being asked for, assign it a 3. For example, I assign a frequency number 1 to the lyrical solo from *Don Juan* and a 2 to the triplet runs. In this way every audition list you create is different, and you will get used to having curve balls thrown at you, as will happen at real auditions. Orchestras may not do this intentionally, but you will realize it just happens by making your own lists. After deciding what frequency number is appropriate, perhaps with the help of a teacher or professional, indicate these frequency numbers on your formatted excerpts.

Create a new daily audition list selected by a random number generator. To do this, use two small containers, one containing 10 slips of paper individually numbered from 1 to 10 and one containing the names of all the required excerpts. If drawing from the “excerpts” container yields *Don Juan*, use the stack of excerpts formatted for *Don Juan*. Place excerpts assigned a frequency number of 1 face down on your music stand to be played at your mock audition. For excerpts assigned a frequency other than 1, draw a number from the number bag.

If, for example, the frequency number of an excerpt is 2, place this excerpt face down on your music stand *only* if your chosen number was 1, 2, 3, 4, or 5. If you chose a number greater than 5, set this excerpt aside as you will not play this excerpt during this particular session. In other words, an excerpt with a frequency number of 2 will appear in your audition lists roughly half the time. If your frequency number is 3, place the excerpt face down on your stand only if your chosen number was 1, 2 or 3. (It will appear on your list approximately one-third of the time.)

Practice your audition for the day in the randomly created order, no matter how ridiculous or unreason-

able the particular list might seem. At a real audition the list order will have been compiled by a human, not at random. The list order for a real audition will seem easy by comparison to your daily mock audition and will not be an issue affecting your performance. These lists can be hard, but they will make the real thing seem easy.

## Practice Auditioning Everyday

Once you have all the excerpts face down on your music stand, it is time to turn them face up. Leave the audition room, but before you do, set up a tape recording machine. Reenter the room with your trumpet bag packed, just like you would at the real audition, and take your place according to the audition triangle. Open your bag and play whatever you would on stage before you would begin in a real hall. Then play the list down. Do not stop for anything.

If you wish to repeat something, ask the tape in a quite voice as if asking a proctor, being careful not to be overheard by the audition committee. When finished, pack up and leave the room. Write down some impressions from this experience in your notebook.

Next, listen to the recording and critique your audition. As you listen, write down comments in your notebook. Score each excerpt on the following basis:

- On odd-numbered calendar days, score yourself according to psychological merit, specifically answering the question, “How did I feel when that particular excerpt came across my music stand?” If the answer is a resounding “Great!” score yourself 10. If the answer is “Oh no!” score yourself zero.
- On even-numbered calendar days, score yourself according to technical merit. You should begin with a 10 and subtract 1 point for each and every minor flaw, more for major errors or really poor intonation.

How hard you are as a judge will determine your ability to improve. Remember there is only one problem that you cannot solve – be objective and honest, recognizing all flaws as if you were listening to another trumpeter and not yourself.

## Practice What You Don't Know

At the end of the day, work on what you scored the worst. If you have two hours to practice, select your four worst excerpts and devote 30 minutes to each one. As you practice, note your recorded comments about why you had difficulty, or in the case of psychological merit, why you felt that you were uncomfortable with a particular excerpt. Fix problems to the best of your ability using popular method books to correct poor multiple tonguing, for example. It may be that you don't play one of the faulty excerpts at this session but instead work on techniques that

caused you to score low. Many trumpeters play what they can play over and over again, falling flat at the audition because they can't play other challenging material they haven't practiced. Don't let this happen to you.

So what happens to the excerpts that you score high on? Play them once every day at the mock audition. Eventually your worst excerpts can equal and surpass your best. You will end up cycling through all the excerpts, working on each one at some point in a practice session. You will become thoroughly prepared and limit the risk of a poor performance.

### **Keep a Graph**

Keep a graph of your daily results, particularly to compare how you think you score technically with how you score psychologically. This can be a very telling view into exactly what problems you may have as a trumpeter.

For example, what does it mean if you consistently score high technically and low psychologically? I would view this as someone who doesn't listen enough when critiquing technical details or one who needs to play for some respected friends or colleagues to help boost confidence levels.

### **Make an "Audition Tape"**

Make a tape of a good orchestra performing each of the excerpts. On each formatted excerpt sheet, note the cassette and tape counter of each excerpt. Play this tape in the car, while looking at the excerpts, while doing homework, and at other times. You need to be able to hear how the other parts in the orchestra sound while you flawlessly execute the trumpet part. This is more important than you may realize, because most orchestras put a great deal of importance on experience.

Accompanied by orchestra recordings, play through the required works using the complete trumpet part. Count all rests to simulate a real performance. You need to have an idea of just what it will be like to have the job, experienced or not.

### **Have It Your Way**

Despite all the mental and physical preparation, and the time and money spent on getting to the audition itself, all can be for naught if you become a casualty of the logistics of running an audition. Some auditions are organized better than others, but all orchestras are subject to union rules that govern fair audition practices. However, this won't be worth much at the moment a personnel manager gives you an ice-cold room to warm up in, or gives you 30 minutes to warm up and calls you five minutes later. The answer to these or any other situations that you feel are unacceptable, is a polite "no." Personnel managers

desperately want to maintain peace backstage at auditions. As long as your requests are reasonable and polite, they will accommodate you. Not all audition sites are capable of offering you the amenities that you seek, but if you think your request is reasonable, stick to your guns. Also, remember that dealing with a large number of auditionees is stressful for the personnel manager. They can seem tired and irritable, but a calm, patient, and persistent approach is the best answer to seeking the help you need. Regardless, have it your way. You have worked hard for your moment and deserve nothing less than the most professional treatment.

### **Success**

Today, with many symphony orchestras running large deficits and on the very brink of financial collapse, it may seem that the orchestral trumpet job is a concept of the past. As fewer and fewer jobs are available, it may seem there is no possibility for all trumpet players to be employed as symphony artists. Times are changing, and orchestras are waking up to the notion of expanding to educational programs designed to benefit not only current students, but orchestras of the future. As conservatories and universities expand their thinking into curriculum that will graduate a more versatile musician and as research is completed revealing the astounding educational benefits of elementary music education, the potential for opportunities for a professional trumpeter will increase, not diminish. There will always be room for good players, and success will always be available to those who work hard.

*About the Author:* William Lucas studied trumpet at the University of Michigan with Clifford Lillya and Armando Ghitalla. He is a member of the Detroit Symphony and former member of the Toledo Symphony. He is a faculty member at Wayne State University and the University of Michigan and performs regularly at Detroit area jazz clubs.