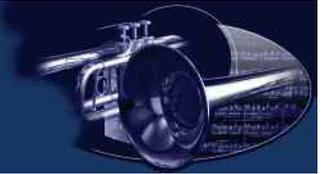


# CHAMBER MUSIC CONNECTION

MARC REESE, COLUMN EDITOR



*Chamber Music Connection* is a forum for ideas concerning the trumpet's role in the expanding literature in all types of chamber music. Ideas and suggestions should be directed to: Marc Reese, Assistant Dean and Brass Department Head, Lynn University Conservatory of Music, 3601 North Military Trail, Boca Raton, FL 33066 USA; [chamber@trumpetguild.org](mailto:chamber@trumpetguild.org)

## IT'S NOT ABOUT THE TONE: THOUGHTS ON DEVELOPING VOICE

BY BRIAN MCWHORTER

Great trumpet players have always had their own *voices*. In some cases, their voices were spectacular; some were simple; some were tireless or terrifying; and some conveyed meaning and character that would become legendary. It almost seems ridiculous to encourage students to work on their *voice* as a musician, but we are trumpet players, after all, and it probably couldn't hurt.

To hear great playing is to hear a great voice. Whether it's Nate Wooley creating a lavish, patient, and surreal soundscape with *Seven Storey Mountain* or Alison Balsom becoming opulence itself with the English Concert; Wynton Marsalis ministering purposefully over a blues with the Jazz at Lincoln Center Orchestra or Peter Evans disrupting expectations with *Mostly Other People Do the Killing*; the electricity of Bud Herseth, the quick-wittedness of Dave Douglas, or the thoughtfulness of Kevin Cobb and Louis Hanzlik; the audacity of Mark Gould or the humor of Lester Bowie—all of these players have a voice that says something far greater than "I'm concerned about my tone." We are often too quick to reduce truly masterful playing as a vertical phenomenon—"Wow, what a tone!" or "Wow, killer range!" or "Wow, s/he didn't miss a note!" And, this isn't too much of a surprise when we consider that trumpet players generally lauded in academic circles happen to be players who excel in these very lines of development. These musicians have a set of skills that plays right into our vertical fixation with trumpet playing.

However, these great musicians are simply not reducible to vertical skills—and we shouldn't be either. When we are fixated on the vertical in our own practice, we tend to hear and latch onto those very aspects when listening to anyone else play; those fixations are the *loudest phenomena* to us. Even if we're in the front row, we are often too distracted with our personal fixations to hear a great voice. We focus on their articulations, their intonation, or their tone. We forget that what these artists are communi-

cating is more resilient than that. Mark Gould may have said it best—"It's not about the tone, it's about the truth."

We all go through periods (or moments) when we forget about the importance of our voice, or "truth," and forget that this is not just something that develops over time, but something to which we have access *right now*. Voice doesn't come from a developed tone; it comes from intent. If your intent is fixated on your disappointing tone, your voice will join the chorus of musicians who convey the only message they can—"I wish I sounded better than I do."

Fashionable tones come and go like the traffic on a *Vogue* runway. Today, we might reach for a bigger, more resonant sound; tomorrow, we could be discouraged with a little fuzz in our buzz and penitently focus our practice on fixing it before doing anything else. But then we've already screwed up; we abstracted music in order to fit our fixation instead of *saying something with the tone we have, with the music we're playing, and with the musicians we're playing alongside*. As it happens, this is the gig; this is the challenge of performance.

To work on voice, there is likely no better situation than playing with a small group. In fact, in any small-group setting, working on virtually any music can be just the thing we need to shake us out of the vertical fixation that suspends our musical openness and development. Playing in a small-group setting is part of any balanced approach to practice; it is the art of working with others toward a musical idea.

When we play in a small group, there is a fortuitous balance of autonomous and collective awareness.

Our role is distinct and individual, but we are also clearly part of a whole. Surrounded by enough players to engage in a meaningful and musical conversation, we can explore how our voice fits in with the group. The interpersonal and intermusical dynamics that occur as a result of this balanced con-

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it's about the truth."*

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*"It doesn't matter if the person sitting next to you is young or old, if they can play or if they can't, if they're out of time or out of tune, if they have weird ideas or if they disagree with you at every cadence; all that matters is that you continue to engage with him/her, with the music, and with your voice."*

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versation create an immersive situation that clarifies the goal. To be a great musician, it doesn't mean anything if you can play *better* than someone; it means everything if you can play *with* him/her.

It doesn't matter if the people sitting next to you are young or old, if they can play or if they can't, if they're out of time or out of tune, if they have weird ideas or if they disagree with you at every cadence; all that matters is that you continue to engage *with them, with the music, and with your voice*. Anne-Marie McDermott, pianist with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center said, "I think in life, all of us have a great need to converse with each other, to be understood by each other, and to provoke each other, and that's exactly what chamber music does."

Certain musical styles may be less valuable for these purposes, of course. Minimalism, for example, is more note-oriented and less character-driven, and it's easy to lapse into vertical fixation when playing it. This musical language can be important for other purposes, but it's not as useful for developing voice. Also, while music that is too technically demanding or intimidating can be useful for some (to shock them into a certain kind of openness), it usually isn't the best choice either.

Music that has character, flexibility, line, and even clichés is entirely useful for developing voice. Music that can be played with and made fun of, music that begs for subtlety, and music that could use some *chutzpah* are all examples of pieces that a band should explore. In a perfect school, perhaps, student trumpet players would be locked in a room with three to five others and told to come out only once they developed an approach for something Baroque, Classical, romantic, modern, jazz, free, experimental, pop, hip-hop, folk, and, yes, something for a wedding and a funeral.

By working on a diverse set of music with character and emotion in mind, a small group's voice will arrive naturally and surprisingly—and it's not always a smooth process. I recall many times, just before going onto a stage with a group, in which tensions were so high that it seemed like someone was going to get punched—only to have some of the most exciting performances I have ever experienced.

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"Fortunately for us, audiences just want a group's voice to exude *something*; it is when our voices exude *nothing* that they stop showing up."

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Rarely, a group's voice exudes peace and love; most of the time, it is far more colorful and rich. Fortunately for us, audiences just want a group's voice to exude *something*; it is when our voices exude *nothing* that they stop showing up.

*About the author:* Brian McWhorter is associate professor of trumpet at the University of Oregon, co-artistic director of Beta Collide, music director and conductor for Orchestra Next and plays the fool with the "award-winning" Pink Baby Monster. Described by the New York Times as a "mini-celebrity for the mayhem of the creative process," Brian blames any success he has had on accidental associations with divergent musicians,

artists, filmmakers, dancers, and other demons of the night (<http://brianmcwhorter.com>).

