

Trumpet Tone

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When practicing trumpet, one of the most important things you can improve is your tone. A great trumpet sound is what people want to hear in a performance, and many of them will be disappointed with poor tone even if you play all of the right notes. In many ways, your trumpet tone is like a musical signature that uniquely identifies you to the world; no two players sound exactly the same. With that in mind, it is a topic worth discussing in more depth.

Tone, when discussed in this musical context, means the qualities or general characteristics that can be attributed to the sound produced by your instrument. Often, these characterizations can be very abstract and subjective. Words like “dark,” “clear,” “pure,” and “shallow” are frequently used. Sometimes it takes a little imagination to determine exactly what a person is describing when they discuss tone. When these inevitable confusions arise, one way to clarify the issue is to listen to an example that demonstrates the tone quality and decide for yourself what word best describes it. In any event, it is important that you decide what kind of tone qualities you like in a good trumpet sound and work to develop those in your own playing.

If you are just starting trumpet, there are just a few basics that should help to develop good tone qualities from the very beginning. First of all, relax your body, especially your neck, shoulders, and chest. Don't use excessive pressure against your lips, and start with an embouchure that feels natural. Most importantly, make sure that you have steady and sustained airflow when playing. If you are doing all of those things, you can then make small adjustments as you buzz your lips to change the qualities of your tone.

Often, players will be able to hear tone qualities that they don't like, but won't know what to do to fix them. Here are a few common examples and potential solutions:

Problem: Your tone is described as “airy.”

Solution: Be more efficient with your airstream. What gives the “airy” quality is literally small amounts of air passing over your lips without causing them to vibrate or buzz. There are several things that might correct this. First, continue to produce a steady airstream, but use a slightly lower volume of air when you play. If that doesn't work, try making minute adjustments in the position of your lips until you find a setting that

doesn't waste air. You'll know you have an efficient combination when most listeners describe your tone as "pure."

Problem: Your tone is described as "bright."

Solution: Increase the number of low overtones in your sound. This is a very complicated scientific topic, but can be accomplished with some very simple actions. First, try creating a larger oral cavity by relaxing your throat and dropping your tongue. Secondly, try using a mouthpiece that has a deeper cup. Mouthpieces can influence your tone qualities a great deal. You'll know you have more low overtones when most listeners describe your tone as "dark."

Problem: Your tone is described as "stuffy."

Solution: Several things could cause this. First, you may be putting too much lip into the mouthpiece. Try firming up your embouchure just a bit. Secondly, your pitch may be uncentered. This happens when your lips buzz just a little too fast or a little too slow for the resonant frequency of the note you are trying to play. You might be able to correct the problem simply by tightening or relaxing your lips a very small amount. Thirdly, you might have an air leak in your instrument. Check the spit valves to make sure they close tightly. If you play another trumpet and the problem is immediately gone, then you probably have an air leak that should be fixed by a repair shop. You'll know you've fixed the problem when most listeners describe your tone as "resonant."

You can incorporate several practices into your routine to work on regular tone improvement. First, maintain focus while you practice. No matter what you are working on, play it with a good sound and don't let your mind wander. Secondly, play "long tones" (notes that are sustained as long as you can play them with a full sound). Thirdly, listen to great players. Identify and emulate the sounds that you like hearing in trumpet music. Lastly, record your practice and listen to your own sound. You will be able to find areas for improvement that you may not have otherwise been aware of.

Often your audience will draw their first impressions in a performance from your tone. Similarly, it will be the most lasting impression that they take away when they leave. With attention, care, and practice you can develop great tone qualities and a musical signature that is worth signing on any performance.