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## COMING BACK FULLY: PLAYING IN A COMMUNITY ENSEMBLE

BY THOMAS ZOUBEK

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# COMING BACK FULLY: PLAYING IN A COMMUNITY ENSEMBLE

BY THOMAS ZOUBEK

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

In a previous *ITG Journal* article (June 2022), I detailed how one might come back from a long period of not playing by using online resources and syllabi published by a number of international music programs and schools. Another part of one's comeback is the return to public performance. It is all well and good to pass one's time playing a variety of pieces in the comfort of one's own home, but most returning players intend to join groups in which they can play with others and perform in concerts. Performance anxiety and playing insecurity are also best conquered by seeking opportunities to play with others and for the public.

A player coming back after a hiatus must consider several factors as part of their return to public performance—the type of music they want to play, their playing ability, their time availability, and their desire to improve. A fully committed player who has set a goal of eventually playing first part or lead will need to exert a lot more effort and put in far more time than a player for whom playing in a group is more of a social activity or who is happy playing less-challenging parts.

In most communities, there are different types of groups one can join, which provide opportunities for people with varying skill levels and available time. Seasonal bands provide one of the best opportunities for returning players. These are usually summer bands that start rehearsals in May and wrap up their seasons in July. Frequently, these bands spend most of their time rehearsing a single set of music—in the USA often patriotic in nature—with the goal of performing on the Fourth of July and for firework displays. These bands generally rehearse once a week and are open to all comers. Frequently people can decide for themselves which parts they feel most comfortable playing. The people in seasonal bands do not usually come from far outside the band's hometown. The music tends to be familiar as well—often Sousa marches and well-known movie or Broadway tunes—and is also not usually very difficult. Seasonal bands provide a great opportunity for returning players to “get their feet wet” in a low-stakes environment and meet like-minded players.

A greater commitment is necessary to play in recreational or community bands. In the USA, these bands' seasons often align with the school year, and schools often provide the venue for rehearsals. These bands are also often sponsored by the local community's parks and recreation department. While these bands also usually rehearse once a week, the rehearsals are often longer running—two to three hours. These bands are

often larger and draw from a wider area. In addition, the total number of pieces performed will be far greater than the seasonal band and are usually a bit more difficult. Community bands often perform several times a year in various venues.

People join community bands for different reasons. For some, the opportunity to play and meet new people is sufficient. Others are focused on improving their ability to read, play, and learn new material. While some strive to move “up” in the line, others are happy to remain playing the same part. Community bands also differ from seasonal bands in that there are often a number of members who teach music in surrounding school

systems. These players often raise the caliber of the band in terms of the difficulty of the music and the skill sets needed to play the lead parts. When one joins a community band, there is generally a section leader whose role it is to place a new player in the line. At other times, the conductor may informally audition people for placement.

Some towns and cities also boast a community orchestra. As with community bands, this is often an all-volunteer group, frequently including area music educators among its ranks. The type of music played differs from the community band experience, but in many other ways the groups are similar. From a trumpet perspective, such groups will offer fewer opportunities simply because the number of chairs is usually limited to two to four players. It is often the case that the skills needed to play successfully in this kind of group are greater. Occasionally, such groups may need additional trumpets if they are doing a piece requiring an enhanced brass section, and such players are often recruited from the local community band.

In addition to community orchestras, there may also be more specialized groups that rehearse at senior centers or community halls and specialize in playing a particular type of music. I belong to a community jazz/swing band that is made up of all volunteers and has players

with a range of abilities. What all players have in common is the desire to play jazz/swing music.

A final level of community groups consists of those that have a set limit of chairs in each section, audition players for entry, and subsequently determine section ranking. Such groups often have “symphonic band” or “symphonic winds” in their names. There is an expectation that players will bring with them a range of skills that include double-tonguing, triple-tonguing, and solid sight-reading skills. Similarly, players are required to practice and master the pieces as much as possible

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at home. Rehearsals are intended to brush up pieces and focus on artistic elements and dynamics. The pieces themselves are also generally more difficult and longer.

These groups may contain players who are professionally trained in performance or who also play in semi-professional and professional groups. These groups are for players who want to hone their skills and can commit a significant amount of time to both attend rehearsals and do the preparation work at home. While there is still a social element, rehearsals are more intense. In general, this kind of group often performs six to eight times during the year. Like community bands, audition-only bands also often take off during the summer months.

Once a player has joined a group, there might be other related opportunities that arise. For example, band members might split off for separate rehearsals in quartets, quintets, sextets, or octets. These might be comprised of different instruments, as in the case of a brass quintet, or could be smaller trumpet ensembles. In these kinds of groups, the members can decide the repertoire and level of difficulty for themselves. The decisions of where to rehearse and whether to prepare for public performances also rest with the group. These kinds of groups allow players to explore different genres of music, such as chamber music or jazz from smaller combos. Community bands might also split up into smaller groups to play smaller venues.

One of the best ways to find out what options are available for you is to go to your area's music educator association website. Since many music teachers play in community bands and orchestras, the association will know what bands exist for community members. Another obvious place to look is your community's parks and recreation department page. A very useful web directory is the Concert Band Portal

(<https://tinyurl.com/itg2401e>). This site is an international listing of community concert bands all over the world. A useful multi-state resource in the United States is the Association of Concert Bands website (<https://tinyurl.com/itg2401f>). You can search for bands simply by using Google and searching "community bands near me." Facebook is also a good resource.

Some of the things to look for in the directories are band rehearsal times, locations, and dues. Some bands require dues to be paid by members, and others do not. These funds are generally used to pay the conductor and acquire music. Some bands also require the purchase of a shirt or uniform. Many bands openly invite players to join at any point during the season. One can go without an instrument to a rehearsal and listen to get the feel of a group and gauge the level of difficulty of the music. One can also jump right in with an instrument. It is usually up to the player, but it is a good idea to have some information before you go.

The most important thing is to enjoy the band experience; going to rehearsal should be a pleasant occasion. While personal dynamics in bands can differ, one should be able to find a good match without having to journey too far from home. Playing in a group will help a player overcome performance anxiety, improve technical and sight-reading skills, and make new trumpet buddies. Have fun on the journey!

*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 him from 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.



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