Claude Gordon's Approach

Written by Jeff Purtle

Why did so many people come from so far away to study with Claude Gordon? What made him unique? Why do so many people owe their careers to this man’s teaching?

Claude was unique in the content of his teaching and his approach to applying it. His central principle was that every great player plays exactly the same way. He understood that correct playing transcends any style and didn’t take the route of so many who teach solos at the expense of developing long-lasting fundamental skills through exercises. Presupposing Claude’s way as the correct way, we must ask why he had more success than others that understand the fundamentals the same way. The answer is that he applied this knowledge much differently than most teachers. His teaching was always very specific, with a written practice routine, and very systematic, with planned development in a step-by-step manner. We never turned to the end of a book or flipped from thing to thing in a chaotic manner. He had a plan for every student and knew how he was going to take the student through learning and developing correct playing. One of Claude’s remarks about Herbert L. Clarke, cornet legend, was that he taught him how to think. That too can be said by anyone that seriously studied with Claude. Because of his structured approach students knew how to extract knowledge from any of the great books and incorporate it into a smart practice routine.

The core of Claude’s teaching philosophy was the fundamentals, known as “The Seven Basic Items.” The assertion that there is only one correct way to play was in regards to these seven items. Underlying his thinking was an understanding of natural laws that are unchangeable. Natural laws govern trumpet like anything else. He frequently made illustrations using his airplane flying and how we can understand those laws and eliminate worry in the same way as in brass playing. This could offend those that disagreed with him because it was obvious that any other way was wrong.

The following is an overview of “The Seven Basic Items" with a few brief comments on their implications. Each item is intended to work together in harmony with all the other items. If one item isn’t working correctly there will come a day when the player will struggle. These exact items are also found in Herbert L. Clarke’s Setting Up Drills, which shows how Claude approached things exactly like Clarke did. He studied with Clarke for ten years. Gordon’s Brass Playing Is No Harder Than Deep Breathing has been misunderstood by some as focusing only on breathing. The point is that once everything is working correctly, playing is as simple as taking a big breath, which anyone can do. By correctly structuring practice, these can be trained to work by habit to achieve all the feats that the great players have accomplished.
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The Seven Basic Items Explained:

1. Wind Power

Wind power refers to the strength behind the blowing. Strength must be developed before control. Therefore, at first you must not play too softly. Extremely soft playing takes just as much power, but more control. This comes later. If not, you will have neither power nor control. Correct breathing involves correct posture and taking a big breath every time you start to play. Claude summarized this by saying “Big Breath, Chest Up.” If your chest drops you loose all your power. It is now known that diaphragmatic breathing is a misnomer and the cause of much confusion in brass playing.

Wind power is developed through breathing exercises, holding long notes resulting in an isometric squeeze of the muscles used in blowing, and practice of a range study.

2. The Tongue

The tongue is perhaps the most misunderstood item. It does much more than just articulation. It must first be understood that the tongue controls the velocity of the air coming out of the mouth. As the player goes higher the tongue must rise into an arched position in the mouth and move forward, as in pronouncing an “Eee” vowel sound. When descending, the tongue must flatten into an “Aww” vowel. Tongue level refers to even more than this in that for every single pitch the tongue has a specific level or shape in the mouth. Understanding this helps to answer how high notes are really played. High velocity air is what gets the lips vibrating at a high pitch.

Correct single tonguing makes sense in light of tongue level. The very tip of the tongue must always lightly remain in contact with the top of the bottom teeth. The middle portion of the tongue, however close to the tip, must be what is used in producing the “T” attack. Claude referred to this as “K Tongue Modified” or “KTM” because it is similar to K tonguing, but more forward on the tongue. Tonguing any other way (i.e. tip going up to top teeth) will result in a disruption of the arch of the tongue in the front of the mouth and more movement of the tongue.
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Understanding this will help to answer how you can play perfectly accurate in the extreme high register, without cracked notes, and how to single tongue faster. Everyone uses tongue level in their playing, even if they don’t know it. But, KTM is not taught or understood by many people. KTM must be developed by practice of things such as K tonguing.

3. Wind Control

Wind Control is controlling the strength of the developed wind power. The player first uses this by learning to play stronger when ascending and lighter when descending. Resistance increases the air pressure as the tongue arches. If the player plays too softly the notes won’t respond. “Never play softer than you can get a sure sound” was a key phrase of Gordon’s. Wind power and tongue level must work in a coordinated fashion. “The air does the work, the tongue channels the pitch” was a frequent saying by Gordon. As the player develops, other aspects of control can be focused on. Playing many times in one breath, playing in a whisper and playing softer when ascending are some of the skills that require more development and come after strength is sufficiently built.

4. The Fingers Of The Right Hand

The fingers of the right hand refer to correct hand position. The valves must be struck on the ball of the fingers, and not pressed on the tip. The fingers must lift high off of the valves in order to train a definite quick response. This is not slower as some might think. It actually develops greater speed. The right thumb should be straight and slightly on the side of the first valve casing closest to the mouthpiece. This places the fingers into a relaxed but strong position to work the valves. The little finger should be out of the hook for easier mobility of the third finger. The fingers of the right hand are frequently worked-on in conjunction with wind control, in being able to play cleanly enough and fast enough to do exercises many times in one breath.

5. The Left Hand

The left hand must carry the entire weight of the instrument in order to allow the fingers of the right hand to function properly. The grip should be firm, yet the wrist should be supple in order to move as the face and jaw move slightly. The valve casing should rest in the palm of the hand. An attitude of taking total control of the instrument is also reinforced by a solid grip. “You are the
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boss!”—CG. The valve casing should not be tilted to one side or another because it will interfere with the relaxed nature of the fingers of the right hand.

6. The Muscles Of The Face

The muscles of the face have the function of adjusting to keep the lips vibrating. They have a feeling of contracting very slightly when ascending and relaxing when descending. This should not be dwelt on too much. Any student of Claude will remember hearing “Forget about your lip!” anytime it was worried about or brought-up for discussion. The contracting motion is significant in light of not falling prey to bad habits such as smiling, pinching, puckering and other unnatural things players do. Correct practice of tongue level exercises along with accenting higher notes (i.e. wind power and wind control) ties everything together and makes the muscles of the face work properly without thinking about it.

7. The Lips

The lips’ only function is to vibrate. The lips are a vibrating medium similar to the cone in a loudspeaker or a double reed on an oboe. Something else must act to make the lips vibrate and produce any given pitch. Wind power and tongue level are the cause, and the vibration of the lips is the effect. There is, however, an ideal place to position the mouthpiece with 2/3 on the top lip in order to achieve a freer vibration. The ability to play high notes has nothing to do with the strength of the lips. The lips must be flexible and able to respond easily. Care must be taken to not abuse the lips, and hindering their free vibration. Avoid buzzing of any kind, tight mouthpieces and long tones for the purpose of building strength. Rest with the mouthpiece off the lips to avoid fatigue, tightness and developing bad habits. Practice pedal tones and tongue level exercises to develop a free vibration, moving away from being lip conscious and dispelling the error of too much emphasis on the lips.

Stop thinking that what is required is talent or luck. There is no such thing as luck! You must avoid gimmicks and “not follow tradition and use your brains” as Herbert L. Clarke said a century ago.
More info about Claude Gordon’s teaching and Jeff’s teaching can be found online at www.purtle.com and http://www.purtle.com/jeff.html. Jeff Purtle studied ten years with the late Dr. Claude Gordon and currently lives in Greenville, South Carolina.