

Fall 2017

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Recommended Citation

Gates, James G., "Using Singing as a Teaching Tool in Brass Playing" (2017). *Honors Research Projects*. 579.
http://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects/579

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Using Singing as a Teaching Tool in Brass Playing

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A common cliché heard within instrumental lessons is, “if you can sing it, you can play it.” The concept of using singing within the instructional sequence of instrumental education is not new, however, this teaching approach is often overlooked. This paper is an examination of three prominent brass pedagogues, Emory Remington, Arnold Jacobs, and Joseph Alessi, who each emphasized the importance of singing in rehearsals and personal practice. The purpose of this project is to gather strategies for using singing presented by these pedagogues and consolidate the findings into a resource to be used by classroom educators.

Dr. Mitchell Robinson, Associate Professor of Music Education and Chair of the Music Education Area at Michigan State University, writes that through singing, students gain aural skills that aid them in musical development. In his 1996 article, *To Sing or Not to Sing in Instrumental Class*, Robinson states, “students exposed to singing as a regular component of their instructional program tend to score higher on measures of music achievement, executive skill development (fingering, articulation, bowing, and so forth), attitude, and developmental music aptitude” (p. 18). Robinson also points out there is a positive correlation between bands receiving superior sight-reading ratings and the inclusion of singing in the learning process (Robinson, 1996).

The National Standards for Music Education list participation in both instrumental and vocal ensembles as integral components in the student’s music education (NCCAS, 2014). However, when a student begins studying an instrument, the use of the singing voice is often overlooked. Well-rounded instrumentalists incorporate both instrumental and vocal ideas into their practice and teachers can provide the connection between the two (Wolbers, 2002). By

adding singing into the instructional sequence, the teacher is making connections between different approaches, helping solidify students' understanding.

In the 1993 text, *Teaching Techniques and Insights*, Joseph Casey encourages teachers to implement singing as it establishes a connection between, "the students' aural experiences and the students' oral performance" (p.193), as there is no instrument between. Casey also advocates singing very early on in instrumental education as a way to develop musicianship as students, "can learn to sing and hear musical content sooner than they can develop the facility to perform at the same level instrumentally" (p.193). Through singing, students gain aural and musicianship skills that build readiness for learning their instrument and reading musical notation (Casey, 1993).

Teaching Techniques and Insights includes a collection of accounts given by successful educators who use singing in their classroom. Donald Wilcox, Director of Bands Emeritus at West Virginia University, stated that singing is a way to teach musical concepts without the instrument. He went as far as saying, "we have done a couple rehearsals without instruments." (p.194). Through using singing to establish musical ideas, Wilcox allowed the students to hear their part in an alternate setting which may have lead to new discoveries.

Hal D. Cooper, Professor Emeritus of Arkansas Tech University, suggests assisting unconfident students become more comfortable singing in the classroom by first having students hum the vowel. After the hum is established, the students then just open their mouth and a full sound will project (Casey, 1993). Teachers might be hesitant to include singing as they are unsure how the students will respond, or if they will sing at all. This approach will not only help unconfident students but will also help the teacher to begin integrating singing in their classroom if it has not been a strong focus in the past.

Mark Wolbers, Professor of Music at University of Alaska Anchorage, writes in his 2002 article, *Singing in the Band Rehearsal*, “when students are properly guided, singing can help them develop their aural perception and provide an alternative to a ‘button-pushing’ mentality...Students must be taught to hear the music they are producing, not just to simply see it” (p.1). He states that singing during band rehearsals is an effective approach for students to, “discover pitch, balance, and, most importantly, musical syntax” (p.2).

As the above professors and band directors attest to, singing is an integral component of band rehearsals, however, it is also effective in small and individual lessons. Robert Duke, Distinguished Professor of Music Education at The University of Texas at Austin, stresses teaching with the individual in mind as no two students are ever precisely at the same level. In his 2016 book, *Intelligent Music Teaching*, Duke discusses that addressing the same concept in multiple instructional settings will aid in student understanding as the teacher is able to more effectively meet the student’s individual needs. Effective curricula focuses on the growth of the individual student and therefore the body of this paper will review techniques suggested by brass pedagogues based on their experiences of using singing to teach individuals.

Singing has been advocated and used by brass pedagogues in individual and small group settings as an alternative approach to thinking about the music away from the instrument. Some pedagogues go as far as to refer to the instrument as a musical crutch to lean on. This project focuses on how three brass pedagogues incorporate singing into their instructional sequence to solve technical and musical problems related to brass playing.

Emory Remington was the esteemed former professor of trombone at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York from 1922 until his passing in 1971. During his time at Eastman, Remington saw the success of hundreds of students who went on to perform with the

nation's top ensembles and teach in colleges and public schools. He was regarded as a Master Teacher at the University of Rochester and was awarded the University of Rochester Alumni Citation to Faculty in 1957 and the Edward Peck Curtis Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching in 1968. He served as the principal trombonist of the Rochester Philharmonic and Civic orchestras until he retired in 1948 to focus on his teaching at Eastman. As an educator, Remington was known as a man who "believed in people, took pleasure in their accomplishments...and who reveled in their love and devotion to music" (Hunsberger, 1980, p.4). Remington's musical training began at a young age as a member of an Episcopal Church Boys Choir. During this time, he experienced the lyric, "floating tone" quality of soprano boys, a style he would evolve into his trombone playing. He commented on this in a newspaper article saying, "if I had a special distinction as a player, it was that I tried to make the trombone sing with a human quality. People liked its warm, rich tone and so did I" (Hunsberger, 1980, p.5).

Heralded as both a master performer and educator, Arnold Jacobs is considered to many as the father of modern brass playing technique. As a performer, Jacobs was a member of the Indianapolis and Pittsburgh Symphonies before becoming the principal tubist of the Chicago Symphony in 1944, a position he held for 44 years until his retirement in 1988. Jacobs was also one of the most sought after educators in instrumental and vocal technique for his unique approaches to breathing and motivation. Outside of his studio at Northwestern University, Jacobs gave lectures and clinics around the world including Tokyo in 1977 and 1985, as well as Chicago's Michael Reese Hospital in 1978 where he presented how playing wind instruments can be therapeutic for children with asthma. For his achievements and contributions to instrumental music, Jacobs received the Midwest Clinic Medal of Honor in 1985 and the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Chicago Federation of Musicians in 1994 (Frederiksen,

1996). Dale Clevenger, principal horn of the Chicago Symphony, states, "nearly every brass player in America has studied with Arnold Jacobs, whether [that player] knows it or not" (Frederiksen, 1996, p. 88).

Joseph Alessi has been the Principal Trombonist of the New York Philharmonic since 1985 and Professor of Trombone at the Juilliard School since 1986. As a soloist, Alessi has performed globally with ensembles such as the New York Philharmonic, Lincoln Symphony, New Japan Philharmonic, Seoul Philharmonic, Orchestra of Teatro Massimo Bellini in Catania, Sicily, and the Mannheim National Theater Orchestra. He is also a founding member of the Summit Brass ensemble at the Rafael Mendez Brass Institute in Tempe, Arizona. For his contributions to the trombone, Alessi was awarded an International Trombone Association award in 2002 and a Grammy Award in 2000 for his recording of George Crumb's *Starchild on the Bridge*. Alessi has presented masterclasses both nationally and internationally as a master teacher and is a frequent clinician at The Midwest Band and Orchestra Clinic. His playing is described as, "refined musicianship, a particularly rich sound quality and complete technical control. He embodies the American style: a clean, singing tone with occasional vibrato, and consistent sound throughout the instrument's entire register" (Alessi, 2007).

The following resource section is a collection of approaches and strategies for implementing singing into rehearsals and practice used by Remington, Jacobs, and Alessi. The three pedagogical areas included in this resource are Tone/Timbre, Rhythm/Tempo, and Phrasing/Style. The information contained in the resource section is a collection of beliefs and concepts advocated by each pedagogue. It was gathered through the viewing and transcribing of masterclasses and is supplemented by writings on the subject from Remington and Jacobs.

Educator's Resource on the Use of Singing

Tone/Timbre

Emory Remington stressed the constancy of tone quality throughout the instrument's range to achieve an evenness of sound. Similar to a vocalist having a chest and head voice, brass instruments have ranges in which certain tone colors are more easily produced. During the warm-up sequence, singers will often implement sirens or interval studies to develop a consistency between ranges. Remington applied this concept to brass playing in the implementation of lip-slurs. He stated, daily drills of lip-slurs, "will provide the benefit of being able to pass quickly and easily through the various registers" (Hunsberger, 1980, p. 20). The goal of the drill is to encourage the player to play with, "minimum effort and maximum relaxation" (Hunsberger, 1980, p. 20), similar to what vocalists strive for. By having the students sing, Remington showed them the required level of relation.

Much like singing, tone quality for brass instruments is greatly affected by the shape of the oral cavity. If the shape is spread wide or flat the sound produced will be bright, whereas a round shape will produce a darker tone. Arnold Jacobs suggested that to create the desired oral shape, the player should think of creating vowels. He stated that if a player focuses too much on the shape the tongue is creating within the mouth, the mouth itself will unconsciously readjust to counteract the tongue's movement (Frederiksen, 2017). Instead of thinking about the tongue to create the correct oral shape, the player should focus on the reflexes of speech that every human possesses since childhood, as it is a more natural approach to creating tone on an instrument (Frederiksen, 2017). Jacobs also stated that as the player moves between the low and high register of the instrument, the vowel shape should change from "Ah" to "E" (Frederiksen, 2017).

Similar to Jacobs' use of a vowel concept to achieve the correct oral shape for the desired tone quality, Alessi suggests to "think vowels, not consonants." He emphasizes the difference between the two, as vowel sounds do not have a front articulation. Alessi's reasoning behind this concept is by thinking of vowels, the player is focused more on sustaining the body of the note rather than allowing the front articulation to affect the overall tone (J. Alessi, personal communication, February 27, 2017). Different musical styles require varying tone colors, which can be achieved by using different vowels. For example, the trombone excerpt from Saint Saëns' *Symphony No. 3: "Organ Symphony"* should be played with an "Oh" vowel, while an "Ah" vowel should be used in the trombone solo from *Mahler's Symphony No. 3* (J. Alessi, personal communication, February 27, 2017).

Rhythm/Tempo

When faced with a challenging phrase, one of Alessi's approaches is to put down the instrument and conduct and sing through the line. The pattern itself should not be fancy, but rather is used to simply keep time. The purpose of conducting is to externally express the time, which helps navigate rhythm and meter changes because of the visual, kinesthetic, and aural connection to each beat. Alessi has students sing out loud while they conduct, as he is able to both see and hear their understanding and execution of rhythm, then make adjustments as necessary (Alessi, 2017).

Jacobs suggested that to help keep a steady internal pulse, the player should create and sing an accompaniment for each tune they play. He stated that by doing this, the player will begin to feel a stronger rhythm coming into their body which will help tie musical concepts together in their playing. An example used is when playing a waltz, "think 'UM-PAH-PAH' and blow a rhythmical 'HA' into it" (Loubriel, 2013, p. 187). As a helpful practice tool, Jacobs

suggested the students play along with a recording of them singing the accompaniment to help them stay accurate. For players who do not have a strong internal sense of pulse, Jacobs said they, “need to do this kind of work at some point in their career” (Loubriel, 2013, p. 187). He also stated this approach can benefit stiff players as, “this study will bring relaxation and it will bring the ability of doing all the ‘bowings’ and sudden changes required for playing music” (Loubriel, 2013, p. 187).

Phrasing/Style

According to Remington, the playing of chorales is an integral part of the warm-up sequence and should be at the center of an ensemble’s musical development. This idea heralds back to his early training in the Episcopal Church Boys Choir, which he credits to developing his concept of a musical line. Remington believed that chorales are not meant to be played solely as a warm-up and therefore must be approached as its own rich piece of music. As many chorales were originally intended for a choral orchestration, Remington encouraged ensembles to sing through the chorale, listening to how each part fits into the greater phrase created (Remington, 1968).

In order for a phrase to have musical intent, there needs to be a clear beginning, middle, and end. A question Alessi asks his students is where they believe the phrase is leading and what is the “goal note?” He says this approach is a good gateway to a phrasing discussion as students might have differing interpretations for the same line. Alessi begins by having the student sing the line, putting emphasis on overtly conveying a musical idea. This is because students almost never will over-do phrasing when asked, but will rather make small increments forward until the teacher deems their playing acceptable. When the student has created a clear phrase idea and has

identified their “goal note,” Alessi then has them use the instrument to show the phrase, usually to better success (J. Alessi, personal communication, February 27, 2017).

Jacob’s approach to phrasing was to create a story through setting lyrics to the music. He said that “if you hear a singer, you usually hear wonderful story telling and phrasing because she has a story to tell with her music—she has lyrics” (Loubriel, 2013, p. 96). When speaking or singing, every word has meaning behind it and certain words are emphasized more than others depending on their individual meaning and importance. This concept transfers into music as the player shows rise and fall in the phrasing, much like a singer changes pitch and inflection to convey a sense of direction in the music. Jacobs advocated beginning this approach by recording oneself singing and playing *America the Beautiful* in both a march and chorale style. He stated that it might be embarrassing at first, but after listening to the playback multiple times, one can begin to make decisions about their phrasing (Loubriel, 2013). For Jacobs, the storytelling aspect of performance is the ultimate goal of any musician and by creating a clear mental picture, the performer will find it easier to tell their story (Loubriel, 2013).

Conclusion

When the student applies the musical ideas they discovered through singing, they are met with greater success (Robinson 1996). When teachers have students sing, they are fostering an environment for students to investigate musical ideas away from their instrument. Jacobs stated if the player focuses on hearing the music in his or her head while performing, he or she will more likely convey his or her intended message. “That’s the message you want your audience to hear – like a great storyteller or a great singer” (Loubriel, 2013, p. 168). Arnold Jacobs also reminded that “you should form a mental picture of what you should sound like in your brain before you play” (Loubriel, 2013, 168). He advocated to use singing to help develop this mental

picture. While the phrase “if you can sing it, you can play it” is a common cliché heard from brass instructors, the pedagogy behind it rings true within the curriculum of brass playing.

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