



Beginning Tuba Students With Good Habits

by Harvey Phillips
and Roger Rocco

The tuba is particularly difficult for beginning students because it outweighs them by several pounds and is probably about as tall as they are when seated. With these problems at the outset it is no wonder that students often develop bad playing habits that stubbornly resist change in later years.

Tone Production

Because the tuba is the largest wind instrument most young students should start on a $\frac{3}{4}$ -size model. The first thing they should learn is how to blow a large quantity of air. Simplicity is the key to developing air flow. Before attempting to teach students to buzz the mouthpiece, they should imitate the sound of a vacuum cleaner by placing a forefinger in front of the mouth and sucking air in with loud sounds. As with any instrument, explanations of the mechanics of breathing are unnecessary and often confusing. Students will be able to make air rush in simply by imitating a vacuum cleaner. The next step is to establish a flow of air in the opposite direction by making the same sound when blowing air out.

A student who has learned to inhale and exhale large quantities of air is ready to buzz on the mouthpiece. Again, simplicity is the key. Begin by demonstrating a buzz so a student can see and hear buzzing lips before trying to make the sound. At this point it is not important how the lips are formed, only that they make a loud buzzing sound. Some students concentrate on the lips so much that they cannot produce a sound. When this happens, ask them to make the sound of a horse or a siren; this will distract them from thinking about moving air and lips to produce a sound. After imitating a few other sounds, a buzz will usually come forth.

When a buzz is established, it is time to add the mouthpiece. A standard guideline for mouthpiece placement is $\frac{2}{3}$ to $\frac{3}{4}$ upper lip and $\frac{1}{3}$ to $\frac{1}{4}$ lower lip. However, most players instinctively place the mouthpiece in a comfortable position. Teachers should avoid the mistake of asking students to move the mouthpiece to an uncomfortable spot because this puts the focus on discomfort instead of sound. The mouthpiece should be at an angle so the rim contacts the lips with equal pressure at all points. Every tubist will play at a slightly different angle to maintain this equal pressure because facial structures differ. Beginners should be told to place the upper part of the mouthpiece rim as high up on the upper lip as possible, perfectly centered. If the mouthpiece moves from this position and a student still sounds good, it means the student made himself comfortable without being aware of a change.

The large tuba mouthpiece is easy to buzz and should be used alone to avoid the distractions of holding the instrument, fingering the valves, or reading music. About half of beginning students can buzz a distinguishable melody without any instruction; the other half will produce only one note. Just as children learn to speak at different rates, so do they learn to create pitches at different rates. Students who can only produce one note are often analyzers, trying to figure out what to do with

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the lips to play high and low. These students need to be distracted. One technique to encourage them to play more than one pitch is a high/low exercise that begins with buzzing a high note followed by a quick glissando to a low note. Then they imitate the sound of a siren, starting high and moving low. Another technique is playing soft/loud, having students produce the one note softly and quickly make it loud. Students usually blow fiercely to produce a loud note and will often change pitches without intending to.

Articulation

Every tone on the tuba is 99% air and 1% articulation, but clean, clear articulation is an essential part of good musical technique. Any open vowel sound will work for low brass players, but the most common syllable used in wind playing is *ta*. A closed vowel sound does exactly what it says and closes the air space. All forms of articulation should

be sung first, and a good way to introduce articulation is to have conversations with students using the word *ta*. After awhile, they say *ta* into the mouthpiece. The tongue should refine the beginning of a note but never stop the sound. A good exercise is to play Name That Tune at every lesson; each student buzzes a tune on the mouthpiece for the teacher or other students to identify. Beginning tuba students will advance much faster by working on the mouthpiece alone than with the instrument because mouthpiece playing is not limited by technique or music-reading limitations. The analogy of children learning to speak is true here, too. Children can converse at an advanced level even if their reading ability is limited or nonexistent. If they were limited to speaking only words they could read, their language development would be severely delayed. With young musicians directors should not limit students to playing only what they could read but should teach articulation at an early stage.





Imitation games with the teacher or student playing a rhythm for others to imitate do not involve any reading skills, so young students are able to play advanced rhythms.

Playing Position

The critical moment for beginning tubists is the transition from mouthpiece alone to mouthpiece in the instrument. Because of its tremendous size the tuba can be a major distraction that is best dealt with before trying to play it. Students should learn how to hold the instrument, where to place their hands, and how to support the instrument as separate issues, so when the time comes to play it, they do not focus on the instrument.

Even tubas designed for beginners are two or three times larger than the other brass instruments. Beginners should not actually hold or support the weight of the instrument but support it with either the chair on which they sit or a tuba stand. The tripod type is the best tuba stand because it holds the instrument in front of the player.

Correct posture for playing the tuba is with a straight back, as if standing tall, so the instrument is brought to the lips to play rather than having the player slouch or stretch to reach the mouthpiece. Whenever students hunch over, their breathing is restricted. If they stand too straight or stretch, deep breaths are also hampered. The midsection should be pliable so breathing is comfortable and controlled. Both feet should be flat on the floor. As players become more experienced they may make adjustments to find the most comfortable position. Once the instrument is positioned correctly, it is good to let students press the valves and finger the instrument so they become adjusted to how this feels and it does not distract them when it is time to play the tuba.

The first note tubists play is usually F2, but there are two approaches to playing this first pitch. One is to loudly buzz the note on the mouthpiece held two or three inches from the end of the instrument. After a pause, buzz the note again a little closer to the lead pipe; pause and buzz a little closer until the mouthpiece moves into the lead pipe and the instrument resonates. A second approach is to buzz the pitch on the mouthpiece and without pausing or stopping the pitch to put the mouthpiece inside the instrument. With either approach the important step is to buzz the F first. Players should think in terms of sending a note through the instrument rather than mindlessly blowing in it. A player who cannot buzz F2 should start with a pitch he can buzz. Fingering is a complicated issue on woodwinds, but on brass instruments it is easy to push one valve down to produce the pitch a student is buzzing. The only guideline for fingering a brass instrument, especially a tuba, is that the fingers should contact the top of the valves at all times. Students commonly raise their fingers off the valves and allow the hand to close up. The consequence of



this is that they use only one or two fingers instead of three or four to push the four valves. Some students even develop the habit of using two fingers to push one valve.

After a student can produce a pitch on the tuba, use the sing/buzz/play technique to teach other pitches and develop pitch awareness. Each pitch should first be sung with a *ta*, then buzzed on the mouthpiece before inserting the mouthpiece in the instrument. With beginners a good ratio is to sing and buzz tones three times as much as time spent playing the instrument. Students should sing a pitch once, buzz it twice, and then play it on the instrument. When the mouthpiece is added to the instrument, the pressure of the rim should remain equal everywhere, even if this entails angling the instrument to maintain this pressure.

Equipment

The best instruments for beginners are $\frac{3}{4}$ -size or E^b tubas. These instruments are much lighter and smaller than any other tuba. Boosey & Hawkes, Holton, and Yamaha make good $\frac{3}{4}$ -size tubas; Willson, Yamaha, Miraphone, and Besson make good E^b tubas. Side- and front-action tubas are easier for beginners to play than top-action tubas, which have upright valves that are difficult for small students to reach. With forward valves or side-action valves students can caress the instrument. Just as students cannot write with broken pencils, so too do inferior instruments impede musical progress. Every beginner should have an instrument in good working order with valves that are tight, properly aligned, and respond quickly when compressed or released.

It is important for the mouthpiece to fit the instrument and player. A large instrument with a

small mouthpiece or the converse does not respond well. The best mouthpieces for small players are ones with a shallow-cup and a moderate diameter of bowl. A large mouthpiece calls for a longer, stronger embouchure and higher rate of air flow than beginners have. Among the good mouthpieces for beginners are a Schilke 62, Yamaha 67, and Conn 2.

Beyond the First Three Lessons

Tuba parts in ensemble pieces are generally very dull, so teachers should assign other music to keep players interested. The family of a young tubist will appreciate a variety of challenging and rewarding music. No parent wants to hear a youngster hammer away at scales, tetrachords, and arpeggios hour after hour, but they will enjoy hearing a familiar tune they can hum along with. This is a good reason why one of the best sources of literature for students is a hymnal.

There are a number of good method books for beginning tubists that call for no transposition of octaves or to other keys. Walter Beeler has a terrific book, *Method for Tuba* (Warner). *Method for Tuba* contains valuable pictures, excellent lip-slur, warm-up, and rhythm exercises, and familiar melodies and duets. *Prep Band Method* by Gerald Prescott (Schmitt, Hall & McCreary) is an excellent beginner book that takes a good pedagogical approach to melodies from symphonic literature, and *First Book of Practical Studies* by R.W. Getchell (Belwin) is another fine publication. Other publications that are good for young players include *Foundation to Tuba Playing* by William Bell (Carl Fischer), *VanderCook Etudes for E^b or B^{bb} Bass (Tuba)* by H.A. VanderCook (Rubank), *Basic Techniques for Tuba* by Nilo Hovey (Cole), and *Rubank Elementary Method* by Nilo Hovey (Rubank). □

