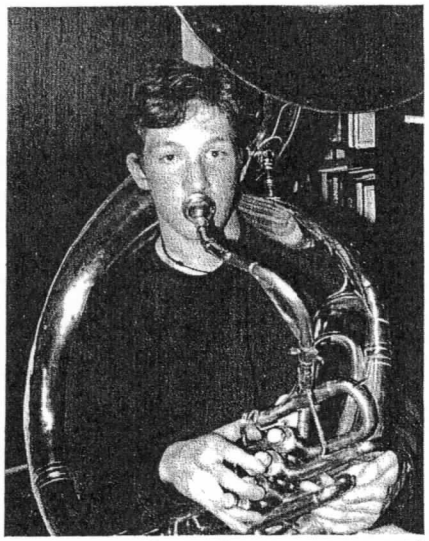
Sep 1996

Stands and Positions For Tuba Students

by John M. Taylor

My high school band director thought that I was a less than spectacular trumpet student and might do better playing sousaphone. When I went to the band room and saw the sousaphone that was resting in all its glory on a sousaphone chair, my first thoughts were not of how to play it, but how to get into it. Not a tubist or even a brass player, the director based his teaching on photographs in books and what he had learned in Brass 101. Many years later it still seems that directors have little training in how to hold a sousaphone or tuba properly.



Proper sousaphone playing position with relaxed upper body and left hand low on instrument.

Much of the problem is not the fault of the teachers or the students, but stems from the physical characteristics of the cumbersome instruments, which are an intimidating armful. Left to their own devices, students will grapple with them, but often their positions restrict breathing and make it difficult to reach the mouthpiece. Contortionists did well as vaudeville acts, but musical performance on a tuba is possible only with a relaxed playing position.

Schools often have only a sousaphone for both concert and marching bands. While the sousaphone is heavier, it is in some ways a little more user-friendly than the tuba. A student who is large enough can often manage satisfactorily, but there is a tendency to drape the left arm over the tubing and grasp the mouthpipe or mouthpiece while playing. When marching, it is much easier to simply hold the music in the left hand, but when seated in a concert band the left hand should either hang at the side or be placed near the bottom of the valves to balance the instrument. Most schools use specially constructed chairs that support the sousaphone for ease of playing, and these chairs should be adjusted monthly to accommodate growing students:

As a student of Arnold Jacobs for many years, I learned that tuba and sousaphone players need a full breath, nearly the maximum amount of air their lungs will hold: 80 percent is the ideal. They should then be able to exhale this air into the instrument in a relaxed manner. The tuba is played with the least air pressure of all instruments but the greatest air flow. With fifth-grade beginners or graduate students, only a relaxed position will permit the full expansion of the chest and abdominal cavity while inhaling. A full discussion of proper breathing with brass instruments is beyond the scope of this article, but there are some excellent comments from students of Arnold Jacobs in *Legacy of a Master: Arnold Jacobs* by M. Dee Stewart, published by The Instrumentalist Co. To breathe correctly students should be free of problems with holding the instrument.

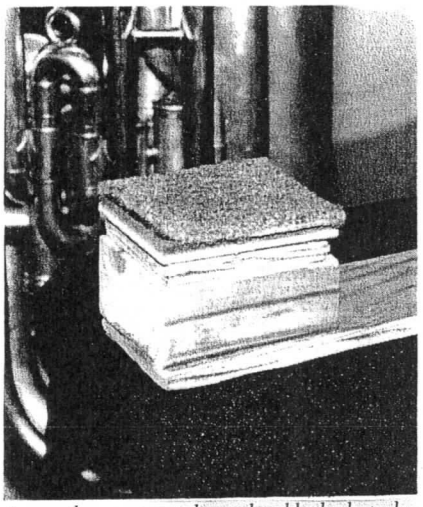
Poor playing position with left arm draped over tuba, impeding respiration.

One of the main problems for students is finding a convenient place to rest their arms. Some drape their arms over the instrument as if to save it from hypothermia, while others hang their arms elsewhere and seem as if they are in the last throes of a debilitating disease and need the support. Either position drastically inhibits respiration. Because the valve slides have to be adjusted for good intonation on some notes, the left arm should be positioned to do this without restricting respiration.

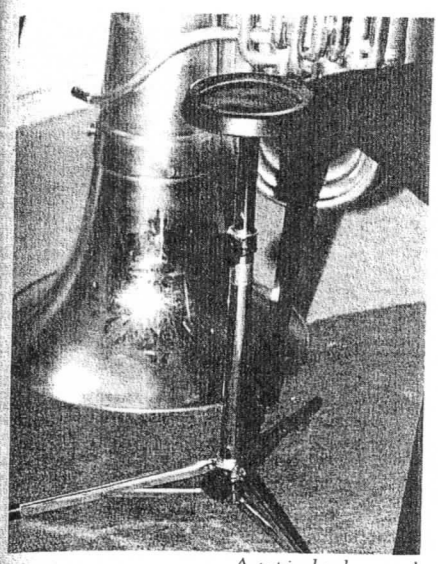
It is often more practical for young students to begin on a euphonium or baritone while using a tuba method book and playing all notes an octave higher. It is a simple matter to change over to the larger instrument when they have grown sufficiently.

Just as a sousaphone chair can support that instrument, there are now a variety of stands that will help tubists adjust the height of their instrument. Although such stands are available commercially, a clever shop teacher or band director can make tuba stands from discarded music stands or wood.

The tuba should be held so the mouthpiece is level with the performer's mouth. This seems like a simple premise, but I often see students who look like giraffes as they strain to reach the mouthpiece. Others look



An easily constructed wooden block that elevates the mouthpiece.



A typical tuba stand.

like Quasimodo hunkering over their tuba, which is usually resting on the chair. They should use a stand, a paperback book, or a wooden block taped to the chair to enable them to sit comfortably.

Commercially available tuba stands are not cheap, but they are portable and provide infinite adjustment of the padded circle or crescent-shaped yoke that holds the bottom of the tuba. The first such stand I saw was one that the stagehands had made for Arnold Jacobs at Orchestra Hall in Chicago. The bottom consisted of a discarded music stand with a little table of sheet metal welded parallel to the floor. More recent stands are more sophisticated but no more functional. Moreover, improvised materials, such as a plastic milk crate, a small, kindergarten-size chair, or a trumpet case, can serve as a base to raise the tuba to the proper height for playing. When a student grows taller and the tuba no longer comfortably sits on the edge of the chair, paperback books can provide an extra lift to place the mouthpiece at the proper angle.

Setting a tuba on the lap is satisfactory, but these heavy instruments often cause discomfort or pain after a short time. One technique is to have a student hold the tuba with his left hand at the ferrule that joins the bottom bow to the last branch. By holding the tuba this way, his hand will keep the bow from slipping onto the chair and thereby raise it to proper playing position. However there is a period of adjustment as the hand gains strength and gets comfortable with the new position. The mouthpipe of a tuba is often not set at the optimum angle for comfortable lap use; I have a wonderful old York CC tuba that defies playing with all but a stand.

Perhaps the least expensive tuba support is a block of wood, which can either be cut from a 4-by-4 fence post or built up in layers from common shelving or plywood. Glued, nailed or screwed together, the block is then screwed to a board of the same width and one foot long. The student sits on the board with the block augmenting the chair to raise the tuba to an easy playing position.

In some cases it may be necessary to raise or lower the leadpipe. Some instruments are made as they were 100 years ago, but students today are taller. If the majority of the tuba students seem to fit a higher mouthpipe placement in relation to the tuba's position on the edge of a chair, it might be worthwhile to raise the mouthpipe on that instrument. Any repairman can change the height and angle of a leadpipe, although there will be a blemish on the bell where the pipe was originally positioned.

It is important to remember that the goal is not to build stands or reengineer tubas but simply to enable students to sit comfortably and use their full respiratory capacity while the mouthpiece is at a comfortable position, the head is erect, and the throat is open and relaxed. □

John M. Taylor is currently editor of TUBA Journal, *the quarterly journal of Tubists Universal Brotherhood Association, and the author of numerous articles that appear in many of the nation's leading outdoor publications. He studied tuba with now-retired Chicago Symphony Orchestra tubist Arnold Jacobs, and has been a member of the Buffalo philharmonic, l'Orchestre Symphonique de Quebec, and in 1991, following a 21-year career, retired from The United States Army Band, and has performed with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Lyric Opera of Chicago, and taught at the Brevard Music Center, Brevard, North Carolina. In the summer of 1996, he toured Japan as a member of the tuba section of Keith Brion's New Sousa Band.*

More Audition Etudes

Meredith Music announced the publication of *More Audition Etudes* by Garwood Whaley. Featuring original music for snare drum, timpani, and mallet and multiple percussion instruments, the 40-page book with evaluation charts and C.D. is available for $19.95 from Meredith Music Publications, 170 Northeast 33rd Street, Fort Lauderdale, Florida; 954-563-1844.

From Our Readers

Sentimental Request

On March 5 of this year our home was broken into and much of our personal property was stolen. Most of my jewelry was taken, including a John Philip Sousa lapel pin. I received this award as a senior in May 1979 at my last high school band concert. The John Philip Sousa award is considered the most prestigious band award at Scotland High School in Laurinburg, and I was very proud to receive it. Much of my jewelry, such as gifts and engraved items, cannot be replaced, but I hope to replace my pin, which holds a great deal of sentimental value to me.

Kim Denison
Laurinburg, North Carolina

Useful Information

Susan Nigro's article, "Contrabassoon Fundamentals," which includes information on its history, repertoire, tonal characteristics, and technical information, is well organized and should be useful to a variety of readers. As a bassoonist with limited contrabassoon experience, I found her passages on performance technique enlightening. The comments toward the end of the article may be too technical for high school directors and students, but the discussion of fingerings, registers, and reeds is excellent for those at an advanced level.

Andrew Briddell
Bassoon Instructor

Musser Student Bell Kit

The Musser M654 is a 2½-octave bell kit that features aluminum silver powder, scratch resistant bars marked with note names, and a wood frame with plastic molded end pieces and a steel center section. The lightweight wood case has a detachable lid with a 180° piano style hinge, metal corners and latches, and a carrying handle. Each kit includes one pair of birch-handle mallets.

Under New Management

Johann Mösenbichler agreed to fill in for Nico Boom, who resigned as manager of the World Association for Symphonic Bands and Ensembles International Youth Wind Orchestra, until the next conference in July 1997. Applications to perform at the 1997 W.A.S.B.E. conference in Schladming, Austria are due by October 15, 1996, Wolfharting 11, A-4906 Eberschwang, Austria; 43-7753-2645.