

Thoughts Concerning Range

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For most trumpet players, few issues can be more frustrating and all-consuming than expanding their range. Trying to play higher notes can become an obsessive pursuit for many students, to the detriment of other parts of their playing. While it should not be the sole focus of any practice routine, developing a great working range is an important component of becoming a successful player.

To begin with, I advocate thinking of range on the trumpet as a full spectrum issue. After all, the term range by definition describes all of the space between two limits, or extremes. So, we're not just talking about high notes; playing low notes freely with a full sound is just as important as playing the high notes in that manner. In fact, how well you can play the low and medium register notes often can tell a lot about your tendencies and habits in the upper register. When working on extending the upper end of your range, you should also frequently revisit the lower register. Make sure that you keep your tone even and consistent, and that you can produce quality sounds at soft volumes as well as loud ones.

The pitch of the notes you produce on trumpet is determined by a complicated interaction of muscles, lip tissue, air, and the instrument itself. Adjusting any one of these variables can greatly affect the resulting sound. Essentially, producing higher notes can be described using scientific terms and physical laws, but to describe it very simply: your lips vibrate or "buzz" when their resting position is disturbed by a focused stream of air. As a player increases tension in their lip tissue or decreases the mass involved in the vibration, the rate of the vibration will increase and the pitch will go up. Likewise, increasing the speed of the air travelling through the lips has the same result. Ultimately, I have found players working on range to be more successful when they focus on their ability to control the airstream. It does take strength to play the trumpet, but more than that, it takes precision and control. Finding balance between the tension in your lips and controlled airflow is key to producing full notes in every part of the trumpet's range.

As players work on their range, there are a few things that I recommend. First, make sure your breathing is relaxed and free. There are many muscles involved in pushing air out of your lungs, but the primary muscle groups are in your abdomen and lower back. Don't let muscles of your neck and throat constrict the airway and work against the process. Secondly, remember that your lips have to be free to adjust their own tension. Think of your lips as drawing inward towards the center. Don't stretch your lips tight to the outsides or push the mouthpiece against your lips with a lot of pressure because those two habits will eventually stop your lips from vibrating, limit their flexibility, and possibly cause injury.

When working to extend the upper end of your range, there are many approaches and exercises available. I recommend primarily doing exercises without articulation so that you can focus on airflow at all times. Slurs, scales, intervals, and arpeggios are all great for building a strong upper register. Lip flexibility studies, long unarticulated etudes above the staff, and ascending patterns can be found in many books and are great tools for that purpose. As you plan to incorporate range studies into your routine, remember to plan your practice like an athlete would: take rests between exerting activity, allow time for your muscles to rebuild after a particularly strenuous day of range study, and don't practice high notes when you are completely fatigued.

Developing great range on the trumpet is a complex process that often requires patience and dedication. Remember that playing high notes is only one component of playing the trumpet well, and that playing notes well in every register is often the fastest path to extending your own range. Recall that mouthpiece pressure and airstream restriction are counterproductive, and will often be the greatest enemies of progress. In the final assessment, range is a full spectrum issue offering great challenges and great rewards as we continue to study and improve on the trumpet.