

Trombone Tips from Jim Beckel

10 Ways to Improve the Sound of Your Trombone Section

Often band directors have mentioned to me that they would like to have their trombone section play with a fuller sound. There, of course, can be many reasons for this problem.

1. Equipment

My first recommendation would be one regarding the equipment that your students are using. Many trombone players begin their study of the trombone in grade school on a very small-bore instrument with a matching small mouthpiece, usually a Bach 12 C or equivalent mouthpiece. While this equipment is not necessarily a bad way to begin the study of the trombone (such equipment takes less air to produce a sound), as the student gets bigger and hopefully learns to breath more efficiently, a larger bore trombone and mouthpiece can aid in the production of a larger sound. I realize that many students do not have the money to buy a new instrument, but simply going to a larger mouthpiece can greatly improve their sound even on a small bore horn. By the time most students are in high school, a 6 ½ AL Bach mouthpiece or similar size mouthpiece would make it much easier for these students to play the full range of the instrument and have a much fuller sound. Such a mouthpiece can be purchased for \$40 or less. If the student is looking to buy a new instrument, they should first get the advice of their private teacher. If they do not study privately, encourage them to do so. However, a Bach 42B or Conn 88H are both good choices for a large symphonic bore trombone. The Edwards line of trombones are also a good choice, although an Edwards is a custom made trombone, and the cost a custom instrument new is over \$1,000 more than a good assembly-line Bach 42B or Conn 88H.

2. Basic Tongue Position

Checking your student's airflow while playing is the second best way to improve the sound of your trombone section. The most critical part of this is the position of the student's tongue while blowing. Many high school students play with a tongue position that is too high in their mouth. Typically, I will hear students playing with a "Tee" syllable. This is too high of a position for the tongue and produces a more nasal sound. Have your students say "Tee" and then with that tongue position have them blow air onto their hand. Then have them say "Toe" and repeat the blowing process with that tongue position onto their hand. They will not believe the difference in the amount of airflow! Obviously, the airflow is much greater with the lower tongue position. Next, have your students play a middle register B flat with the "Toe" syllable. There should be an instant improvement in their sound. Many students will resort to the higher tongue position to aid in the production of the higher register notes. The higher tongue position forces the air to move faster. This faster air should come from better air support from proper breathing instead of choking off the air in their mouth with the partial blockage of the tongue.

3. **Proper Air Support**

Make sure that your trombone students are breathing correctly. Many students primarily breathe by raising the chest or rib cage. While this is part of the correct breathing process, the diaphragm should play a much bigger role in supported breathing than simple chest breathing. The breath should start with the extension of the stomach, which engages the involuntary muscle known as our diaphragm. Pulling this muscle down with the extension of our stomach draws air into the lungs. Ask your students to take some deep breaths with one hand on their stomach and the other hand on their chest. The hand on their stomach should move first. This will help them better understand the correct process. If you can't breathe properly without the trombone in your hand, you will have no chance of breathing correctly while you are busy playing. Also, the simple suggestion of remembering to breathe deeply can make a big difference in your trombone section's sound. Most students don't play with enough air support because they don't take a big enough breath to begin a phrase.

4. **Mouthpiece Buzzing**

Asking your trombone students to buzz a musical phrase on their mouthpiece will often lead to an instant improvement in the sound of your section. The old saying "if you can't sing it, you can't play it" is really true. For our purposes we will substitute the word "buzz" for "sing." The problem is that too many students do not accurately buzz the pitches that they are playing. The physical mechanics of the trombone will help create a sound that is close to the correct pitch, but the sound is often not totally centered. Such a sound is lacking many of the needed overtones in the sound; hence the tone is deadened or dulled. Mouthpiece buzzing is like an X-ray machine, you hear exactly what you are really doing. Accurately buzzing the notes on the mouthpiece will immediately translate into a purer, fuller sound on the instrument.

5. **Embouchure**

Make sure that your trombone students aren't pinching off the sound with their lips. When having your trombone section buzz on their mouthpiece make sure that they are getting a good flow of air through the mouthpiece. They can check this by putting their hand in front of the mouthpiece as they buzz. Part of the problem often comes from bad habits that were formed while the student was beginning the study of the trombone. It is very typical for beginning students to produce a sound on the trombone by keeping the lips pressed together and forcing an opening in the lips when they blow. Such an embouchure technique requires less air. When students are first learning the trombone they have not yet learned the proper way to support the sound with their air and revert to this technique to conserve air. While they produce a sound, it is a very pinched tone. The aperture, which is the hole created between the upper and lower lip in an embouchure, should be open even when the player is not blowing. In other words, the blowing of an air stream should not form this aperture; rather there is a preformed opening in a good embouchure. This is similar to a whistling embouchure, only with a lot less pucker; and the lips are turned slightly more inward toward the teeth. The

point here is to encourage your students to buzz the mouthpiece with the fullest sound possible. A full sounding buzz will become a big sound on the trombone.

6. **Good Posture and Throat Opening**

Make sure that your students are not partially blocking their air with their vocal chords. Good posture will help this. Don't let your students play with their neck being too far forward. You bring the trombone to you. You do not bring your head to the trombone. Allowing your head to lean into the trombone can put a strain on the vocal chords causing a partial closing of the larynx, which will diminish airflow. Ask your students to blow air as if they were fogging a glass onto their hand. The syllables of "hoe" will often create this effect. This should produce a breath that is hot and moist because the vocal chords are totally open and this creates a slower air column that will naturally pick up some of the body's heat and moisture as the air is expelled. This type of air will produce a fuller sound in a similar way that the lower tongue position affects the sound. (See Suggestion 2)

7. **Mouthpiece Pressure**

Make sure your students aren't using too much mouthpiece pressure. This is usually more of a problem during marching band season. While more mouthpiece pressure will help keep the mouthpiece in place while marching, it really cuts down on the amount of sound that will be produced. As the mouthpiece presses harder onto the lips, the lips will tense and pucker or thicken to avoid damage to the muscle group. This is a natural reflex response. As this muscle group tenses, the embouchure becomes stiffer and less likely to vibrate; hence, the sound thins and diminishes. When you warm up your band, encourage your trombone students to lighten up on the mouthpiece pressure. Relaxing the left handgrip of the instrument can help minimize this problem.

8. **Dynamic Range and Sound Production**

Don't let your trombone section over blow their sound. There is a point of diminishing returns. When most players play fortissimo with their best sound and compare the actual decibel reading of that sound to their loudest sound possible, there is usually little if any change in the actual amount of sound being produced. The sound simply changes quality. As the student over blows their instrument they start cutting out the lower overtones in their sound and the tone simply gets thinner and brighter. The pitch usually also goes sharp. They should be encouraged to increase the dynamic range of their playing, but this is done with the daily practice of long tones, which includes crescendos and diminuendos. As they practice this, they should strive for louder and softer sounds but never at the expense of a good sound. This is a good place to remember the concept of a "Toe" syllable instead of "Tee." (See Suggestion 2) Encourage your trombone section to play louder by thinking of a great flow of air instead of a forced, fast air stream.

9. **Intonation**

Better intonation will make your trombone section sound fuller and louder. Three trombone players playing a unison passage in tune will be louder than five trombone players playing out of tune. This is basic acoustics. When pitches are not in tune, they start to cancel each other out. While this rule obviously applies to all sections of your band, there are a few quick fixes for your trombone section. As already mentioned, the practice of mouthpiece buzzing should lead to better intonation in the trombone section as your students listen more carefully. Making your students aware of the natural tuning tendencies of their instrument should also greatly improve their intonation. The most out of tune harmonic series on the trombone, in the range that your students will be playing, is the 7th overtone on the instrument. This is the high A flat above the bass clef on the trombone in first position. This harmonic is very flat. In fact, it is so flat that you never play the high A flat in first position. You play that note in 3rd position. The two notes that are played on that harmonic series are the high G and F sharp. These notes need to be played with a shorter slide position. The high G is played in a short 2nd position and the high F sharp is played in a short 3rd position. The F harmonic series is the second most out of tune harmonic series on the trombone. This applies to both octaves, the F in the staff and the F above the staff. These two harmonics are sharp on every trombone that I have ever seen. Simply making this fact known to your trombone students should help them be more aware of their tendency to be sharp on notes in that harmonic series. This is not as complicated as it sounds. This is a fingertip adjustment that they should get in the habit of making. All notes of that harmonic series are affected; F down to low B natural in 7th position should be slightly longer. The best place to learn these adjustments are in the warm ups that your trombone students should play every day. Getting in the habit of making these compensations in warm-up flexibility exercises will eventually make these fingertip adjustments second nature in their playing.

10. **Private Lessons**

A few of these suggestions are best implemented in private lessons, so the 10th best way to improve the sound of your trombone section is to encourage them to study privately with a good teacher.

I hope that a few of these ideas help your trombone section sound better.

Good luck with your students!

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