

The Comeback Player by Vern Campbell

The Decision to Become a Comeback Player

Seven years ago I watched my 12 year old son open the case to his new clarinet. The joy and wonder on his face as he ran his hand up and down the clarinet triggered memories of my own first instrument; a used cornet that I received many years before. It was the moment my son pulled the clarinet out of its case that I decided to reenter the world trumpet playing.

I had plenty of trumpet experience but that experience was from a distant past. While a high school student, I was fortunate to study with Dr. Dennis Horton, professor of trumpet at Central Michigan University. Dr. Horton not only got me well grounded in the fundamentals, he instilled in me an appreciation of music and furthered my love of the trumpet. Despite my attachment to the instrument, I realized I did not have the talent to become a professional trumpet player nor did I have the necessary motivation or the skills to teach. I played in every possible musical group I could while in college but ultimately pursued medicine as a career. The trumpet, in the meantime, eventually found its resting place in the closet. Medical school, internship, residency, practice concerns behind me and a son out of the crib, I was ready to join the ranks of the comeback players.

Establish a Goal

The first thing I felt I needed to do was to establish a goal. I recall when I was asked by my high school English teacher what my goal was and I responded by saying I'd like to play trumpet well enough to win a spot in the Chicago Symphony! That goal is, as it was then, unrealistic. A realistic goal, however, is to become the best player I possibly can. But what tactics should I use after 20 years away from the trumpet?

Suggestions for development

I'm sure there are many great approaches but what follows is the approach I took after reading, research, and instruction. It is an approach I have suggested to other trumpet players in our community who are interested in a "comeback".

1. Start with the fundamentals. Revisit Schlossberg, Clarke, and Arban and take advantage of the reality that there is no time limit to "get it right". Your career means you have no excuse to shortcut on fundamentals due to time constraints (an upcoming audition, studio class, concert or recital). You have unlimited time to slowly change notes in scales and expansion studies in search of that "perfect" seamless transition. The same attention to scales, articulation, and interval studies. I am convinced that this daily attention to fundamentals is the single most important factor in my advancement. I spent several months on fundamentals alone before adding other elements (etudes, etc) to my practice regimen.

2. Learn a new technical etude every 1-2 weeks. To learn a new etude at that frequency, one must necessarily pick an etude that is not too difficult, but try to choose an etude that is a challenge to learn in that amount of time. Revisit the etude 6-12 months later, spending no more than a week, but the second time around concentrate on making it more musically interesting.
3. Play a lyrical etude every day. I like to work on a different lyrical etude (Snedecor, Bordogni, Concone) each week, focusing on tone quality, pitch, and smoothness. I play the etude through once to get the notes and every time thereafter to “get the bumps out” and to improve upon the phrasing. I consider my week less than successful if my interpretation is not significantly different at the end of the week that it was at the beginning.
4. Seek the advice of a teacher. I am fortunate that an excellent teacher, Scott Thornburg (Western Michigan University), spends his summers at the Bay View Music Festival in Bay View Michigan- easy driving distance from my home. Having feedback and direction has been invaluable in my continued development. It’s not necessary to have a lesson every week of the year, in fact, it may not be desirable. I take lessons in the summer. Our professions have taught us the importance continued self- learning.
5. Join a performing group. Mr. Thornburg encouraged me to join a local group of musicians if I was serious about developing. I was reluctant, but he persisted and now I am Principal in an outstanding community orchestra—one of my proudest achievements. Not only do I have added motivation to practice (most all my colleagues have advanced music degrees and are far more knowledge than I am), but I necessarily must play at a higher level.
6. Read the ITG Journal. The journal has outstanding papers from some of the best trumpet players and teachers in the world. Read and re-read the advice columns carefully. I pay particular attention to articles that discuss the fundamentals of trumpet playing or ones that offer practice or performing tips.
7. Attend an ITG meeting. Hearing some of the world’s best trumpet players live has opened my eyes to new possibilities. I am continually impressed at how generous our professional trumpet playing colleagues are at sharing tips and giving advice. I’ll never forget standing in the middle of a long queue to ask Tom Hooten (Los Angeles Philharmonic) a question following a master class. Seemingly everyone in front of me had a question and after the long line shrank, I got to meet him. I asked him a question and his response was patient, detailed, and well considered; as though I was the only other person in the queue!
8. Take advantage of the internet. I frequently visit the blogs and webpages of great players and teachers. Some of the best advice I’ve had has come through contacting a professional through e-mail or on a blog with a specific question. I was struggling with the piccolo trumpet before Dr. David Hickman offered a key tip through my question on Jens Lindemann’s “Tip Tuesday”. I check the blogs of brass players other than trumpet players as well. Jay Friedman and Joe Alessi (trombone) have exceptional blogs and webpages. I have downloaded, read, and reread practice tips from Ray Mase, Chris Gekker, and others. Note of caution: Beware of advice from anonymous posters on trumpet blogs and on YouTube. Their only qualification, after all, is having a computer!
9. Listen for pleasure, but analytically as well. What makes great musicians sound great? How can I incorporate that into my own trumpet playing? I listen to great trumpet

players, other instrumentalists, and singers as well. I keep a journal and makes notes after every concert and every trumpet lesson. I find note taking especially valuable when listening to string players and singers as it has considerably increased my listening skills. I pay particular attention to phrasing and try to incorporate what I've learned into my trumpet playing. I didn't think it was possible to takes notes on a vocalist until I jotted down an entire page after listening to a Bartoli recording.

Ars Gratia Artis

My decision to become a comeback player was one of the best decisions I have ever made. The intellectual and artistic challenges are exciting. And there's a certain sense of satisfaction knowing that many in our community know me as a trumpet player in the chamber orchestra and are somewhat surprised to learn that I didn't major in music while in college. When I get home from the office or the hospital, the first thing I do is pick up my trumpet because trumpet playing, for me, is an escape. As a nonprofessional, I will never reach the high level of performance that our professional colleagues have. I can, however, experience the joy of playing trumpet in perhaps its purest form: the joy of playing simply for fun.

About the Author: Vern Campbell received his medical degree from the Michigan State University College of Human Medicine in 1992 and completed his residency in ophthalmology at William Beaumont Hospital in Royal Oak, Michigan in 1996. He is in private practice in Petoskey, Michigan where he performs with the Great Lakes Chamber Orchestra. He studied trumpet with Dennis Horton (Central Michigan University) and continues his studies with Scott Thornburg (Western Michigan University).