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MAINTAINING A HEALTHY EMOUCHURE: PREVENTING INJURIES IN BRASS MUSICIANS

BY NICOLE PIUNNO

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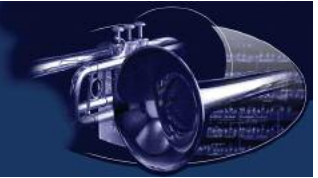
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MAINTAINING A HEALTHY EMOUCHURE: PREVENTING INJURIES IN BRASS MUSICIANS

BY NICOLE PIUNNO

A properly functioning embouchure is crucial to the success of any brass player. If the embouchure is weak and cannot control the lip opening, brass playing will be very difficult. We all need to be more aware of the causes, symptoms, and ways to prevent a serious lip injury.

To form a good embouchure, the groups of muscles in the face must work together properly. Most of the muscles in the face attach to other muscles, which form a kind of muscular net. The embouchure is formed by two primary muscle contractions between the orbicularis oris and the buccinators. The buccinators contract away from the mouth, which allow us to form a smile. The orbicularis oris enables the mouth to do the opposite, which is to form a pucker by drawing the lips forward as if whistling. Since the buccinators connect into the orbicularis oris, the contraction of these muscles must be symmetrical.

Since we cannot directly see the interplay of the muscles, we must describe how to form a proper embouchure based on what can be seen. Though there are small differences in appearance from player to player, every player's embouchure must have certain characteristics in order to function properly. These characteristics include a pucker with a slight suggestion of a smile against it, a forward jaw, and a flat chin. A player might try to use the syllable "woo" against "ee" to achieve this same effect, being careful to keep the corners of his mouth firm. After a great amount of playing, a player should only feel fatigue in the corners of his mouth where the muscle activity occurs.

Taking any of these aspects of the embouchure to the extreme can result in a faulty embouchure. Evidence of a faulty embouchure will show in inconsistencies in tone production, endurance, and/or range. Four types of improper technique include having any of the following: an extreme pucker, extreme smile, excessive mouthpiece pressure, or air pockets. People who use these types of embouchure techniques are especially prone to injury.

Preventing Injuries

Many injuries can be avoided through proper day-to-day maintenance. First, it's important to notice the way the embouchure feels instead of playing in an inattentive way. The

player must concentrate on his playing mechanics when playing the instrument. This attentiveness should begin during the warmup and continue through playing exercises that are beneficial for what the embouchure needs.

Second, players should begin each day with a loosening-up routine followed by a warmup routine. The physically demanding activity of brass playing requires much strength and endurance.

In order for the facial muscles to have peak strength and flexibility, these routines are necessary. Buzzing the mouthpiece is recommended by many as a good way to start your playing day. Some players also find that gently flapping the lips helps in this loosening-up process. The player then should begin a warmup routine. If a warmup is inadequate, the physical demands of playing the instrument may cause the lips to swell. The warmup can be used to expand the range and volume gradually so that the muscles are prepared for all of the playing requirements of that day.

Third, knowing when to rest while practicing is vital to staying healthy. Resting helps to prevent muscles from being overworked. If the facial muscles are in a constant state of stress and fatigue they cannot supply strong resistance or withstand the forceful column of air needed to play. A player with a weakened embouchure might resort to using excessive pressure to produce the compression needed to play. In order to avoid this, it is important to know when to rest and stop playing.

Conclusion

The potential for embouchure-related injuries exists in trumpet players of all ages. It is important to understand that practicing and performing incorrectly can cause a life-changing injury. With proper knowledge of the embouchure's function, we can solve playing problems and catch physical issues before they turn into an injury.

About the author: Nicole Piunno earned a Bachelor of Music degree in Music Education from Ohio Wesleyan University. She has studied trumpet with Bill Campbell, Nathan Warner, Larry Griffin, and Todd Stoll. Nicole is currently a graduate student in Music Composition at Central Michigan University.

