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## A SELF-DIRECTED RETURN TO TRUMPET FOLLOWING AN EXTENDED ABSENCE

BY THOMAS ZOUBEK

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# A SELF-DIRECTED RETURN TO TRUMPET FOLLOWING AN EXTENDED ABSENCE

BY THOMAS ZOUBEK

This article was approved for publication by the ITG Non-Pro Players Committee.

There are many people who, for one reason or another, have paused their trumpet playing and pursued other careers instead. Returning to active playing after a hiatus (whether months or years) can be an intimidating and sometimes scary process. Not everyone is fortunate enough to have a trumpet teacher or other players nearby, and many simply do not have the time to devote to regular practicing. A self-directed approach offers an avenue that can be best adapted to the busy, non-professional player.

While equipment is not at the root of a self-directed approach, there are a few items that are important to have in order to avoid falling into bad habits. From the moment a person decides to begin playing again, a metronome is a necessity. This device will not only help a player maintain a regular, steady beat when playing, but also offer the opportunity to learn a piece successfully at slower tempos. The metronome can be used to increase the tempo of a piece gradually until the player can execute it well at performance tempo. The metronome can also work against a returning player's common urge to play eighth- and sixteenth-note runs too quickly. With the advent of cell phones, metronome apps are easily accessible and often free. A tuner app can also be obtained for little-to-no cost such that returning players can adjust as necessary to play in tune.

Recording equipment—including cell phones and mobile apps—is also useful for a returning player. Recording oneself is a great way for a player working alone to keep tabs on tone, sound production, dynamics, and speed. Teachers frequently emphasize playing back recordings at half tempo to focus closely on sound. It is also helpful, when possible, to listen to the recordings that others may have made of an etude or solo under study.

Finally, it is useful to keep a practice journal. Returning players will want to track the skills they are trying to develop. Practice journals are helpful not only for keeping track of how much time is spent developing a particular skill, but also for noting the exercises, etudes, and songs being studied. It may seem like a chore at first, but after a few weeks, the player can observe the progress made, which provides a morale boost and renewed energy to keep going.

A return to trumpet playing can be a long, arduous, and sometimes frustrating experience. It is important to reward oneself periodically by choosing to play a particular piece or etude for fun. While it is always good to practice what one is not good at, it is also healthy to occasionally play pieces

that one does know well so as not to become too overwhelmed or disheartened.

Self-directed approaches need not take place in a void, as there are many online resources available to help guide the returning player. While the United States does not have a national system or a true graded system of instruction, many other countries do—or, in some cases, university-approved systems for the learning of musical instruments. In the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, South Africa and Canada, syllabi of trumpet content and skills are available, which move a player through a series of skill levels and pieces that are graded by their difficulty. At each level, the syllabi identify basic skills of music theory that are to be mastered, as well as a number of technical skills, and provide lists of musical selections that afford the player a means through which to demonstrate those skills. Most syllabi are graded from level one to eight. Some contain post-graduate levels or levels to be mastered by professionals and teachers. Syllabi vary in content, as some are targeted particularly to the development of jazz playing.

Each syllabus generally contains a list of etudes, pieces, or exercises at each grade level. The lists are frequently divided into three subgroups with the requirement that a player master a piece from each of the subgroups. The intent is that a student will play a lyrical piece, a more technical piece, and frequently a piece that demands attention to a variety of playing aspects: tone, phrasing, musicality, and dynamics. One can either follow the suggestion of a given syllabus that requires a number of pieces to be executed at each level or decide how many pieces they wish to master. Since the pace of a player's return is not necessarily tied to a given timetable, it is up to them to decide. If a person one really wants to work on each level intensely, they may choose to master multiple pieces at each level. It is interesting to compare the skills and pieces in the same "grade" of different syllabi, as the syllabi will sometime differ in skills taught at a given level. Many of the same pieces are included at the same grades on various syllabi, regardless of country of origin.

Some universities and organizations have put out their own books containing all the etudes, solos, and exercises noted on their syllabi. These books are particularly useful since one need only acquire the set that goes along with that program. These books are often accompanied by CDs on which a known player demonstrates how the given work should sound. Frequently, a second track contains only the accompanying instruments,

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When all is said and done, there is going to be a double investment, and it is useful up front to decide what one's goals are. Returning players should ask themselves what they want to do with their playing. If they wish only to join a community band and play third part, one may not need to climb all the grades. If, however, a player has greater aspirations—to play first, solo, play in semi-pro or professional groups, gig, or maintain a church job—they may need to climb higher. All of this entails some cost—for books, CDs, and time. It is said that one needs to spend 10,000 hours to master a skill well. Not everyone will have that kind of time in a non-pro setting, so it is important to be clear about one's goals from the beginning.

One's old trumpet used in high school or college may not serve the serious returning player best. They who are determined to really take playing to a high level may want to buy a new instrument. This could be another way to reward oneself for putting in the effort and practicing consistently.

At some point, it will be desirable to find a teacher or connect with a more experienced player for whom to play. This may be a later facet of the self-directed return and, again, a goal toward which one works. Some returning players are very insecure about playing in front of people, especially alone. The only way to get over it is to seek out more opportunities to do precisely what they fear most—performing for others.

One additional resource/experience that returning players should take advantage of is attendance at a trumpet camp. Adult programs are offered at Eastman, Oberlin, and the University of Kentucky, and they are rewarding and great sounding boards for opinions on tone, technique, and interpretation. Watch the *ITG Journal* Calendar column for postings of these opportunities.

Following is a list of websites that post syllabi offered by a variety of international organizations and institutions. One might also check at nearby colleges and universities to see if there have posted syllabi that give an overview of the brass program and repertoire lists. Some examples are included here.

Good luck with your return to playing!

giving a student a chance to play over them. These play-along systems are highly recommended.

There are also less formally “graded” materials that are available. The books put out long ago by Sigmund Hering are particularly useful in this regard. In addition to his four main instruction books, he also provides a number of etude books that increase in difficulty as the number of etudes in each volume decreases—50, 40, 38, 32, 30, 24, and 15 etudes. Also particularly useful are the CDs by Clyde Hunt, which again give the player an opportunity to hear etudes played at the appropriate tempos. They can be found on his website (<https://tinyurl.com/itg2206x>).

The benefit of using a graded system—such as the ABRSM or Trinity series—is that the footwork has already been done for the returning player. The books contain all the material one needs to follow the path to a return. If a person sticks with a given syllabus not backed up by a book series, they must find the books themselves. A benefit of this is that a given book of collected songs or etudes is likely to have pieces that appear at multiple grades on a given syllabus. The big pieces of the trumpet canon—Kennan, Stevens, Hummel, and Hindemith, for example—do not appear on most syllabi until levels seven or eight.

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*About the author:* Dr. Thomas Zoubek has been a member of the ITG Non-Pro Player Committee since 2012. He began trumpet study in high school and played through college, but life as an archaeologist precluded his playing the trumpet for about 25 years. Dr. Zoubek began his return in 2010

using the above approach and currently plays in a number of groups in Connecticut, including the CT Symphonic Winds and the American Chamber Orchestra.



## TRUMPET REPERTOIRE SYLLABUS SITES

University of West London  
Graded syllabus: <https://tinyurl.com/itg2206y>  
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