instrument-specific beginning band tips

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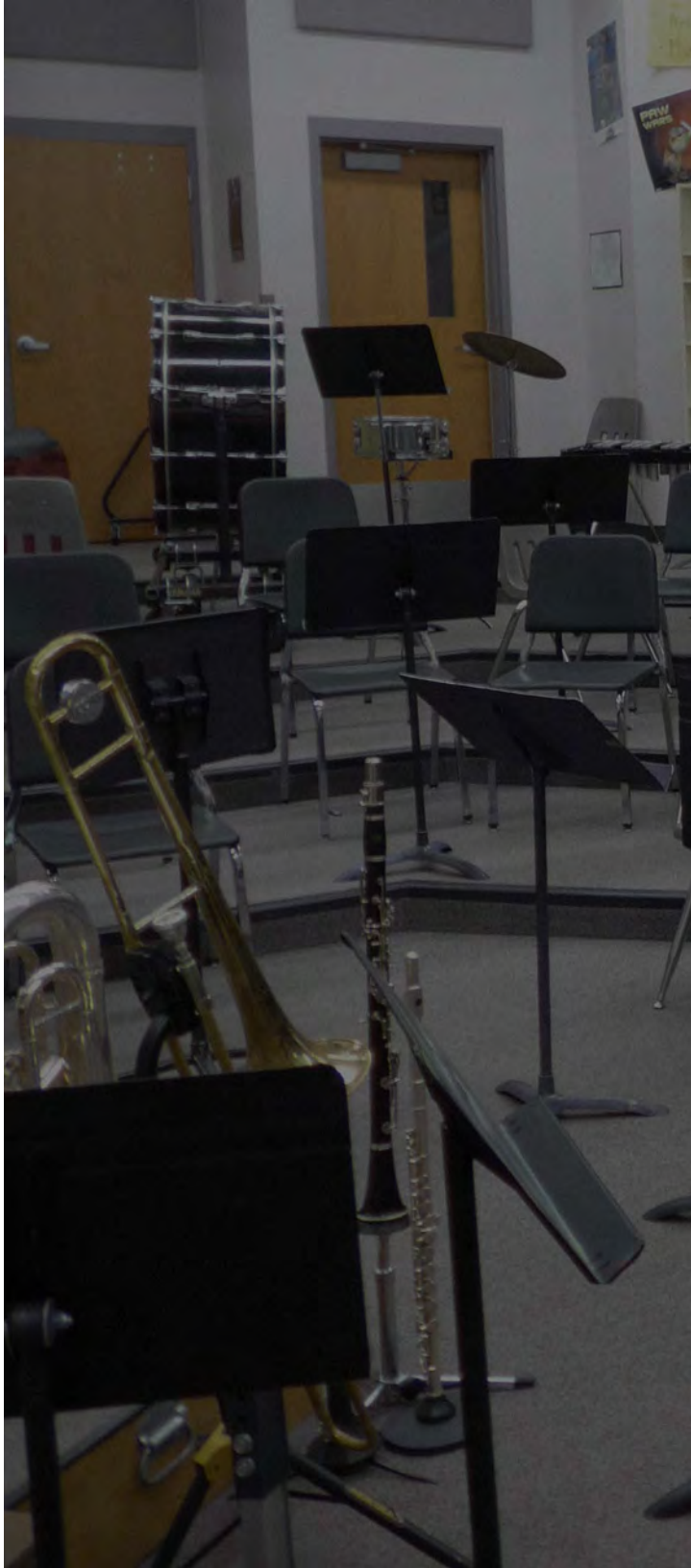
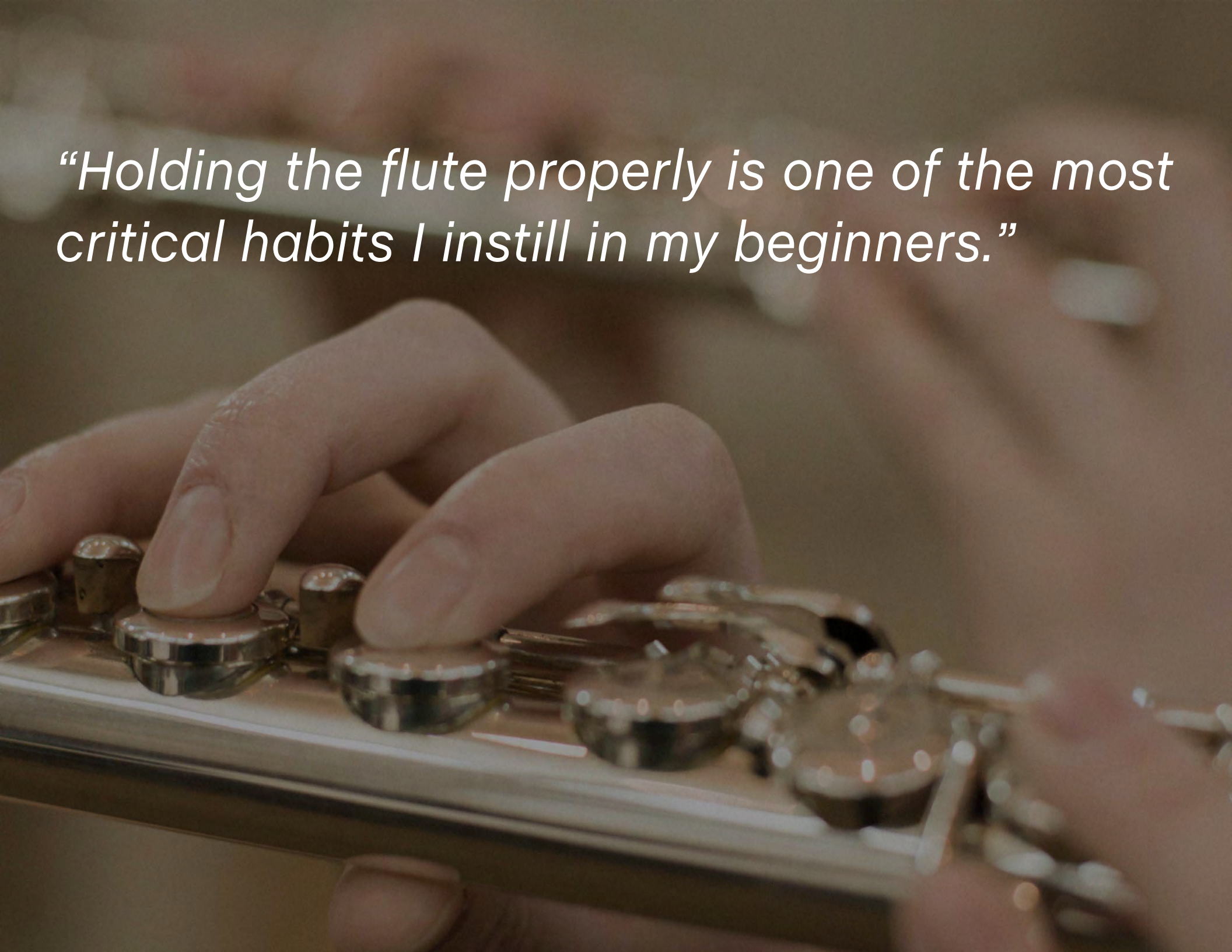
contents

It's tough to be as fluent with every instrument as you'd like in guiding all of your students.

To that end, we've compiled instrument-specific beginning band tips, from the SmartMusic Blog, to help you ensure that all your students get started right.




“Holding the flute properly is one of the most critical habits I instill in my beginners.”

flute

Holding the Flute

Holding the flute properly is one of the most critical habits I instill in my beginners. Embouchure placement, tone development, and technical development all depend on a student's ability to hold the instrument securely and without tension. For example, it's impossible to produce a good tone if the flute is slipping every few seconds. It is also impossible to play fast passages if the hands are tensed to keep the flute still. This is especially challenging on the flute because it is held asymmetrically. Because of this, I spend a significant amount of time establishing proper posture and hand position. I discussed several aspects of hand position in my previous blog post.

Headjoint Placement

Making a sound on the flute is notoriously difficult for some, and embouchure refinement can continue well into a student's college years. So what should teachers focus on in the beginning stages? For me, the answer is headjoint placement and alignment. To check for this, be sure that the tone hole is lined up left to right with the center of the student's aperture. This is not always in the center of the lips! When the student blows across the flute, you should be able to see a small area of condensation on the opposite side of the tone hole. This area of condensation should be directly in the center of the tone hole. Since this is visible, students can verify this alignment in a mirror fairly easily.

The headjoint should also be placed so that the lip plate sits in the nook of the chin. This allows the bottom lip to cover part of the tone hole. The majority of students will place the flute too high on the lip. I have my students roll the flute all the way in so that tone hole covers the center of their aperture. Next, I have them slide the flute down the chin (it is still rolled in at this point) until they can feel the bottom edge of the tone hole just BELOW their bottom lip.

Finally, I have them roll out so that the tone hole is more or less parallel to the ground and the bottom lip is covering about a third of the tone hole. From here they should be able to make a sound, but if they struggle, make sure that the jaw is open enough to aim the air into the flute and that the aperture is small enough to focus the airstream. For more on this topic, check out videos by Whitney Reagan and Sir James Galway.

Use the Tongue to Articulate

With a large flute section it can be tricky to catch the students who aren't using their tongue to articulate. Many students will use their throat or simply break the airstream between articulated notes. Once they slip into this bad habit, they often blend into the cacophony of the band (or blend into the top chair players who are articulating properly) without realizing that they are not tonguing. This habit manifests in a flute section that sounds muddy and diffuse. To make matters worse, this habit is incredibly difficult to fix if it has gone unchecked for several years. To combat this, I monitor my students very carefully in the first several months to make sure that they are tonguing consistently.

Dr. Carolyn Keyes is a faculty member at Cameron University in Lawton, OK.

Read her articles and bio on the SmartMusic blog.

double reeds

Oboe

Beginning oboe students need to be encouraged; they are embarking on a noble quest. Make sure they know they're playing one of the most beautiful instruments; if they're not already familiar with Peter and the Wolf or Swan Lake you might share recordings with them. This is important because the sound of the beginning oboe is often less pleasant. It takes a few years to properly develop the correct sound, which involves a combination of lip position (embouchure), air support, and a strong reed.

Remember these two tips and your students will be ahead of the game.

1. Play on the TIP of the reed! The correct oboe embouchure involves very LITTLE reed. If students feel like they have a comfortable amount of reed in their mouth, it is probably too much. Have your students play for you. If you can see at least half of the cane of the reed, they probably have the right amount of reed. If all you can see is the thread of the reed, they are playing too far down on the reed. It will sound worse and most likely be sharp.

2. Emphasize good posture and DEEP BREATHS! Oboe needs the highest amount of air pressure of any wind instrument, especially once you are playing on a strong reed. Have students breathe by expanding their tummy, pushing from there, and keeping a steady stream of air. They will be VERY LOUD at first; this is just fine. In time, they will learn how to control their dynamics. For now, though, it is time to develop a proper embouchure and strong air support. Good luck!

I offer a more detailed explanation of beginning oboe sounds in this previous post.

Pamela Ajango (French) teaches at Butler University.

Read articles she has written and co-written and her full bio on the SmartMusic Blog.

Bassoon

The bassoon has a reputation for being a difficult instrument to play. This may be true to some degree, but with good advice and instruction (and good consistent practice) young bassoonists can sound great and be well on their way to an enjoyable and rewarding musical experience.

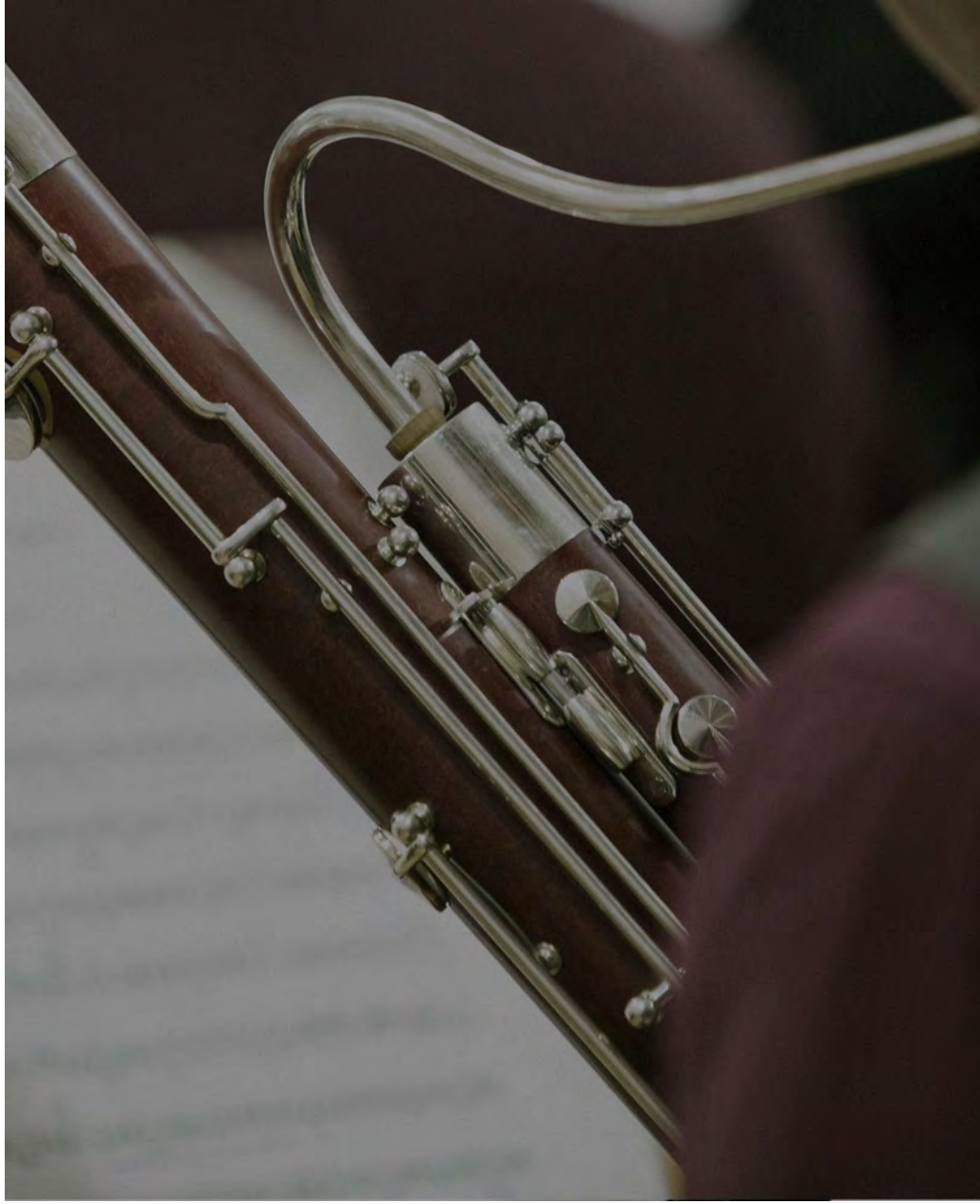
Here are some tips for your beginning bassoonists:

1. Encourage them to find the best private teacher they can. The bassoon is a unique instrument with some features (the reed) and techniques (half-hole, flicking, etc.) that really require specialized instruction.

2. They need to make sure their instrument is in good working order. If need be, have them take it to a qualified repair person to have it serviced. Check to make sure the whisper key pad is in good condition. If it's not, replace it. (Students can prevent damage by making sure the whisper key is away from the bocal when they're putting in and taking out the bocal.) Also check the connection between the 'pancake key' (Low E key) and the whisper key. To do this, depress the pancake key. Is the whisper key closing? Is the pancake key itself closing all the way? If not, you may be able to solve the problem by rotating the tenor joint a millimeter or two one direction or the other. If the problem can't be solved that way, check with a repair person for help.

3. I'd also encourage students to get several quality bassoon reeds to start and to plan on renewing the supply often. Students need to learn to take good care of their reeds. Have them store reeds in a proper reed case with good ventilation (not the plastic containers they come in). Reeds should be kept wet when being used, but make sure they dry thoroughly when not in use. Always soak the entire reed in clean water before playing, and get fresh water each time; never store water in a bassoon case.

If you're teaching first year bassoonists and do not play the instrument yourself, this SmartMusic blog post has some specific tips you can share with your students.



Doug Spaniol teaches bassoon at Butler University and Interlochen Arts Camp.

Read his full post and bio on the SmartMusic blog.


“The most confusing thing for beginning single reed players is embouchure pressure.”

single reeds

Clarinet & Saxaphone

Getting beginners off to a strong start makes a better first impression for students and parents, and saves you valuable time later by teaching good habits from the beginning. Here are three things for your clarinet and saxophone students to focus on in the first week.

Embouchure Pressure

I think the most confusing thing for beginning single reed players is embouchure pressure. Beginning students will ask questions like:

- "Is my chin pointed down or is my lip going up?"
- "How do I know if I'm biting?"
- "I keep leaking out of the corners of my mouth!"

The answer to all of these questions has to do with maintaining even embouchure pressure — a critical skill for single reed playing. You can say "equal pressure all the way around" and draw diagrams with arrows pointing in all directions around a mouth, but sometimes that just doesn't click with students.

I picked up a great strategy for tactile learners from Daniel Silver at the University of Colorado that's proven really effective with beginners. Hand out Chinese finger traps to students to demonstrate how the pressure is even all the way around their fingers and also that more pressure isn't always better (more struggling won't get you out of those things unless you're The Hulk). This physical comparison can help students understand that their embouchures should be snug all the way around and get good embouchures started right away.

Reed Strength

It's tempting to start students on a soft reed to make it easier to create sound right off the bat, but that can lead to bad habits. Start students on a number 2 strength reed — if a student can't make that reed vibrate, there is something going on with the embouchure, probably biting. I prefer Vandoren reeds; they are a bit thicker than other brands, so students end up with a fuller sound and get a feel for appropriate resistance rather than blasting away on something that's far too soft.

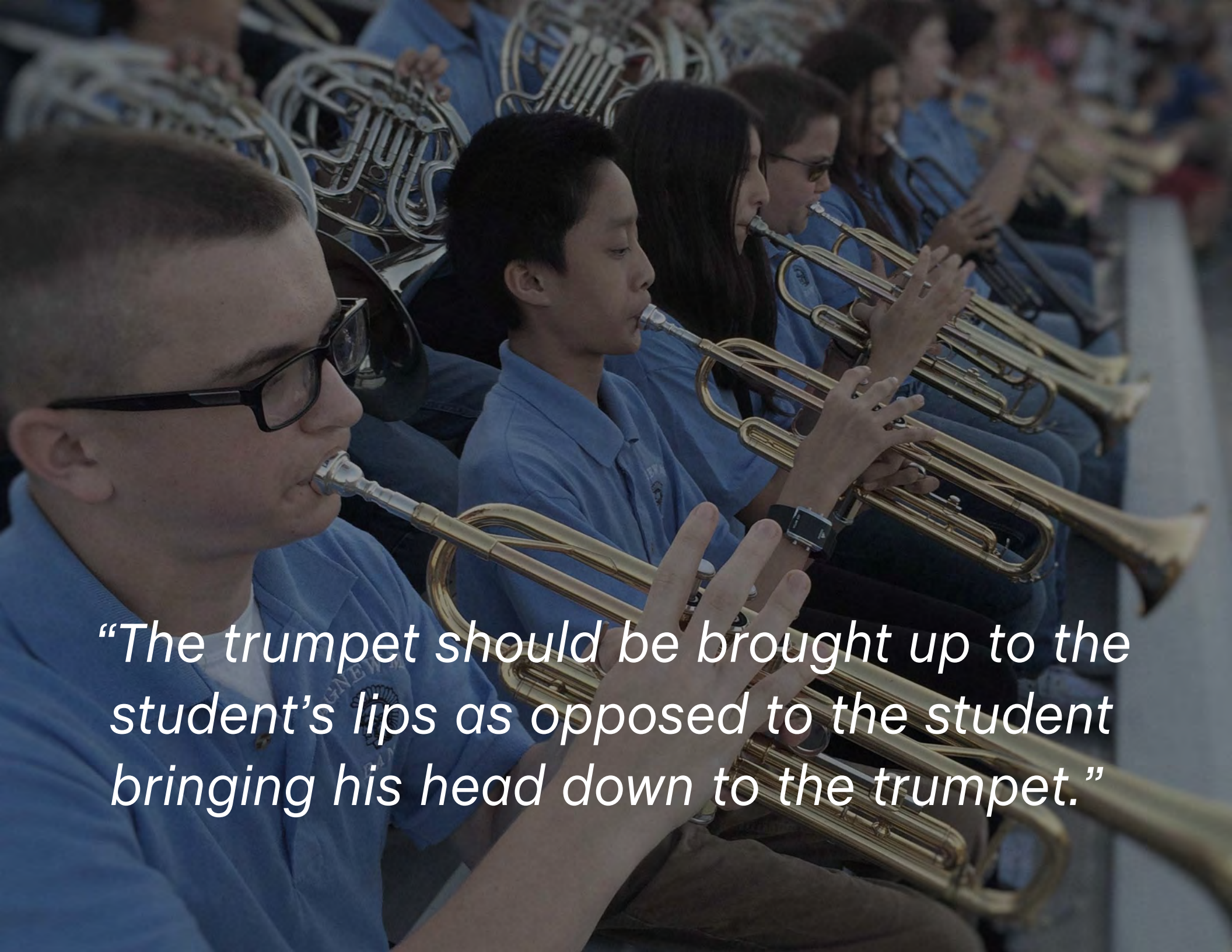
By Thanksgiving or Christmas students should have the air and embouchure stability to move up a half strength. In general, if the sound is blasting and unfocused, the student probably has enough air for a stronger reed, and if the sound is thin and airy with a red-faced student, the reed is probably too hard or warped. Be sure to give students clear instructions on reed care, as well.

Instrument Anatomy

It may seem obvious, but students need to know all the parts of their instruments. I have come across students at the end of their middle school careers who call the ligature "the thing that holds the reed on." Students should also know the note names for each fingering. When "it" or "this one" won't play, it takes more class time to diagnose than when "low F is having a hard time coming out." If you have time, a fun "Pin the Tail on the Donkey" style game, sans blindfolds, where students match parts and names might help things stick, literally and figuratively.

Maggie Greenwood directs the woodwind studios and orchestras at the Colorado School of Mines.

Read her articles and full bio on the SmartMusic Blog.


“The trumpet should be brought up to the student’s lips as opposed to the student bringing his head down to the trumpet.”

high brass

Trumpet & French Horn

It is important with beginners to keep in mind that more information is not better information. This can especially be important when teaching large classes. Keep it simple, and keep the science and terminology to a minimum in the beginning.

In light of keeping it simple, I will focus on three aspects that will set up your beginning high brass for success: posture/hand position, embouchure, and air.

Trumpet Posture/Hand Position

The body should be relaxed with little tension in the upper body. The student should be seated in the front half of his chair with flat feet on the floor. The back should be straight with shoulders relaxed. The trumpet should be brought up to the student's lips as opposed to the student bringing his head down to the trumpet. The trumpet and student's head should be at a slight downward angle (not parallel to the floor) to correctly distribute pressure to the lips.

The right hand should be curved as if the student is making a C or gripping a grapefruit. The first three fingers should rest on top of the valve buttons and the pinky should rest on top of the pinky rest. We place the pinky on top of the rest, versus inside, to avoid any unwanted pressure from pressing the instrument into the lips via squeezing the pinky rest. The right thumb will balance the horn under the leadpipe in between the first and second valve casings.

Watch for flattening of the hand against the leadpipe and valves. This puts the fingers in an incorrect position and will cause trouble later on.

The left hand will do the majority of weight-bearing so that the right hand can stay relaxed and free. The thumb should sit in the thumb saddle with the first and second fingers gripping the valve casing. The ring finger will rest in the pinky ring and needs to be relaxed as that finger will need to easily work the 3rd slide.

Incorrect posture: head tilted down, trumpet angled up, slouching, feet tucked into chair, arms in the stomach

Correct posture: flat feet, back straight, slight downward angle

Incorrect hand position: flat right hand, fingers over the valves, incorrect left hand finger placement

Correct hand position: correct left hand finger placement, curved right hand

French Horn Posture/Hand Position

The body should be relaxed with little tension in the upper body. The student should be seated in the front half of their chair with flat feet on the floor. The back should be straight with shoulders relaxed. The horn should be brought up to the student's lips as opposed to the student bringing his head down to the horn.

A large difference between trumpet and horn is that the head will stay up and straight as opposed to angling down with the horn.

The leadpipe of the horn should be at a downward angle (not parallel to the floor) to correctly distribute pressure to the lips. The student should be able to look down (with their eyes only) at his left hand as opposed to looking straight at it.

The left hand is the easiest to set up correctly. The thumb will rest on the thumb trigger, while fingers 1, 2, and 3 rest on the rotor paddles. The pinky will rest in the ring and will act as a secure point for holding the instrument. The weight of the horn will then rest in the palm of the left hand.

The right hand will need much more attention and close monitoring. It should be cupped as if holding water and inserted into the bell of the instrument so that the horn is resting on the thumb and index finger. The hand should be placed on the wall of the bell furthest from the player at an approximate "3 o'clock" position. The hand should not go in completely, as that would stop up the horn, but up far enough that the big knuckle of the index finger is hitting around the start of the bell flair. A strip of tape inside the bell can be used to help aid beginners into placing the hand correctly.

Embouchure

When discussing embouchure formation with beginners, it is important to be cognizant of the terminology used. Terms such as firm, stretch, tight, loose, etc. can convey the wrong idea to a beginner and cause undesirable results when applied at the wrong time.

Incorrect posture: Slouched posture, parallel horn angle, bell angled into the body

Correct posture: straight back, downward horn angle, bell angled away from body

Incorrect hand position: [top left] closed-off bell/too far in; [top right] wrong position, open hand; [bottom left] flat hand, wrong placement; [bottom right] Correct hand position: 3 o'clock position, cupped hand against far wall of the bell

Students should:

- Say "emmm" and hold the "m" shape. The lips should be together but not pressed together.
- The corners of the mouth should be firm. The corners of the mouth should be the only part of the embouchure that the students can feel really touching the teeth. If their lips are touching the teeth, then the embouchure is too tight and needs to relax. "Firm on the outside, supple on the inside."
- The tongue should be relaxed and low in the mouth with the tip of the tongue forward.
- The chin should be down and flat as opposed to "bunchy".
- Finally, once the embouchure is set, the French horn mouthpiece should be placed even horizontally, with the mouthpiece placed two-thirds on the upper lip and one-third on the lower lip. The trumpet mouthpiece should be placed even horizontally, with the mouthpiece placed half on the upper lip and half on the lower lip.
- Tip: I like to use a coffee stirrer/straw to emulate the correct embouchure. The center of the lips should NOT grip the straw!

Air

The basis of all brass playing comes from use of air. I encourage doing breathing exercises with your brass players before the instrument/mouthpiece is introduced. As the fundamental of brass playing, it is important that new students understand how to correctly breathe for playing their instrument. The inhale should be relaxed and in an "oh" shape. This enables the breath to fill the lungs completely and causes as little tension as possible. The students should avoid "sipping" the air or taking shallow breaths from the chest.

Sample Breathing Exercise:

At 80 bpm:

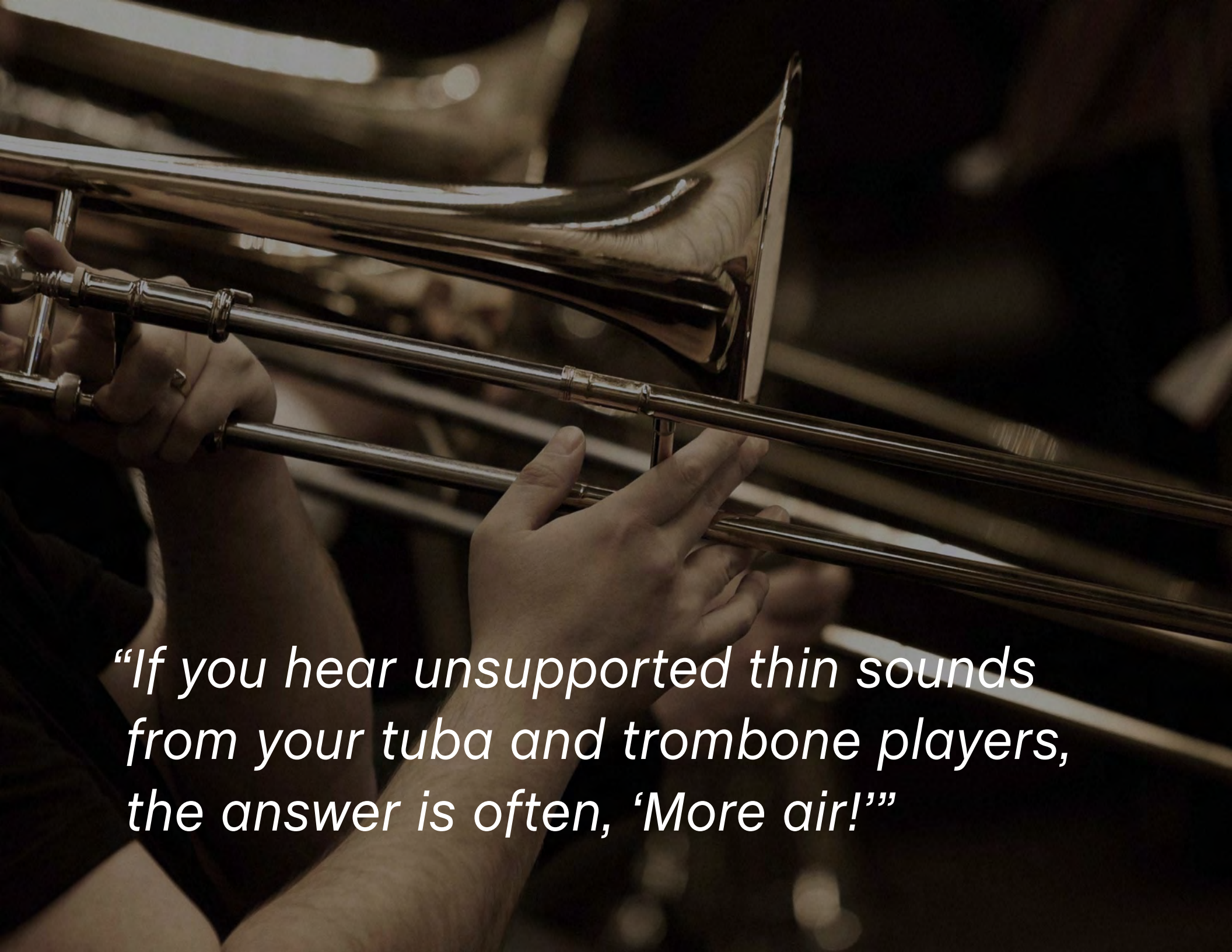
- Inhale 4, Exhale 4
- Inhale 2, Exhale 6
- Inhale 1, Exhale 7
- Inhale 1, Exhale 12 or 16

The inhale and exhale should be consistent and even across the beats of a metronome. Do not allow students to hold the breath in when transitioning from inhale to exhale.

After students have become comfortable with the correct use of air, the first notes on the instrument or mouthpiece should be created slowly using "air to sound." Simply put, the students should blow easily through their mouthpiece/instrument and slowly bring the lips in the center together until sound is created. It is very important to be patient during this process and not rush the results. This allows for a sound to be created with the least amount of unnecessary "muscling" and pressure.

Chris Clark is the band director at Hendrick Middle School in Plano, TX.

Read his articles and bio on the SmartMusic blog.


“If you hear unsupported thin sounds
from your tuba and trombone players,
the answer is often, ‘More air!’”

low brass

Trombone & Tuba

I believe your low brass students need to know three things to get started.

1. Use More Air

   Your beginners need to understand from their very first day with their instrument that air (wind) is the key to making sound, and a beautiful sound at that. Start with breathing exercises for your low brass musicians (which can benefit all of your wind players).

   Have students open their mouths like they are saying the letter "O" and then inhale and exhale slowly. They should gesture with their hand palm facing toward them to help the wind come in, and then move their palm backwards as they slowly exhale. This serves as a nice visual so students can picture their wind as a source of power. Know that if you hear unsupported thin sounds from your tuba and trombone players, the answer is often, "More air!"

   Metaphors that can help students visualize the concept of using more air include (but are not limited to): blowing out birthday cake candles, blowing out a campfire, powering a sail boat with air, and blowing down a house made of straw. You get the idea.

2. Remain Open

   Beginners can tend to have a lot of tension in their bodies because they are not used to holding their instruments. It is important to let your students know that their throat and their teeth in particular need to be open. A closed throat and closed teeth create an undesirable pinched tone. Teach students to relax from the beginning and they will see success much sooner.

   To understand the concept of slightly parted teeth, I have my students take their mouthpieces cup facing their mouth. They then turn the mouthpiece so the shank is facing their mouth. Have students open their teeth and place the shank in their mouths so that they can lightly bite down. This is roughly the space low brass players need between their teeth to produce a beautiful tone. I love this trick because it gives students a tactile understanding of the remaining open concept.

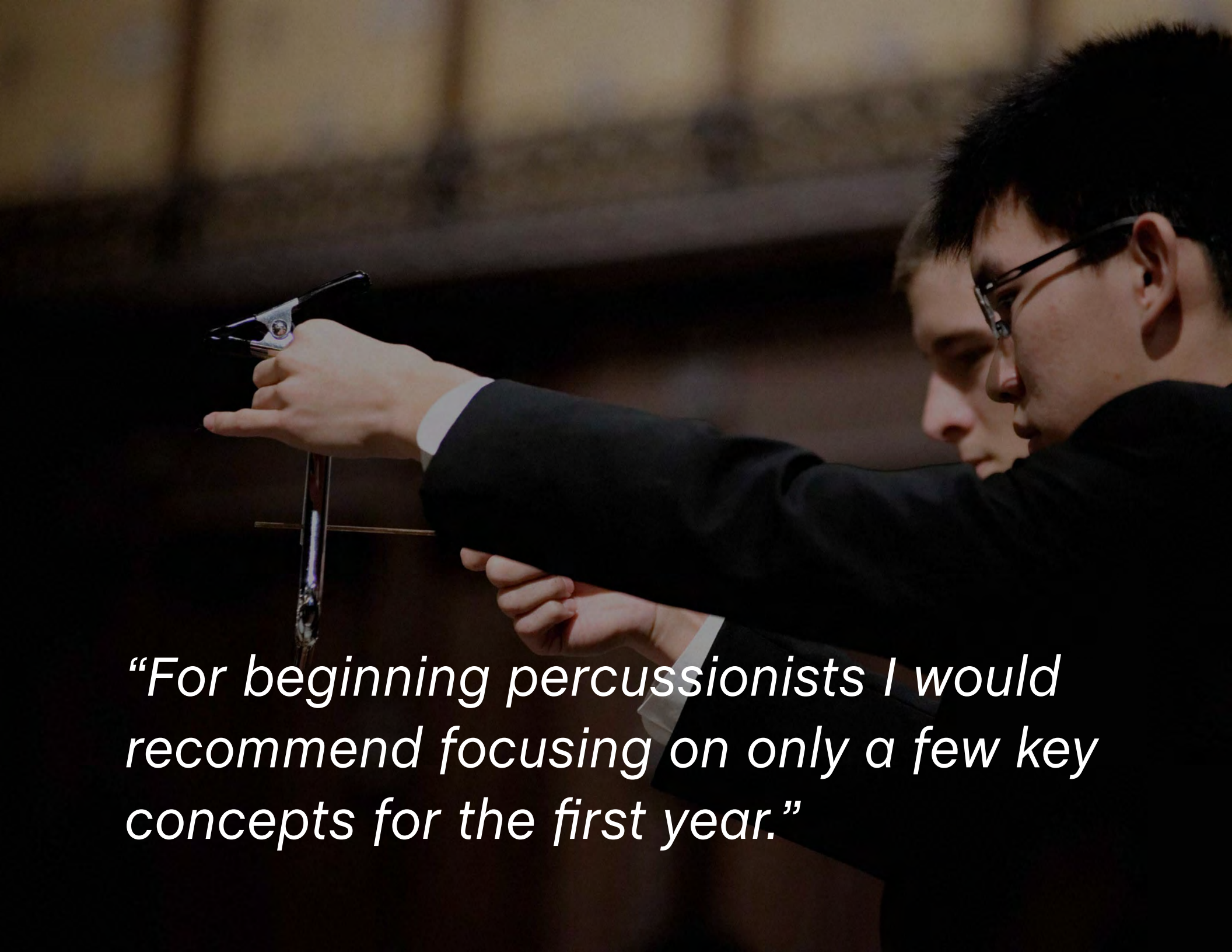
   To finish out the exercise, have students turn the mouthpiece back around, keeping the space in their teeth, and take a few deep breaths blowing their air through the mouthpiece.

3. Bring the Instrument to You

   Finally, beginners need to get started with a correct playing position. The most important concept here is to have the mouthpiece come to them - sitting up straight with feet flat on the floor of course. If they contort themselves in any odd way, their tone will not reach its full potential. When they are sitting up correctly as you would like them to, have them bring the instrument to them, and they will be off to a great start!

Heather Ewer teaches band with Mapleton Public Schools in Denver, Colorado.

Read her articles and full bio on the SmartMusic blog.



“For beginning percussionists I would recommend focusing on only a few key concepts for the first year.”

percussion

I recommend focusing your beginning percussionists on only a few key concepts for the first year. For my particular schedule, in which I see my beginning students every other day, the main concepts for the year are to understand the technique, know basic stroke types, understand and count rhythms through basic sixteenth note variations, know basic rudiments, be able to sight read mallet music at the appropriate level, know major scales, and above all else be able to play in time with a good understanding of pulse.

There are many details within each of these basic concepts. For example, teaching the desired grip and stroke will take a good amount of time with very specific instructions for each student, as hands vary. There are certainly different opinions on grip and stroke. My preference is to have all fingers on the stick and to use a piston stroke with emphasis on the wrist only. Once students are comfortable with the piston stroke I believe they'll find it easier to learn other strokes; I have found this order to work better than trying to implement a piston stroke for speed later down the road.

Many mistakes in the grip will be present when the students are first learning, so it is imperative that the teacher not allow any bad habits to form. This requires constant inspection and reminders of the grip and stroke pretty much for the whole year, at least on the block schedule that I deal with. For mallet playing I have my students use the same grip and stroke as with snare drum. Here the piston stroke aids in note accuracy because mallet instruments do not provide rebound.

Additional Beginning Percussion Resources

Many great resources are available to help you with your beginning percussion students. I've posted previous articles with tips for basic snare drum rudiments as well as for help in teaching scales to percussion students. Method books you might find helpful could include Mark Wessels' Fresh Approach books.

Nick Fernandez is the director of percussion at Bentonville Public Schools in Bentonville, Arkansas.

Read his articles and full bio on the SmartMusic Blog.

We hope you've enjoyed these tips for starting your beginning students out right. Learn more on the SmartMusic Blog.

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