By: Matt Tropman

Have you ever struggled through a phrase like the one below? It is disjunct, the melody is not one you would leave a concert whistling, and it hits many bad notes on a B-flat euphonium. How would you go about learning a phrase like this? Most of us would play it over and over until it was mostly correct. Some of us might isolate certain parts and practice these individually. But very few of us would try learning this phrase "Ears First."

When struggling through a particularly difficult passage, we have all been told a time or two to hear the music before we play it. This sounds like a perfectly fine idea, but for many of us it is not easy. It may even be difficult to know exactly what it means to hear before we play. Should there be a voice in our head singing each note before we sound it on our instruments? That would seem distracting to say the least. Perhaps it is better said that we should try to hear the music *as* we play it, but this may still be a major challenge, especially in some of the more difficult contemporary repertoire in which wide leaps and unusual melodic/harmonic language may make hearing as we play seem impossible.

The truth is that most of us play such passages using a combination of skills. In some cases we may truly hear the music as we play, but more often we use our memory of how different notes feel physically to our bodies and then use this feel as confirmation (or not) of what printed note we are supposed to be playing. For instance, in playing a C-natural just above the bass clef staff, the first note of our example phrase, I often hear younger students find that note by feel: they "climb the ladder" playing first a low B-flat, a middle F, a middle B-flat and then finally the C. If the student tried to pick the C-natural out of nowhere, he/she might just as easily hit a partial lower higher, in this case A-flat or E-flat. As the memory of the feel of C-natural improves, they will no longer need this cumbersome method of finding it. The higher in the instruments' range we play, the closer the partials become, making finding higher notes more difficult for the vast majority of brass players.

When finding notes, what are the ears doing? Generally they are cast in the role of observation and confirmation and are secondary to feel. So if we're trying to hit that middle C mentioned above, the feel is primary and is confirmed (or not) by the ears. And, if we hit the wrong partial but don't know it, we could easily play several wrong notes in a row, all because we used *only* feel to hit that first note. As we improve, our feel improves and so should our ears. But since the feel method develops naturally just by having the horn on our face, the ear can be neglected over time. The ear will not improve as steadily as the feel if it is not exercised. Thus, for some, the gulf between the effectiveness of playing by feel versus using the ears can widen over the years.



Consider the phrase above. How many times do we play through such a passage to learn it? Two dozen? In doing this, in what way is it learned? Often, we have learned the passage almost entirely by feel. We have simply trained the meat of our faces to know what comes next and act accordingly, like learning how to move about in a dark room. Certainly the ears are active during this process, but they are again observing the sounds we produce and then confirming if they are likely to be correct.

By spending some time playing Ears First this can be avoided and will have many beneficial outcomes. Take the example passage again. It may be difficult to sing this passage at first, and this often leads to trying to play it several times before even considering singing it. But instead of playing through it incorrectly several times to train the "feel," try starting with the Ears First. Here is the process:

- 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.

END