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REDEFINING GOALS: THE OLDER TRUMPETER IN THE COMMUNITY ORCHESTRA

BY BARRY RACHIN

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REDEFINING GOALS: THE OLDER TRUMPETER IN THE COMMUNITY ORCHESTRA

BY BARRY RACHIN

This article was reviewed and approved for publication by the Non-Pro/Comeback Players Committee.

Old age is not for sissies. It's not so great for senior brass players either. As bodies age, subtle changes occur that do not necessarily favor a trumpeter's ability to perform at the highest level.

Older lungs lose flexibility as well as physical capacity. With that, the ability to manage large volumes of air suffers, along with the compression required to play confidently in the upper register. Stamina diminishes considerably. The problem is not so much a matter of physical strength; endurance is the culprit. At seven o'clock in the evening, the player starts off strong, but by nine o'clock, alertness wanes, along with the ability to anticipate musical demands. These idiosyncratic concessions to the aging process also impact the older musician psychologically. Admitting that you cannot accomplish what previously was second-nature can prove a huge blow to the ego.

Speaking from personal experience, failing eyesight represents one of the thorniest issues when participating in a community band or orchestra. One must see the conductor as clearly as possible in order to anticipate tempo changes and interpretive cues, but this concern must also be weighed along with the need to see the written music clearly. Prescription distance glasses that one wears when driving a car allow the musician to comfortably follow a conductor's baton, but may leave sheet music little more than an illegible blur. High-strength reading lenses frequently render anything more than a foot away totally unmanageable.

One practical solution that I discovered may seem a bit unconventional. After experimenting with several different prescription glasses, I settled on a pair of magnifying lenses that I picked up at the local drug store. These generic glasses allow me to view the sheet music quite clearly while still following the conductor thirty feet away at the front of the stage. Needless to say, this strategy will not work for everyone. In the final analysis, whatever gets the job done is permissible.

For the past 36 years, I managed a home health care agency in southeastern Massachusetts with my wife, Anne. Over the decades, we assisted people in their twilight years as they navigated the hazards of old age. Now, in my early seventies, I, too, have begun to grapple with the corrosive effects of the aging process.

As brass players age and abilities diminish, certain nagging questions arise. What is the revised role of older players in the music community? How can they continue to contribute meaningfully to the creative endeavor? When in the process of growing old gracefully do those diminished skills translate into a liability such that one can no longer, in good conscience, perform publicly?

I currently participate in a community orchestra at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts. The Southeastern Massachusetts Wind Symphony includes undergraduate performance majors, local professional musicians, retirees, and a handful of high school players. The conductor, Earl Raney, is also an adjunct professor of music at Atlantic Union College, where he conducts the Atlantic Wind Symphony and is the trumpet instructor at the New England Conservatory Preparatory School. On numerous occasions, Raney has encouraged band members to do whatever is necessary to get the job done. Several musical examples (*i.e.*, strategies for improving performance) documented in this article are based on recommendations made by Raney during band rehearsals.

The Wheaton College orchestra contains a surplus of excellent first and second trumpeters, many who study in the undergraduate music program. The bulk of the instrumentalists are easily young enough to be my grandchildren! Upon joining the orchestra, I assumed the third trumpet chair, sitting next to Bob, a gray-haired retired pharmacist who also was handling the lower parts. It quickly became apparent that playing in tune with a rich, full-bodied orchestral tone presented the biggest challenge.

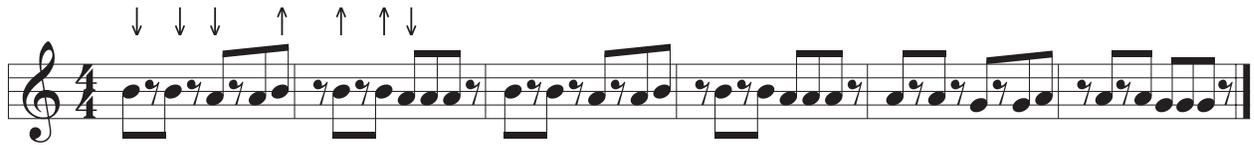
To that end, the basic warm-up exercises that most trumpeters use to fine-tune fundamental skills can be extremely helpful. Long tones, lip slurs, simple scales in the low and middle registers, arpeggios, and other melodic passages all help get the lips vibrating and the horn responding properly. Intermediate-level etude collections such as Kopprasch's *Sixty Studies* edited by Roger Voisin are also extremely beneficial. These rudimentary setup drills help aging embouchures function at maximum capacity and improve articulation and tone quality.

Additionally, a host of complementary strategies exist to help level the playing field for the aging trumpeter. For example, numerous articles and interviews have appeared in the *ITG Journal* over the years, in which second- and third-chair symphony trumpeters discuss the challenges and demands of performing in an orchestral setting. They frequently mention the importance of leaving one's ego at the door, playing in tune, and blending with other section players in both style and interpretation.

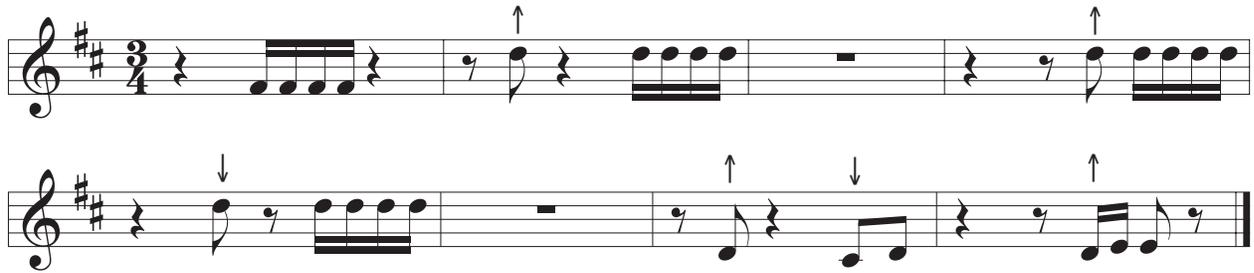
What else can community orchestras do to accommodate the older trumpeter? Several years ago during rehearsals of Beethoven's Eighth Symphony, I approached the conductor with a personal concern. A few weeks earlier, the principal trumpeter had left the group on short notice, and I was asked to take his place. Several sections in the rather lengthy piece

"Old age is not for sissies."

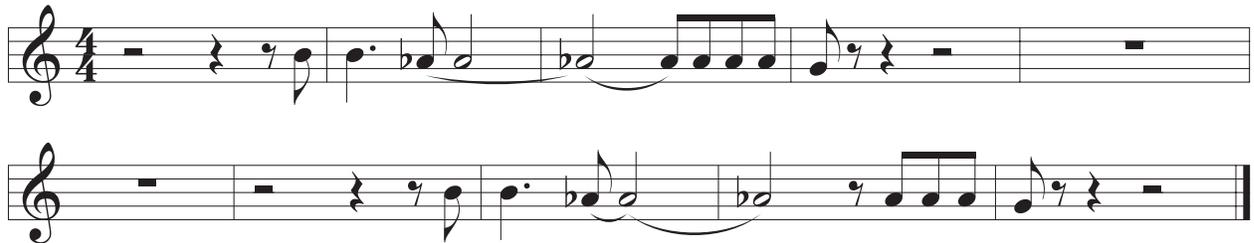
"Admitting that you cannot accomplish what previously was second-nature can prove a huge blow to the ego."



Example 1a. Alfred Reed, *Second Suite for Band*



Example 1b. John Williams, *Dry Your Tears, Africa*



Example 2. Alfred Reed, *Second Suite for Band*



Example 3. Alfred Reed, *Second Suite for Band*

were pushing my physical endurance to the limit. When I explained my dilemma, the conductor immediately drew my attention to the fact that the brass section fulfilled an incidental function in the passages mentioned, and he had no issue with me taking the music down an octave or even resting for a few measures, if needed. The melodic focus, as the conductor noted, was clearly on the violins and string section; the brass passages were more decorative and ornamental. It bears mentioning that older trumpet players must be willing to openly acknowledge physical limitations and find creative ways to adapt.

On another occasion, I was performing in a four-part brass choir. The music was not overly difficult, but there were very few places in the score where the brass was allowed to rest. Recognizing that there were older musicians in the group, the conductor suggested that players sharing parts could locate specific spots in the score where they might drop out and rest their lips for a handful of measures. Marking the music for rests insures that there are no “holes” in the music and that a gratifying artistic experience does not degenerate into a musical ordeal.

Leveling the playing field

Older eyes do not process light nearly as well, and cataracts are commonplace. Thankfully, there are strategies for rendering a page of sheet music more user-friendly. Each time you

play a wrong note, pencil in the sharp or flat. If you do not feel comfortable marking on originals, make copies of the music. Also, wherever music shifts abruptly from one place to another, as with a *dal segno al coda*, highlight the locations with a brightly colored magic marker. Rather than struggle to locate an abrupt transition, your eyes are drawn to an unmistakable neon-colored marking.

On jazz scores with tricky syncopation, I frequently draw arrows pointing up or down to remind me where notes fall on an offbeat. In Example 1a, for instance, the tricky Latin rhythm is much easier to feel than to read. Younger or more proficient players might view this as silly or, worse yet, amateurish. However, such practices can prove quite helpful and, as the night wears on, take the guesswork out of rhythmically complicated notation.

In John Williams’s, *Dry Your Tears, Africa* from the movie *Amistad* (see Example 1b), several repeated tones are reversed, causing accents to fall on the offbeat. For the older brain with which reflexes are less nimble, it pays to jog the memory from one rehearsal to the next so that proper accenting of syncopated notes is observed.

In the opening section of Alfred Reed’s *Second Suite for Band* (see Example 2), Raney suggests that the brass section delete the first eighth note in measure three in order to avoid lagging behind the tempo and reaching the following measure squarely on the downbeat.

“Older trumpet players must be willing to openly acknowledge physical limitations and find creative ways to adapt.”

