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Book review on playing, learning and teaching brass

Whilst there has been no shortage of towering brass pedagogues throughout history, there has perhaps until recently been little attention paid to the extent to which we can identify similarities and differences in the way brass has been played and taught in different countries and eras. So much of the way brass is played and taught in Britain comes from our brass band heritage: our brass playing was remarkable in earlier times for the rise of auto-didacts; most players played in an amateur context and learnt through aural transmission of ideas. There are still vestiges of aural transmission in brass playing especially in the brass band movement in Britain, and this is something that is central to StAMP. Learning in groups has been proven to be effective (Nielsen et al, 2018), and though there is still very much a place for one-on-one teaching, it is interesting to consider that historically such teaching was generally used only when someone was struggling to play a part by themselves. Historically, the British approach to brass playing lay somewhere in between the North American and European approaches though, as is the case with everything, globalisation has created an internationalised menu which results in localised variation.

The first three books below are based on an approach to brass playing that came of age in the second half of the 20th century in Chicago. Howard Snell's *The Trumpet* was a landmark publication at the end of the 20th century while Fergus McWilliam's *Blow Your Own Horn* comes very much from the perspective of our own century. Finally, we consider the chapter 'Playing, learning and teaching brass' in *The Cambridge Companion to Brass Instruments* a must read and we have included a summary to illustrate why.

[Frederiksen, Brian. 1996. Arnold Jacobs: Song and Wind. WindSong Press](#)

Arnold Jacobs was a pioneer in brass teaching. His work combined significant insights from psychology and anatomy, alloyed with his pedagogical approach and experience as an acclaimed tuba player. This book was written by his assistant and collates many different sources: it was the first publication of Jacobs' ideas about brass playing. Jacobs describes how 'song, to me, involves about 85 percent of the intellectual concentration of playing an instrument, based on what you want the audience to hear.' He goes on to say that '...you cannot get anywhere without wind. If you think of a car, the wheels will not turn without an energy source – the engine. Brass players must have a source of energy as there must be a vibrating column of air for the instrument to amplify and

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resonate. The musical engine is the vibration of the lips. However, the lips cannot vibrate without wind.'

Much of Jacobs' work was about moving teaching away from physiologically driven methods towards an approach based on the musical 'product'. Jacobs describes the transition as follows:

In music, so often a teacher makes the mistake of altering the machine activity rather than altering what [they want] accomplished. The instructor is giving machine methods on how to do it, but people don't work that way. None of us can. It is so simple. If you want a big breath, just take in a lot of air. If you want to blow, just blow. A teacher should always try for the simple answers that bring about the proper motor response. That idea belongs not in the realm of anatomy, but in the realm of psychology.

[Loubriel, Luis. 2009. Back to Basics for Trumpeters: The Teaching of Vincent Cichowicz. Sunatoria](#)

Vincent Cichowicz was a long-time colleague of Jacobs: each had considerable influence on the other's thinking. Many brass players across the world play the flow studies of Cichowicz, written and compiled during his career as a teacher at Northwestern University. It is widely reported that Cichowicz didn't have a set 'curriculum' for his students, and that he responded to the needs of each by understanding them as individuals. He was said to verbalise solutions for some students and, for others, demonstrate them. He wrote his students' practice assignments which consisted of a list of music and exercises from a very wide range of published material. John Miller, who has written the StAMP Brass Guide, studied with Cichowicz and recalls his lessons:

These often followed a basic formula, and started with a simple mouthpiece buzz on a middle G, to establish that the lips were responding to the airflow. Next, his customary 'flow exercises' got you playing evenly over the range. After this, daily drills from Herbert Clarke's Technical Studies were assigned, according to progression, and extended. There were more variations of the above, and I have these in my lesson notes from 1975! Cichowicz had incredible patience, and would wait until the basic principles were established. You couldn't advance until these were mastered and utterly integrated into your approach. Thereafter, his teaching was music-centred and encouraging. One common factor about studying in Chicago was that anyone who was serious went regularly to hear the Chicago Symphony Orchestra's weekly concerts. That was everybody's key motivation.

Loubriel's book on Cichowicz's teaching is one of a number of important publications which, like the teaching of Arnold Jacobs, emphasise the importance of teaching musicianship.

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[Steenstrup, Kristian. 2017. Blow Your Mind. Royal Academy of Music](#)

Kristian Steenstrup currently teaches at Aarhus University and has an international following, not only of brass students, but also other instrumentalists. He was a student of Cichowicz and has developed both his and Jacobs' pedagogy to include new insights from psychology, neuroscience, acoustics and substantial research into teaching and learning. Some of the most interesting and immediately helpful aspects of *Blow your Mind* centre around the organisation of practice. Steenstrup compares 'blocked' practice to 'random' practice. Blocked practice is when a student and teacher organise 'different tasks that need to be addressed into blocks, with each block devoted to one of the tasks.' This is likely to be seen by teachers as orderly and systematic, and often what struggling students lack in their approach. Block practice is when the routine moves sequentially, for example: warm up, scales, lip slurs, pieces, ensemble parts.

Steenstrup describes how random practice appears to be the opposite of block practice, suggesting that it may seem 'messy, out of order and disorganised. In this scheme, different tasks are spread over the practice session, with the student working on each one for only a short time before proceeding to the next. After having spent a few minutes successively on each task, the student then starts the sequence again from the beginning.' This method of practice is also referred to in some literature as distributed or interleaved practice. The idea is that in block practice a student can become effective at playing, for example, a D major scale, only because they practice it for many repetitions during a block. In reality, when a student has to play a scale they have to get it right at the first attempt and not as a result of successive attempts as they will have done in block practice. Random practice more closely simulates the way we experience musical experience: 'music is a constantly changing mix of many elements, requiring us to be flexible, and able to meet whatever challenges come our way.'

The third method of practising that Steenstrup discusses is 'varied' practice. We assume that if we practice something the same way that we will get better at performing it, though this runs contrary to the findings of many studies in skill acquisition. Rather than repeating a single task (for example, throwing a ball or playing music) without any variation, it has been shown that varying the parameters of that task during practise results in more effective retention and execution. Examples of variations that can be made when practising music include tempi, dynamics, keys, articulations; playing in a different acoustic; playing in a different 'mood' or copying the performances of different players.

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[Snell, Howard. 1997. The Trumpet: Its Practice and Performance - A Guide for Students. New Generation Publishing](#)

Howard Snell will be known to many, if not all, of us for his original compositions and arrangements for brass band. The publication of his 1997 monograph *The Trumpet* was a timely contribution to brass pedagogy and performance. Like the books discussed so far, Snell's book draws widely on research beyond music with the synopsis quoting research from sports science which illustrates that the only difference between Olympic standard and moderate athletes is that Olympic athletes think about their event and 'rehearse' all the time.

The book is divided into seven sections: Mind Skills; Playing Skills; Performance; Practice; Careers and Situations; Attitudes, Strategy and Tactics; Recapitulation. The section on Playing Skills may be of particular interest to teachers, particularly the discussion on posture, body movement, breathing and the embouchure.

Howard encourages you to be active, attentive, autonomous, curious, far-sighted, patient, consistent, universal, constructive, positive, solidary, thoughtful. He helps us understand what to practice for and gives us insight into how each one of us can discover how to do it. Howard covers a lot of ground but explains it all with clarity and practical purpose. At the end he brings it down to the bare minimum, the force of well-guided imagination. This book has helped me to learn how to learn more than any other. It's a classic, probably the most influential book in its field and it continues to be as relevant as ever right now, in times where information overdrive tends to displace clarity of vision.

Valentin Garvie

- Postgraduate Student at the Royal Academy of Music with Howard Snell and John Wallace (1999-2001)
- 15 years as principal trumpet of Ensemble Modern and teacher on the Masters degree in Contemporary Music run by the International Ensemble Modern Academy (IEMA) in collaboration with the Frankfurt Hochschule (2002-2017)
- Since 2017, resident in his native Argentina. Based in Buenos Aires he is active as a freelance soloist in the fields of classical music, contemporary music and jazz, as well as working as an educator, composer and leader of various projects that integrate the different genres in which he specialises.

Of all maestros who have written about studying the trumpet – or any musical instrument, for that matter – Howard is certainly one of the most reflected, scholarly and thorough. His book is a treasure. It reflects his wonderful sense for what really matters, a keen interest in the larger picture, the greater meaning of professionalism, the art of performance – all of that paired with a profoundly humanist,

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and deeply warm, interest in the person behind the mouthpiece and her or his pursuit of making a difference and growing through music.

Andreas König

- Postgraduate Student at the Royal Academy with Howard Snell, John Wallace, Ray Allen and Robert Farley (1998-2000)

- Solo performances in numerous countries, especially in combination with organ; band conductor and educator

- Since 2013, Chaired Professor for Strategic Management, Innovation, and Entrepreneurship at the University of Passau, Germany; Visiting Professor at the Free University of Amsterdam; received numerous international awards for his research on corporate leaders, radical change and executive communication

McWilliam, Fergus. 2011. *Blow Your Own Horn: Horn Heresies*. Mosaic Press

Scottish-born Fergus McWilliam has been a member of the Berlin Philharmonic since 1985. His book *Blow Your Own Horn* is direct and to the point. McWilliam writes 'If you believe that one first needs to acquire sufficient technique before attempting to make music, then this is not for you. Yours is still a flat earth.' In this way, McWilliam's pedagogy is again an extension of that of Jacobs. The small section (of literally just two pages) titled 'Word Game' is a fine example of the thought-provoking nature of McWilliam's ideas. He suggests that words 'are extremely poor tools for describing music and sound.' He goes on to say that they can be 'dangerous when we use them carelessly and/or mechanically.' The reverse of course is true: the way we talk about music and sound when language is carefully considered can be revelatory. McWilliam gives a page of examples of binary oppositions that we often use to talk about sound, i.e. dead/alive; heavy/light; broad/narrow; blasting/projecting; edgy/blunt; veiled/direct. Having a wide vocabulary to describe sound can be enormously helpful for us as performers and teachers, particularly when we can demonstrate these differences in teaching situations.

Ralph T. Dudgeon, Phillip Eastop, Trevor Herbert and John Wallace. 1997. 'Playing, learning and teaching brass' in *The Cambridge Companion to Brass Instruments*. University of Cambridge Press

This chapter initially surveys published treatises. The historical sweep begins in 1288, making its way through important treatises and highlighting often overlooked figures. For example, the authors point out Josef Kail (1795-1871) and François Dauverné (1799-1874) who both did important work prior to that of Jean-Baptiste Arban. The proliferation of methods that focus on stamina and range from the beginning of the 19th C is evidence of demand for those skills, though the authors humorously but helpfully remind us that 'in the wrong hands, allied to the wrong mentality, it is

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possible to have great success turning the trumpet or indeed any other brass instrument, into the musical equivalent of a buzz-saw.' The chapter has a brief focus on the origins of the warm-up:

Systematic 'warming up' is a concept exported from the USA to the rest of the world's brass players. Despite the athletic analogy implied in the phrase 'warming up', the purpose of these exercises is not so much to limber up, but rather in the manner of a classical dancer's daily 'class' to instil consistency in production, to maintain technique and to rectify incipient faults which could develop if neglected. Cichowicz's melismatic warm-ups are very similar to vocal warmups, and demonstrate the durability of the oral tradition.'

Following the historical survey of methods, the chapter discusses sound production, embouchure, breathing, the diaphragm, Alexander Technique, the glottis, the tongue and finally hands and fingers. Throughout these sections there is an emphasis on what many successful players have in common regarding their physical connection with the instrument. The authors' concluding words of this chapter are now more than 20 years old, though no less relevant: 'two of the most optimistic features of the story of brass are the continued expansion of the numbers of people who play, and the fact that a diversity of styles of and approaches to teaching still survives.'