



1. Play this phrase through on piano several times. You do not need to be a trained pianist for this, you only need know the names of the notes on the keyboard. In fact, the less skilled you are at piano, the more helpful this part of the exercise may be.

2. Once you can play this phrase on piano, try singing along. It may take several attempts to become comfortable with this. Pick an octave that is most comfortable and, if necessary, modulate octaves. As your ears start to know the phrase, start playing fewer and fewer notes on the piano, just use the keyboard to “check in” occasionally and make sure you are singing on pitch.

3. Once you can really sing the passage, finger through the valve combinations as you sing, either on the instrument itself or not. By doing this, you are creating a more direct connection between your ears and your instrument. But unlike playing by feel, the ears are now working *first*. If you want a real challenge, try playing the phrase with piano left-hand while singing and doing the valves with your right hand.

Now, go back and play through the phrase. Not only will it seem easier, it will likely seem just *different*. This difference is playing Ears First.

To have the feel confirming what the ear already knows helps even the easiest passages, making them sound more musical and natural. And, hearing as you play will make a major difference in how you learn difficult passages like the example above. Your confidence as a player will continue to grow as you adapt this technique.

Another important benefit of this type of ear training is that it prevents overtaxing the chops in learning difficult repertoire. To learn a phrase such as our example by repetition alone might take two dozen passes. By working the Ears First technique, we might be able to play it in two. Of course the Ears First method requires real discipline and can be frustrating. At first, it may well not be a time saver, but it will surely be a chop saver. As your ears steadily improve it will save both time and chops. Relative pitch will improve and thus intonation issues will become easier both to hear and to correct.

All low brass players, no matter how good their ears or how substantial their experience, spend a good deal of time playing by feel. I’m not suggesting that you abandon it altogether. Try working in some Ears First training next time you encounter a phrase that you would usually learn by repetition alone. You may find the effort well worth your time.

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