

# Brass Clinic

Maurice Faulkner, Contributing Editor

## Cornets . . . Please! ! !

Mario F. Oneglia

Why a "dyed-in-the-wool" performer of that noble brass instrument, the trumpet, should be making this impassioned plea for greater use of the cornet, at this late date, should, perhaps give music educators and parents cause for reconsidering the "cornet vs. trumpet" controversy. I was prompted to write this article in an effort to aid students of the cup-shaped soprano of the brass family—be it cornet or trumpet—in building better foundations for performance. I feel strongly that many of the embouchure problems encountered in students' playing habits were formed rather early in their playing careers, and that a more thoughtful choice of the first instrument might have been highly beneficial in many cases. It will be advantageous for band directors, particularly those teachers who concern themselves with motivating and starting beginning players at the elementary school level, to reexamine

their thinking about whether the proper instrument for youngsters is the cornet or trumpet. The recommendations of these people have a great deal to do with which instrument is rented or purchased by parents.

### History

The modern trumpet and cornet have little in common with the earlier brass instruments. They both differ as to length and bore proportions. Really, the only thing they have in common with each other and their predecessors is that they are both played by vibrating the lip (reed) across a cup-shaped mouthpiece. The *cornetto*, *cornett*, or *zink* of the renaissance and early baroque periods was a wooden instrument with finger holes drilled in its body. This instrument bears no relationship to the cornet of modern times other than that the lips were vibrated across a mouthpiece carved of bone, wood, or ivory. That

important element of brass playing, the harmonic series, was not used to any degree; and since the acoustical relationship of the holes and the wind column were comparable to present woodwind instruments, the tone quality of the cornetto was flute-like, and its volume soft.

The ancient trumpets, on the other hand, utilized the harmonic series, particularly the upper partials. This is evident from an examination of renaissance and baroque music. The melodies for trumpet are in a lofty tessitura where the overtone series becomes diatonic and chromatic.

With the invention of the piston valve in the early 19th century, several changes came about in the brass instruments and their uses in the orchestra. Perhaps it was because of the artistic aesthetic of the classic period which demanded restraint, that the upper register of the trumpet fell largely into disuse. The length of the instrument was shortened, and its use in the orchestra changed a good deal. No longer a virtuoso solo instrument, it was used mainly by classic composers for supporting the string group, emphasizing cadences, and occasionally for a martial effect. An example of this latter type of usage may be heard in Beethoven's *Leonora Overture No. 3*. The valve gave the trumpet greater flexibility by permitting it to play in many different keys without the insertion of additional tube lengths, called *crooks*. This became important for the composer as chromaticism in orchestral music increased.

At about this same time in the early 19th century, an instrument known as the *cornocopean* emerged. The invention of this valved brass instrument with a basically conical bore has been attributed to the Belgian inventor Charles Sax, father of Adolph Sax, the inventor of the saxophone. The *cornocopean*, a relative of the French horn because of its conical bore, soon found favor in the public ear for the mellow, lyrical

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qualities of its tone. This instrument, the cornocopean, of a two-thirds conical bore and one-third cylindrical bore should be considered as the ancestor of the present-day cornet. The trumpet and the cornet differ as to tonal qualities because the bore proportions of the trumpet are reversed; it is two-thirds cylindrical and one-third conical. Because of this, perhaps, various musicologists and writers of treatises on orchestration have described the tone of the trumpet as heroic, martial, strident, and harsh. In addition to these stated differences as to tone and orchestral role, the cornet and trumpet differed in an obvious detail—the cornet was rolled up into a more compact form than the trumpet.

### Napoleon to Louis

With the popularity of the military band of Napoleon Bonaparte, the cornet became the favored soprano brass instrument. It retained this position up until the 20th century, with such virtuosi as Arban, Herbert L. Clarke, and James Burke exploiting its expressive qualities. How then did the tide shift away from the cornet to the trumpet in recent years? It is my opinion that the greater communication brought about by our mass media played a large part in this. Radio, recordings, and television have all played roles in shaping concepts and desires.

In the 1930's, the famed jazz cornetist, Louis Armstrong abandoned his cornet for the longer

trumpet. Just why he did this has not been ascertained, since he started in music as a boy playing the cornet in a brass band. Mr. Armstrong's change of instruments was soon emulated by most popular cornet players, and by 1940, the cornet had all but become obsolete. The exceptions were the school band and the few remaining professional concert bands which still tended to use cornets either because they were owned by the school or were preferred by the conductor for their particular tonal qualities.

### Complete Trumpet Domination

In most concert band music, parts are scored for five soprano brass instruments. The three cornet parts are assigned the dominant melodic passages and are supported by the two trumpet parts. The trumpet is also responsible for flourishes and calls because its tonal qualities are well suited for this function. Since we have had almost two generations of band directors following the shift from the cornet to the trumpet in the thirties, I would like to

suggest that because of the indiscriminate mixing of either the trumpet or the cornet to play soprano parts in some bands, the whole tonal compass of the concert band has changed—and, perhaps, not for the better! The trumpet has been in the public eye and ear for so many years that students, parents, band directors and music educators in general, sometimes forget the values of the cornet. Such fine players as Harry James, Al Hirt, Doc Severinsen, Dizzy Gillespie, and Armando Ghitalla of the Boston Symphony inadvertently have furthered the movement away from the cornet by the artistry of their performances. It might be of interest to know that most of these soloists started as cornet players!

### Begin on the Cornet

As a college instructor of trumpet, I have seen embouchure defects which I believe could have been avoided if the student had been started on cornet instead of trumpet.

First, let's review some fundamentals which apply to both the trumpet and cornet.

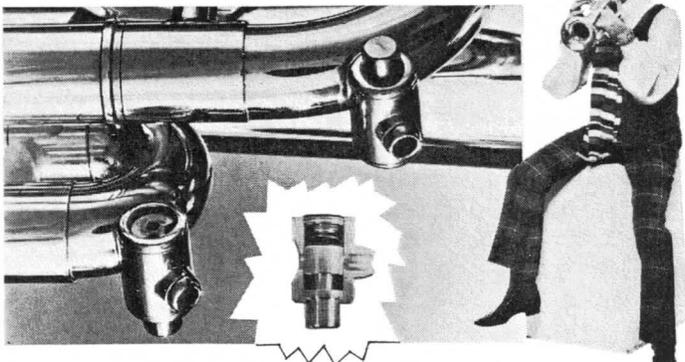


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1. Hold with the left hand, with fingers gripping the valve casings very lightly.

2. The instrument should be horizontal with the floor, allowing the jaw, and consequently the teeth and lips, to be in a balanced relationship. The jaw, while not in a jutting or overbite position, needs to be in its forward position. The teeth should be aligned, with the lower teeth separated from the upper teeth by one-quarter to one-half inch. The lips should be touching slightly, without excess muscle pressure, so that air passing between them will send them into vibration.

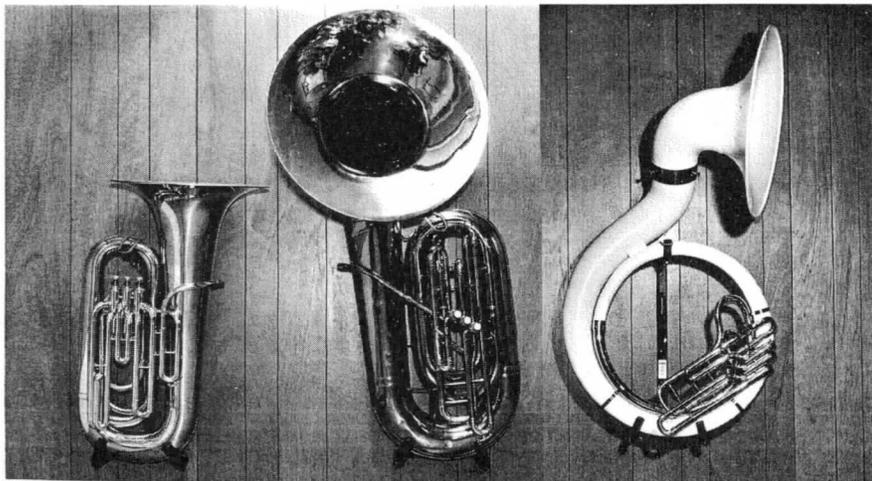
The relationship of the jaw, teeth, lips, and breath is very crucial. When incorrect habits have been a part of the beginning student's playing, it has been shown that it is extremely difficult to overcome them.

The trend seems to be for elementary school children to begin the study of band and orchestra instruments in fourth or fifth grades, and sometimes earlier. The purely physical aspects of holding the instrument at this age can present difficulties. The weight of the trumpet causes a great many embouchure problems to the nine or ten year old student. It is simply too heavy to be supported horizontally, but more important, it is too long and consequently difficult to balance, even for a short four measure phrase. In spite of the exhortations of the music teacher, to "hold your horn up," the child, who is not able to do so, simply proceeds to a playing posture

which, though proper for the playing of the clarinet, is completely wrong for performing acceptably on the trumpet or cornet. In addition to this, the grip of both the left and right hands becomes cramped and tends to pull the instrument into the lips in an effort to support the trumpet. This leads to poor playing habits, wherein reliance is mistakenly placed upon adding arm pressure toward the lips for playing different registers. Lip bruises, cuts, and in some cases, scars may be a result of this "strong arm" style of playing. The right hand tends also to be used as a supporting vehicle, and never develops the necessary relaxed poise which will insure technical facility.

When a youngster is started with a cornet instead of a trumpet, the hands tend to be closer to the body because of the more compact shape of the cornet. Thus, the arms themselves assist in support of the instrument. There is less strain on the wrists, arms, hands, fingers, and lips. The instructor will still need to correct postural habits, but now it will be easier for the student to comply. This in turn will allow him to develop a sound, balanced embouchure in a shorter time span.

Band directors will also be gladdened by these young cornetists feeding into the high school concert bands, since once the dark, mellow, lyric quality of the cornet is heard in the cornet section, and its lyricism exploited throughout its register and tonal compass, few conductors will wish to return to the indiscriminate mixing of cornet and trumpet tone in the color spectrum of the band. This is why I say, "Cornets... Please!!!" ■



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