



## **Ensemble Performance Practices and Proper Etiquette** <http://plaza.obu.edu/bynumj/lowbrass>

Just as it is important for students to properly develop individual skills as an accomplished musician, it is equally imperative to learn how to work **with** one another in an ensemble setting. Too often, ensemble rehearsals become competitions with each other, rather than improving the overall musical product. More often than not, playing the trombone is a “team” endeavor. Therefore, the success or failure of a section not only depends on each member’s ability to play their own part but also their ability to listen to one another. It is also vitally important that each member of the section understands his or her musical role.

### **Role of each Member:**

#### 1<sup>st</sup> Part:

- Makes musical decisions: attacks, releases, volume, etc.
- Listens down for intonation and listens to first trumpet for style.
- Has a clear understanding of how the parts fit together.

#### 2<sup>nd</sup> Part:

- Generally responsible for filling out section sound.
- Typically plays the third of any given chord (requires solid intonation).
- Provides a solid cushion of sound for the 1<sup>st</sup> part to play on.

#### 3<sup>rd</sup> Part:

- Provides the tonal and dynamic foundation for the section.
- Listens down to the tuba and blends within that sound (not compete)

In order to improve as section, it is not enough to simply recognize a deficiency in a specific area. Each member must also be able to implement effective rehearsal techniques that will address the various issues of ensemble performance. These issues include: intonation, balance, and articulation.

### **Intonation and Balance:**

What part of the chord you are currently playing. Is it major, minor, diminished, or augmented? Is it in root position or inversion? Is there a seventh involved? There should never be a time when a section member can’t answer these questions. How can proper intonation be achieved when nobody knows what to do? When working to improve the intonation of any given chord, always do so in the following order:

- Tune all octaves
- Tune the root
- Add the fifth
- Add the third
- Add the seventh

Sometimes, it can prove very beneficial for one voice to purposefully go in and out of tune (allowing every to hear the beats of dissonance become stronger and weaker). This helps everyone to learn what good intonation (and bad intonation) sounds like.

This sequence is also indicates the level of importance for each chord member. Very often, what is perceived to be bad intonation within a section is actually a matter of proper balance. If one member of the section is overpowering everyone else, it will come across as bad intonation. A good rule of thumb is to build from the bottom to the top. Range is the main reasoning behind this concept. The upper tessitura that is common in the first trombone part is much easier to project than the typical register of lower parts. It's important to counter this by building from the bottom. This also gives the section a darker and warmer sound.

Sometimes, proper balance has nothing to do with the volume of each section member. Bell direction greatly influences the section balance. Playing with your bell in the stand ensures that a majority of your sound is not reaching the audience. That effectively eliminates 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the section. Always place your stand to the left of the bell, and avoid leaning into the music (even at the most technically intense moments).

### **Articulation and Group Rhythm:**

In my opinion, the quality of section articulation is the defining characteristic of success. When entering together, a trombone section should present a unified wall of sound (with absolutely no cracks or holes). This is true no matter how intricate a passage may be.

Entering together requires breathing together. Breathing together requires a group consensus of subdivision. This group rhythm not only determines where a note begins, but the end as well. Releases are probably the most overlooked aspect of section playing. A perfect beginning often loses its appeal when followed by a ragged release. Always remember, there are three parts to every note you play: beginning, middle, and end. Each section member must always be aware of the entire note.

### **Here are other general guidelines on working together as a section:**

- Always keep the lines of communication open. Never foster an environment where people are afraid to ask questions or give an opinion. Any tense or awkward feelings will actually creep into the section's performance. It is always much more enjoyable (but not necessary) to perform with people you like being around. When that's the case, the end result is usually better.
- Although everyone's opinion is important, the section leader has the final say so. Never undermine the section leader's authority by asking the conductor questions you haven't asked them first.
- It is the section leader's responsibility to make sure the section is performing at the highest level, and is interpreting the music as the conductor wishes.
- The privilege of being the leader should be treated with care. Only a fool thinks they are beyond reproach and are never wrong. Everyone's opinion should be valued. However, it is always best if the leader has a definitive idea of what he or she wants from everyone.
- Don't be overly sensitive in terms of accepting criticism.
- Be constructive in how criticism is presented.
- Beware of "paralysis by analysis". Sometimes simplicity is the answer.
- Understand the section's role in the overall scheme of the music. Look at the score from time to time. You will see that the trombones aren't nearly as important as you might think. Not every entrance needs to be *fortissimo*. Variety is the spice of life, and will make the really wonderful moments that much better.
- Experiment with warming up together (and bounce ideas off of one another).
- Work together outside of regular rehearsals. There should at least be one sectional per concert.

**Here are other rehearsal techniques to help improve section performance:**

- Play chorales together: they provide a great opportunity to work on intonations and blend. Recruit a tubist to play the bottom voice and experiment with balance.
- Play trios/quartets together: any time spent playing as a section is “money in the bank”. This also provides an opportunity to shift parts. See me for specific examples of chamber music.
- When working on articulation (or a very rhythmically difficult passage), try “bopping” to lock in on the group rhythm.
- Record sectionals or rehearsals to spot problem areas for future study.
- When dealing with issues of tempo, place a metronome or Dr. Beat in front of the section to maintain integrity.
- When rehearsing...**REHEARSE**. Don’t goof around, or just run through the repertoire. Be intense and keep the level of concentration high. When away from rehearsal, don’t even think about the music.
- Be sure to take a break during the session. Try to rest 10 minutes for every 50 that you practice.

**Here are a few other general rules of etiquette (Taken from Phillip Farkas’ *Ensemble Department*):**

- When not actively playing, a performer should sit quietly without talking or making quick motions of any kind. This is particularly true when a player nearby is playing anything of difficulty. To glimpse a sudden motion out of the corner of one’s eye while concentrating intensely during a difficult passage is distracting and could easily cause an error.
- When the conductor is taking time to work with another section, make sure to pay attention. Chances are many of the comments being made apply to your part. This can cut down on unnecessary stops to repeat instructions. If what is being said is inapplicable to your section, mentally rehearse the most difficult sections of the piece. In other words...always be thinking about the music.
- Do not stare at a colleague or their music while he or she is engrossed in playing a solo passage. It usually has an upsetting effect for the player in question. If you doubt this, just let the player seated in front of you turn around slightly and stare at you as you play your most difficult solo of the concert.
- Never publicly play any of the solos which a colleague (and not you) will have to perform in a concert. This is the height of bad manners and could easily lead to harsh words. To play another’s solo gives others the impression that you think you can do it better, or that your musical ideas have more merit than the actual soloist’s.
- Help each other in the small courtesies which not only contribute to the performance, but show respect for one another. Help with a difficult page turn (if you are resting). Share the music equitably when playing two-to-a-stand. A signal such as a mere twitch of a finger can help you and your colleague keep count as the rehearsal marks go past.
- Sometimes when a performer has just played a difficult passage or has done something in an exceptionally beautiful manner, his or her nearby colleagues will shuffle their feet every-so-slightly. Since this is done right in front of the audience, it is, of course, done very subtly and inaudibly.