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## EDITOR'S CORNER

PETER WOOD, EDITOR

## WHAT IS YOUR X FACTOR?

BY RYAN GARDNER

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## WHAT IS YOUR X FACTOR?

BY RYAN GARDNER

We have all seen television shows like *American Idol*, *The X Factor*, and *The Voice*, where contestants have a short time to make a strong first impression if they want to receive their “golden ticket” and progress to the next round of competition. With less than a minute to show off, they have to demonstrate their absolute best qualities. This need to make an immediate impact is also important when taking a trumpet audition. As I started to think about this more and more, though, I realized that there is more to it than that. The people who are successful on these television shows have something special and unique to say that sets them apart. Something about each performer resonates particularly well with the home audience that will eventually propel the artist to stardom.

While the process and circumstances may be different, when we play auditions or perform on the trumpet, we make an immediate impression that can either captivate the audience or leave them unmoved. We often tend to focus on our trumpet playing and not the performance. We think about our deficiencies, rather than trying to show off. While self-analysis is crucial for improvement, we often do not spend enough time thinking about what we do well and what makes our individual playing special; and this can lead to performances that don't match our actual potential. Defining your “X factor” is a first step toward better performances.

What is an X factor? Think about the quality that you love the most about your own playing. Basically, what do you think is the best thing that you do on the trumpet? The answer is your X factor.

When I ask students this question, they don't always know how to answer. They can easily name a litany of issues and problems, but they often struggle to identify the positive qualities in their playing. My former professor, Vincent Penzarella, former second trumpeter of the New York Philharmonic, used to make his students record themselves, listen to the recordings, and then make notes in two columns: things liked and things disliked. This process encouraged us to listen critically and evaluate honestly what we were doing, while still urging us to really listen for the brilliance in our playing. Penzarella would then encourage us to rip the list in half. The negative com-

ments would become the list of things to work on the following day, and the positive comments were to be read before bed. The purpose of this was to positively affirm each student's strengths and to ensure that the student woke up confident in his or her playing the next morning, excited to practice.

I have a suggestion. If students have difficulty highlighting their best qualities, encourage them to listen to several different kinds of trumpeters and other musicians. Students have to be able to assess the music and then identify their likes and dis-

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likes. It is essential to have an opinion, as that helps a person to understand how he or she wants to sound. Moreover, building curiosity about other artists and new styles of music nurtures this type of growth. In addition, no player should want to be a replica of anyone else, because this won't further our industry. We should all try to be unique and to have a different voice, while also appreciating others' unique qualities. Knowing one's preferences makes this possible.

Of course, each person's X factor is special to him or her. As an example, let's say that someone's X factor is his or her warm, rich sound. If that person's sound never changed and remained in that sweet beautiful spot at all times, they would likely be a

very efficient trumpet player. Often times, students try to fix issues by focusing on what they cannot do, without having a game plan. If the student instead went into a practice session and focused only on his sound—that is, focusing on never letting it change and keeping it warm—it is likely that he could fix other weaknesses simply by focusing on this strength. Such issues as articulation, multiple tonguing, finger dexterity, and flexibility can often be approached by just “liv-

ing in the X factor.” Weaknesses then become strengths-in-training and eventually become a part of one's X factor. This is a healthy approach to solving playing issues.

This technique can be transferred to any area of proficiency in order to fix deficiency, which not only makes practicing more fun, but also makes the process more interesting, enjoyable, and effective. To take this process even further, imagine going into an audition or performance, thinking only about

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what makes you special, and being excited to share it. Not only would you be free to communicate that quality to your audience; you would actually enjoy your performance and genuinely connect better with those listening.

Students often try to fit themselves into a predetermined mold, but it is important to note that the music industry is constantly changing. Explore music you love, choose repertoire that is exciting and invigorating for you, and find out how you will uniquely impact our industry. This can all start with one simple question. What is your X factor?

*About the author:* Ryan Gardner is associate professor of trumpet at Oklahoma State University. Originally from Santa Monica, California, Gardner received his BM from the Eastman School of Music with highest distinction, his MM from Rice University – Shepherd School of Music, and his DMA from the Manhattan School of Music. As a Bach performing artist, Gardner actively performs as an orchestral, chamber, and solo musician; and he also provides masterclasses and lectures internationally. He is indebted to all of his primary trumpet teachers: Vincent Penzarella, Mark Gould, Marie Speziale, James Thompson, Boyde Hood, and Paul Salvo. 