

Style

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One of the more difficult aspects of performing on the trumpet is to successfully play in different musical styles. Hitting all the right notes and playing at the proper dynamic levels is a good place to start, but playing with the appropriate style for a specific musical setting is much more nuanced than just covering the basics. The ability to demonstrate these specific differences can be one of the greatest assets a working performer has. It immediately provides options that less versatile players lack. With that in mind, it pays to look a little closer at the issue of style and consider some of its elements.

First, let's compare music with a spoken language. Just putting the correct vowels and consonants in order does not guarantee successful communication. Imagine if you spoke that last sentence without any of the spaces; just one long, confusing word. What if you didn't emphasize any syllables, or emphasized the wrong syllables? Any of those approaches would probably result in a spoken phrase that was difficult for a listener to understand. This kind of a scenario is not at all uncommon, especially when people in a conversation have different native languages or even regional accents on the same language. Musical practice is similar in that small changes to the elements of meter, phrasing, tone quality, and articulation can drastically alter the resulting style and make a big difference to the informed listener.

With regards to style, meter often plays a large part in determining the character of a piece. For example, marches and folk dances can both be performed with two beats per measure, but marches are in 2/4 and other folk dances are in 6/8. The duple meter of 2/4 gives marches their distinctive formal, measured feel while the compound 6/8 meter gives a lighter lilting feel to the style of music. This example is pretty clear, but the swing style of jazz eighth notes provide an even better example because the notes can be written in duple, but are informally expected to be played with an uneven feel that is neither truly a duple or triple subdivision. The same type of unwritten expectation is evident in Viennese waltzes as well. Without an accurate feel for the expected style, players often have a hard time blending with their section and stick out to the audience.

Phrasing is another similarity that language has with musical style. We phrase when we speak by putting pauses, emphases, and inflections at key points such as periods or the second half of questions. Musical phrases are structured similarly, and if a player performs without consideration for the style, he will usually do things that can destroy a phrase such as breathing in the middle of a line or rushing

through a *rallentando*. Masters of musical phrasing set the audience at ease with their performances and are able to seamlessly transition from line to line and section to section. A lack of phrasing style in music will have the same effect as it does in spoken language: it leaves the listener confused and trying to render the sounds in their own mind to arrive at a coherent meaning.

Tone quality is also an element of style. Foreign languages are a great example of this. Germanic languages are very guttural in their pronunciation while some Spanish dialects are spoken with much more of a nasal quality to the voice. An example of this kind of division in music might be playing first trumpet in brass quintet versus a big band. A top space G in brass quintet will probably be played with a warm, rich tone while the same note in a lead trumpet part will be expected to have much more brilliance and edge to it. Similarly, a broad symphonic tone will sound out of place to someone listening for a trumpet playing cool jazz standards in the style of Miles Davis or Chet Baker. Approaching specific styles with the wrong tone quality can ruin the mood and emotion of a performance.

Using appropriate style also includes proper articulation. In language, for example, the letter “R” varies widely. Some languages pronounce “Rs” as we do in American English while others roll them with the tongue. Still others don’t even have a sound like that in their verbal phonemes. Likewise, musical articulations can dramatically impact the sound of the music. Beyond the basic *marcato*, *legato*, and *staccato* attacks, various styles of music require smears, half-valves, tongue stops, and lazy tonguing to perform in the correct manner. Often, these expected articulations are not even marked in the music, but are expected from players who are familiar with the style.

One final point to make when discussing style is that none of these stylistic elements change the fundamentals of trumpet playing. Solid airflow and embouchure habits should provide a consistent foundation for all of the variables that are encountered when learning a new style.

Both languages and music incorporate small nuances that make a big difference to the experience of the listener. Both are vehicles for human expression, and the meaning of that expression can be very different depending upon a variety of stylistic elements. Since language dialects and musical styles are both learned primarily by rote, it is crucial that practicing musicians make efforts to listen repeatedly to the style they are learning to play. You can learn languages through a book, but reading about inflections and phrasing often results in someone who speaks words with a heavy accent and no natural phrasing. Music is the same way. Listening to great artists and ensembles is the only way to get a true sense of how to perform their music properly. Doing so will give you a much broader spectrum of playing styles and will provide you with many more opportunities to join others in performance.