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LIP SLURS ARE NOT ABOUT THE LIPS

BY KYLE MILLSAP

A crucial element of daily practice is work on lip slurs. Slurring is a fact of trumpet-playing life, but from a performance standpoint, lip slurs are really not about the lips. When students place too much emphasis on what the lips are doing while moving from note to note, slurring tends to be inconsistent, tone worsens, and increased frustration commonly results. Instead of focusing on changing notes with the lips, one should rely on what really makes the trumpet work—air.

When playing a musical passage in the upper register, most trumpeters know to increase the speed of the air. The same needs to happen when performing a slur. Instead of “lip slur,” think “air slur.” This happens naturally when whistling, but something about adding the trumpet often creates a block. To help reinforce the concept, stop treating slurs like a technical exercise and create a musical line out of them. Changing the focus to music promotes better airflow and increases musical development. The following are a few benefits that can be achieved from practicing air slurs.

Using Air Slurs For Better Air Flow

In this author’s experience, the number-one critique of students of all ages is usually a lack of appropriate air flow, an essential element of good slurring technique. Rather than dwelling on the change between the two notes, one should perform the slur in a musical context, looking where the phrase is headed. Blow each note into “touching” the next one so that sound is created constantly. A triple-meter pattern can easily be felt as a waltz; make the slur be the music for the dance and keep it moving. By viewing the slur in the context of the big picture, the focus shifts from a technical approach to one centered on music and air flow. The resultant reduction in technical and physical efforts to produce the slur will help alleviate inconsistency, because air and sound are now most important, allowing for more successful slurs.

Using Air Slurs For Better Agility

The basic idea of practicing air slurs is to develop greater agility on the trumpet—to move more easily from low to high and back again. One of the most frustrating things about slur-

ring is a lack of consistent accuracy, particularly in wider intervals. It is helpful to think of a diver. When attempting to jump higher off of the end of a springboard, one does not simply go to the end and jump. There first is a preparatory jump to press the end of the board down, and the board assists the diver to spring higher. Emphasizing the lower note of a slur has this same benefit. The performer can emphasize the bottom note, increasing the motion in the air, and then “spring” to the upper note. Blowing through slurs while properly hearing both pitches will foster greater agility.

Using Air Slurs For Better Intonation

In order to tune the trumpet properly, the performer must learn to play in tune in every key by tuning all the intervals in each key. By sustaining a tonic pitch with an electronic tuner, slurs can be used in the tuning of these intervals. For example, sustain a *c* with the tuner while playing *g*–*e*–*c*. Using the traditional lip slur concept, performers often allow themselves to lip up to the *e*, thus pushing it sharp, and consequently play the following *c* sharp. Using the air slur concept, performers are more likely to play in the center of each note and play in tune.

The term “lip slur” is used to indicate a slur that cannot be played with the valves moving. It should not be commandeered into a technique of playing. By focusing on what produces sound on the trumpet—air—greater slurring success will be achieved, especially on the peskiest of slurs. There are many excellent books available that focus on perfecting slurring on the trumpet. Some that are used in this author’s studio include Max Schlossberg’s *Daily Drills and Technical Studies for Trumpet*, Earl Irons’s *27 Groups of Exercises for Cornet and Trumpet*, and Bai Lin’s *Lip Flexibilities for All Brass Instruments*.

About the author: Kyle Millsap is assistant professor of trumpet and jazz at Texas A&M University-Kingsville, where he teaches trumpet, high brass methods, and advanced brass techniques; directs Jazz Band 3; and coaches the trumpet ensembles and brass quintets. He is an active performer, clinician, and arranger and holds degrees from the University of Memphis (DMA), the University of North Texas (MM), and Wichita State University (BM).

