

TUBA PEDAGOGY FROM DAY ONE

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Keep it fun.

They came to the band room needing to express something unspeakable.

Make it fun to attempt.

Make it safe to fail.

Celebrate with them the gift of universal expression from day one.

SELECTING STUDENTS FOR TUBA

Finding and keeping students to play the tuba is always a challenge. However, explaining the role of the tuba in an ensemble will often appeal to the same type of student as the role of bass function itself: a helper.

Children want responsibility.

If a director explains the powerful role of bass function to students (sound foundation, intonation, and time) the type of student that loves to help will be attracted to this role. Children that seek responsibility and are helpers by their nature become fantastic tuba players. The job of bass function is important to your ensemble, so time and care in finding and motivating tuba players needs to be a top priority.

- Tuba players are found in the general student population by looking for helpers. Kids who hold the door for others. Those who watch out for younger students. And students who love movie sound effects, particularly loud action or comedic sounds. These are tuba players waiting to find their instrument.
- If someone WANTS to play the tuba no matter how small they are, please let them. Some of the smallest framed folks I know are wonderful tuba players. While the instrument might be hard to hold in the beginning, anyone possessing the spirit to take up the tuba before they've tried should be given the chance to do so.
- Some physical characteristics may impede progress on the tuba such as size of the embouchure. Often smaller children are unable to make a seal with a tuba mouthpiece or the mouthpiece doesn't fit under their nose to allow for a proper embouchure. Euphonium (a tenor tuba) will often helps smaller students find a place in the bass clef until they are large enough to handle a tuba mouthpiece.

BEFORE THE FIRST SOUNDS ARE MADE

Students are often very excited to make sounds on their instruments. Do not let their enthusiasm distract you from the proper steps. Yet, be careful to find a balance between teaching process and free play. Detailed step processes will yield a quicker uptake for future progress unimpeded by poor habits.

THE INSTRUMENT ITSELF

- In order to elevate a student's respect for the instrument, all tuba students should learn the proper terminology for each part of the horn.
- Careful demonstration is necessary to help beginners learn to hold, lift, and move a tuba to minimize damage.
- The tuba mouthpiece should be placed into the receiver with a slight, easy twist.
- Tuba students should have valve oil, slide grease, a mouthpiece brush, and a "snake" for cleaning. Teach the students how to lubricate and clean their instruments.
- Teach the students how to give their instruments a "bath" once a semester. Kiddie pools make the best tuba tubs.

BODY POSITION/BALANCE/POSTURE

Instrument Placement: The height of the student in combination with the height of the lead pipe will determine if the tuba will be in the proper position on the chair, in their lap, or on a tuba stand. Inevitably the student will grow in height after they've begun, so watch for poor positions as they start to sprout!

IDEALLY, the student should sit in a neutral position without the tuba in their lap. Then, without changing position, the mouthpiece needs to come to where the embouchure is rather than leaning into, reaching up, or slumping down to reach the mouthpiece. Finding a neutral position for the tuba is the fussiest part of tuba playing.

- Tuba stands are required for almost all tuba players to be able to have a physically neutral approach to playing. If a "grip" is necessary to hold the tuba, the body for music is already full of tension. Tension is the enemy of tone.
- Sitting balanced on ischial tuberosity (left and right) with the knees below the hip joints and the head floating above the hips causes a neutral position in the spine, which is best for breathing freely.
- The left elbow (if playing front action valves) needs to stay below the shoulder or the ribs will be locked and breathing impeded.
- Teach the difference between "bringing the instrument to you" and "going to the instrument" in terms of neutral physicality related to balance.
- Demonstrate the difference between poor positions for breathing and proper ones. Using "wrong" to make "right" more obvious is a great tool for teaching physical awareness.

HAND POSITION

Top action and front action valve set ups change which side a tuba bell points. Top action valve tubas will be similar to the euphonium to hold.

LEFT HAND—FRONT ACTION VALVES

- The tuba rests in the left palm placed somewhere on the 1st branch on the outside of the tuba or on the 2nd or 3rd branch (depending on tuba model) behind the valve slides.
- Gripping is an indication that the instrument is imbalanced. Find a neutral position for the tuba so the hands merely keep the instrument from falling over.

RIGHT HAND—FRONT ACTION VALVES

- The right hand should be shaped like a backwards “C” as though palming a tennis ball or racquetball. This shape ensures proper finger action.
- The thumb should be placed in the thumb ring (if present) or under the slide that runs parallel to the valve section. Be careful not to grip or lift the instrument with the thumb.
- Use the top of the fingerprint to press the valves. Keep the joint between the distal and middle phalanges from collapsing for optimal finger action.
- A flat palm and straight fingers indicate tension in the hand and will slow finger action.

LEFT HAND—TOP ACTION VALVES

- The left arm crosses in front of the body to a “comfortable” position with the hand holding (depending on the tuba model and the size of the student) on the 1st or 3rd slide. Be careful not to pull the instrument into the embouchure with the left arm.
- Gripping is an indication that the instrument is imbalanced. Find a neutral position for the tuba so the hands merely keep the instrument from falling over.

RIGHT HAND—TOP ACTION VALVES

- The right hand should be shaped like a backwards “C” as though palming a tennis ball or racquetball. This shape ensures proper finger action.
- The thumb should be placed under the slide that runs parallel to the valve section. Be careful not to pull the instrument into the embouchure with the thumb.
- Use the top of the fingerprint to press the valves. Keep the joint between the distal and middle phalanges from collapsing for optimal finger action.
- A flat palm and straight fingers indicate tension in the hand and will slow finger action.

Gripping the instrument if it is sitting on a student’s lap is often because the pants are too slippery against the bottom bow. Using black rubberized shelf/drawer liner on one leg will keep the instrument from sliding and match concert dress.

PRODUCING THE FIRST SOUNDS

Children are assessed too often. They are often afraid of giving the wrong answer. Invite them into the world of music where there are many answers to one question and where expression is unbounded.

- Just go for it. Jump in. Pitch matching with hopes of a middle F or Bb (or a low Bb) are lovely. We should all live in hope. But meet them where they are successful. If the first sounds are too high, thin, pinched, etc - celebrate the first sounds. Period.
- Better to have brave adventurers searching for a tone than timid low clef dwellers afraid of their own fingering.
- I consider mouthpiece buzzing, especially on low brass, to be an advanced topic. Usually at the beginning stages it causes too much pinching of the lips because they lack the proper airflow to support an un-pinched buzz. Since they are beginners, sensory awareness is one of their strongest guides. Pinching becomes habit very quickly.
- *Singing is a better option for reinforcing tonal memory particularly in beginners.*

EMBOUCHURE

This is a tricky subject in the beginning stages. Students need to become aware of the proper shapes necessary to produce a sound, but overemphasis on the physical rather than the musical incentive will eventually be overdone as habit creates less sensory feedback.

Arnold Jacobs used to say to me in lessons when I was stuck analyzing my embouchure, “Manage the music not the meat.” Use musical incentives to produce the proper physical result rather than too many physical instructions to produce a musical result. The latter approach usually produces overexertion. Singing is a musical incentive.

- Have the student say “Oh” or “Whoa” and hold their position. This is the shape of a proper inhalation. Practice moving air in and out in this shape.
- Having a “Whoa” or “Oh” shape with the lips touching lightly together is the beginning of a tuba embouchure.
- Meet them where the first sounds come out and guide them with their ears towards the pitches you want them to eventually produce.

AIR

- Use *The Breathing Gym*® flow exercises to create the airflow necessary for tuba. As a practical application, wind pattern familiar songs to get the air to move at volumes students are not used to, striving for tension free air in both directions.
- Keep your vernacular straight between air flow and air speed. They are not the same.
- Air is used to blow your embouchure into shape. This is important in all registers, but for tuba players to be able to play lower, they will need to be familiar with lots of air flow.

FIRST NOTES

- Singing to replicate attempted pitches forces the student to use their ears and introduces the culture of singing in band - the only tool to prove what they see is what they hear.
- Pitch incentive is an excellent way toward first sounds. Chops will fall primarily into two places after tone production is successful either playing in the middle register with difficulty descending or playing the low Bb and having difficulty ascending.
- Introduce students to characteristic tuba tones for aural motivation.

ARTICULATION

- Since “Oh” is the shape that has been introduced, adding a light beginning to that syllable is a good starting point for articulation. “Toh” is good for tuba.
- Wind pattern familiar songs with “Toh” and have the students feel the wind hit the palm of one of their hands.
- “Toh,” if overdone, can be too harsh in the beginning, so use “Doh” or “tOH” as alternative concepts.
- Wind pattern “tOH”, “dOH”, “Toh”, “Doh”, “TOH”, and “DOH” to feel the difference in articulations.
- Denting the airstream rather than stopping it will help to produce smooth legato tones.
- Encourage articulation variation aurally with attention to the differences between articulations of snare drum, xylophone, marimba, vibraphone, oboe, violin, etc.

RECOMMENDED METHOD BOOKS AND PRINT MATERIALS FOR BEGINNERS

I have seen master teachers produce master musicians with all method books available. Here are a few of my favorites.

- *Scale and Rhythm Chunks*, by Richard Canter
Designed to address the current trend of reduced instruction time and increased assessments showing trackable progress.
- *Technique & Musicianship*, by Bruce Pearson and Ryan Nowlin
- *Sound Innovations*, by Peter Boonshaft and Robert Sheldon
- *The Brass Gym: Level Up!*, by Patrick Sheridan & Chip DeStefano
- *Let's Play the Tuba*, by Dizzy Stratford with Patrick Sheridan
- *Fun Play Along Duets*, by André Waigaine
- *Boogie for Tuba*, by Markus Schenk and Kurt Brunthaler with Patrick Sheridan

RECOMMENDED EQUIPMENT FOR BEGINNERS

Educate your new band parents about the benefits of investing in a quality instrument. Students become frustrated with equipment limitations. Cheap equipment does not hold any resale value, usually having to be repaired often. Ask parents to consult with you before purchasing an instrument. Remind parents that maintenance and repairs are a part of owning an instrument. A tuba purchase is a financial investment. Most top brands will hold their value even over 20 years if cared for properly.

Everyone is a different size. Testing many different instruments when possible is key to finding the right fit.

BEGINNING MOUTHPIECE RECOMMENDATIONS

- Laskey Protogé
- Bach 18 - useful for smaller set ups
- Laske 30H, 28H, 30G
- Conn-Helleberg
- Bach 24AW

EVERYDAY CONSIDERATIONS

In Band, we exist to make each other better.

Keep it fun.

They came to the band room
needing to express something unspeakable.

Make it fun to attempt.
Make it safe to fail.

REMEMBER: IT'S NOT FRUSTRATING, IT'S FUNNY.

Celebrate with them the gift of universal expression
from DAY ONE.