

# TUBA AND EUPHONIUM FROM DAY ONE

Dr. Genevieve Clarkson, Clinician  
Associate Professor of Tuba and Euphonium, Oklahoma City University

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## SELECTING STUDENTS FOR TUBA AND EUPHONIUM

Remarks: While these larger brass instruments can be more challenging to carry and maneuver, a student's size should not be a determining factor for their placement on tuba and euphonium, as there are many ways to adjust the height of the instrument to allow for comfortable and natural playing.

- Tubas can be difficult to transport to and from school. Whenever possible, offer your tuba students a school instrument and a home instrument to make practicing outside of school easier and more convenient.

## BEFORE THE FIRST SOUNDS ARE MADE

Remarks: The height of the instrument in relationship to the student can dramatically affect range and quality of sound. Look for a comfortable and natural set-up from day one, and keep tools at hand to help with adjustment.

### THE INSTRUMENT ITSELF

- Mouthpiece rim and shank should be free from major scratches or dents
- Valves should be in working order and freely moving
- Avoid hitting the mouthpiece when inserting it into the instrument's lead pipe – a gentle quarter-turn should be enough to keep the mouthpiece in the instrument

### BODY POSITION/BALANCE/POSTURE

- Students should be asked to sit comfortably tall, neither pushing up on the back of their thighs nor leaning against the back of the chair. Once that height has been identified, it is important to bring the instrument to the student and not the other way around.
- Both tuba and euphonium should be held at an angle and not perpendicular to the ground.
- On euphonium - the fingers of the right hand rest atop the valves, and the left hand should wrap around the front of the instrument for balance and support. The thumb of the right should go underneath the brace behind the valves and the wrist of the right hand should be straight in order to help support the weight of the instrument.
- On tuba – the fingers of the right hand rest atop the valves and the left hand supports the balance of the instrument on the leg, chair, or tuba stand.
- In general, an instrument that is too tall for a student will affect their low range and an instrument that is too low for a student will affect their high range.
- For a euphonium that is too tall when rested on the left leg – have the student sit with their legs on either side of the front-left corner of their chair and use a hockey puck or rolled-up hand towel (cinnamon-roll style, secured with duct tape) on the chair to help raise the height of the instrument.
- For a euphonium that is too short when rested on the left leg – use a rolled-up hand towel (cinnamon-roll style, secured with duct tape) to help raise the height of the instrument from the

lap. You can also purchase a euphonium lap pad (\$45 on Amazon) with adjustable layers of padding to achieve the same effect.

- Holding a euphonium off the lap often requires more upper body strength than beginners typically have, so it is best to start with the instrument on their left leg or on their chair. Note: if/when students do begin to play off the lap, encourage them to put most of the weight of their instrument in their left hand so as to keep the right relaxed and free to move the valves.
- For a tuba that is too tall when rested on the chair – have the student sit with their legs on either side of the front-left corner of their chair and use a hockey puck or several hockey pucks duct-taped together to help raise the height of the instrument.
- For a tuba that is too short when rested on the chair, have the student bring a book or firm pillow of appropriate thickness from home that they can sit on while resting the instrument on the chair.
- Tuba stands are also an excellent tool that can help both too-tall and too-short instruments, but usually run about \$100 each and can be cost-prohibitive for beginners. If your program invests in tuba stands, I highly recommend those from the Baltimore Brass Company.
- If a student and their tuba or euphonium are of an appropriate height to rest their instrument on their leg(s), small rectangles of drawer-liner are useful to keep the instrument from slipping while they play.

### HAND POSITION

- For both tuba and euphonium, the fingers of the right hand should be gently curved over the valves, avoiding straight or rigid fingers.
- If your euphonium players are playing compensating or 3+1 instruments, then the student should move their fourth valve with the pointer finger of their left hand.

### PRODUCING THE FIRST SOUNDS

Remarks: I avoid giving students a lot of verbal explanation before they play the first note, and instead opt to model the sound they should be aiming to achieve. When given a good resonant model (of any instrument or singing voice), students will usually find a sound on their instrument easily enough and tone can be relaxed and made more resonant by making small adjustments. In particular, using ½ inch pieces of PVC coupling (available at your local hardware store) during targeted breathing and/or singing exercises will dramatically help to open up the sound of your low brass players.

### EMBOUCHURE

- Placement on both tuba and euphonium is approximately 50/50 upper to lower lip within the mouthpiece, centered on the face. There can be some margin for error with larger mouthpieces as long as extremes are avoided.
- The corners of the lips should be firm and in their natural location (“pushpin corners”), and neither puckered in (“duck face”) nor pulled out toward their ears (“smiley”).
- The aperture (the center of the embouchure) needs to be relaxed enough to vibrate and will often occur naturally with the proper balance of firm corners and a relaxed center.
- The teeth should remain open across all registers of the instrument.
- If you see students puffing their cheeks, encourage them students to firm up their corners and direct 100% of their air into the mouthpiece. Note that a little bit of cheek-puff is okay for tubists playing down to the Bb below the staff as long as it is not excessive.
- If a student’s corners are pulled toward their ears (“smile embouchure”) or in toward the mouthpiece (“duck face”), encourage them to relax the center of their embouchure and firm their corners to a frown position.
- To work on tone:
  - Always aim for a low and open OH sound (like you are cooling off a hot tater tot)

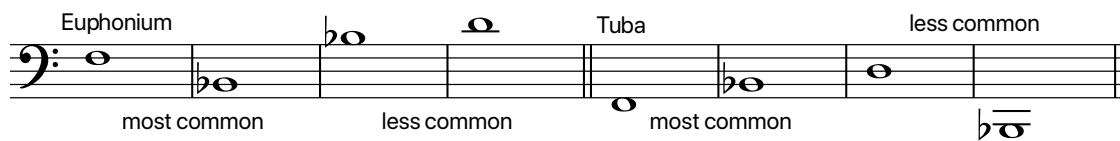
- If a student's sound is pinched, have them take a few breaths in and out with a piece of ½ inch pvc coupling and aim for the same shape when they return to their instrument. You can also ask them to imagine "marshmallows between your molars" to create more vertical space in their oral cavity.
- To help relax the throat, have students imagine that they just drank a cup of hot chocolate. This will particularly help as students move into their lower notes.

## AIR

- The air on these instruments doesn't need to be loud or aggressive to be successful. Think of a large volume of air, used gently.
- The inhale should be open and relaxed, without any obstruction in the air. Be aware that beginners may try to breathe through their noses, but students should be trained to breathe in and out through their mouths.
- Help students recognize that air speed comes from our entire breathing mechanism, and not restriction at the throat or lips. Think of a garden hose – we want to turn up the water instead of closing off the stream.
- As mentioned above, a piece of ½ inch pvc coupling can help a great deal to open the throat and relax the oral cavity for breathing exercises
- Air Speed
  - A pinwheel can be an excellent tool for helping students better understand and visualize the speed of their air.
  - Start with warm, foggy air to help students find a comfortable starting place on their instruments.
  - Faster, cooler air will help students move into the upper register (imagine blowing out a candle)
  - Slower, warmer air will help students move into the lower register (imagine fogging up a mirror or warming up their hands on a cold day)
- Air Direction
  - For most students the following is true:
  - For low notes, aim your air up like you are blowing hair out of your face
  - For high notes, aim air down like you are blowing a droplet of water off your chin
  - Treat the change in direction like a continuum and not a shift – blow air against your pointer finger and move it slowly up and down in front of your lips to help practice the different directions.
- Note that most heterogeneous method books have written-in breath marks that are simply not realistic for beginning tuba and euphonium students. If your students follow the written-in breath marks, they will often play with a weak and un-supported sound. Encourage them to play with their most beautiful, resonant sound and breathe to support that sound instead of the other way around.

## FIRST NOTES

- Starting without any valves depressed, euphonium players will often find F or Bb in the bass clef and tuba players will often find F immediately below the bass clef staff or Bb in the staff most comfortably on their instruments.



- Depending on where students start most naturally, help them expand their range either up or down stepwise within the Bb major scale by practicing stepwise slurs, first in groups of two and then expanding to do three, four, and five pitches on a single breath (which may require moving quickly between notes). The example below can be taken down an octave for tuba students.



## ARTICULATION

- Most tuba and euphonium students are taught to articulate too far back in their oral cavities. Students should tongue toward the tip of their teeth or between their lips, listening for a firm *ping* at the front of their sound.
- To help locate a good point of articulation, have students pretend they are spitting out a watermelon seed or launching a spit ball. You can also put your finger against your lips (as if telling someone to be quiet) and the tongue should just barely touch the finger when articulating.
- Start with slurred air and then add the tongue to ensure that the air stream always comes first and supports the motion of the tongue.

## **RECOMMENDED METHOD BOOKS AND PRINT MATERIALS FOR BEGINNERS**

Remarks: I have found that very few method books begin at an appropriate skill and range for beginners, and I often end up writing out my own exercises for my young students or pulling from what they are covering in the heterogenous method books they use in class.

- Traditional brass exercises like the Remington long tone studies or the Cichowicz flow studies are useful for building tone and consistency.
- Philip Sparke – Starter Duets (excellent for euphonium, unfortunately not available for tuba; these start with whole notes and gradually increase in difficulty.)
- Wolfgang Guggenberger – Basics Plus (written in euphonium range and can be adapted down the octave for tubists; presents various warm-up and technical exercises in duet form)

## **RECOMMENDED EQUIPMENT FOR BEGINNERS**

Remarks: It is most common for beginning euphonium players often start on a small-shank 3-valve instrument, which has the same shank size as a tenor trombone.  $\frac{3}{4}$  size piston tubas are ideal for beginners, who will more easily be able to make a full and resonant sound on a smaller instrument before transitioning to a larger model as they grow.

- Euphoniums: Yamaha YEP-201 or Eastman EEP-321; Bach 5G mouthpiece
- Tubas: Yamaha YBB-105; Schilke-Helleberg mouthpiece

## **OTHER CONSIDERATIONS**

Remarks: Sound should always come first. No one cares if you can play fast if doesn't have a great sound.

Whenever possible, focusing on product over process will help your beginning brass players play more naturally and avoid "paralysis by analysis" – a term originally coined by tubist and pedagogue, Arnold Jacobs (1915-1998).

Beginning low brass players often have the easiest and most uninteresting parts in their band classes, but they are capable of a lot more. They will rise to the occasion if you challenge them!