

Trumpet Articulation

by Louis Davidson

All aspects of playing the trumpet are inextricably affected by the attack. Slurring, tonguing, high and low notes in fortissimo or pianissimo all begin with the attack. Above all other techniques, attacks should be as natural, uncomplicated, and as much a reflex action to players as breathing and walking. In a good attack the note starts freely, without hesitation, force, or a hint of a hiss. Synchronizing the lips, breath, and tongue produces a pure sound with immediacy and presence. Should the timing of any one of these basic elements be off, the result will be a bad attack.

For most players the tongue contacts at or near the juncture of the upper teeth and gum line. At its point of contact the tongue should not be held in a fixed position before releasing for the attack, but should resemble a timpanist striking a drum-head softly with a short downward and upward motion of the mallet. The tongue gives short forward and retracting movements, and the retracting one releases the air and starts the note.

The excellent players who attack and tongue between their teeth are the exception rather than the rule. The tongue position upon retraction differs with each syllable, *taa*, *too*, and *tee* for low, medium, and high registers. With the *taa* the tongue arches in the lower part of the mouth, like a bowl held upright; with the *too* it flattens in the center of the mouth; with the *tee* the tongue arches in the upper part of the mouth, somewhat like an inverted bowl. Some players worry that their tongue retracts into different positions, but the important thing is that the tongue contacts the same place regardless of range, volume, or articulation.

To improve timing in the attack, practice coordinating the breath, tongue, and lips without using a mouthpiece. When this feels natural, practice with the mouthpiece but pausing to relax the lips completely.

Take a breath and without any hesitation release the air as the tongue retracts.

After establishing a sense of coordination and timing with the mouthpiece, practice with the trumpet using a middle G. Attacks in different dynamics come only after the basic timing is established.

Having breath support for the attack cannot be overemphasized, but do not blow at the note, blow through it. Golf and baseball players follow through with the swing after the ball is well on its way. The equivalent follow through for wind players is continuing the air stream after the attack, sustaining the sound with the breath as string players sustain it with bow motion.

The less fuss and preparation there is before attacking a note, the more natural and secure an attack will be. Relax the lips completely before each breath to counter the tendency to set lip tension in advance of playing. When players tense the lips before an attack, they usually get more tension than is necessary, and this causes them to miss the pitch entirely or to produce a strained and labored sound.

Instead of cranking up the lips to where a trumpeter thinks the note lies, he should let the attack be almost a reflex action. Although it usually is easy to play a note in the context of a scale, arpeggio, or etude, an entrance that begins with the same pitch seems harder. When players are anxious, the difficulty of a task increases: what normally weighs an ounce may take on the weight of an elephant. In playing brass instruments, however, players should realize that the energy or tension to play a particular note stays the same regardless of the context.

By relaxing the lips to a position of repose, taking a breath, and quickly attacking a note, the attack is clean. At the moment of attack the note itself sets lip tension at the absolute

minimum for that note; when a player consciously sets lip tension in advance, he almost always uses excessive tension. Complete repose of the embouchure before an attack allows the lips to form into the exact degree of tension that is necessary for that note.



Setting the lips before an attack tends to affect whatever follows the attack by causing the embouchure to be out of kilter. Practice on these exercises can break the habit of setting lip tension relatively quickly.

Special Exercises on the Attack

Moderately Fast



Louis Davidson studied with Max Schlossberg and played with the Cincinnati Symphony under Fritz Reiner at age 16. He was solo trumpeter with the Cleveland Orchestra for 23 years, and taught at Indiana University, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland Institute of Music, and Oberlin College. He has written a book, *Trumpet Techniques*.



continue down by 1/2 step to F#

Repeat low notes several times to get the feel of effortlessness in attacking any note. The mechanics and timing of the attack are precisely the same for a *pp* as for a *ff*. Trying to sneak into a *pp* attack throws the timing off, and results in a note sounding late or not at all. This can be disastrous in a delicate pianissimo entrance; but this problem can be almost entirely eliminated by practicing *pp* attacks in all registers with absolute attention to the mechanics and timing.

Tonguing

Shortening tongue strokes to the smallest distance possible is the most direct route to good tonguing technique, because the shorter the stroke, the faster the tongue can articulate. A long forward and retracting movement causes sluggish tonguing. The shorter the stroke, the less energy expended and the less tongue fatigue, and the greater the accuracy.

Breath support is an integral part of the short stroke technique, and should create the sensation of an uninterrupted flow of air. Without using the trumpet, hum a long tone while articulating a series of *doo's*. The effect is a series of articulations superimposed over a sustained tone. At this stage the syllable *doo* rather than *too* is better to shorten the tongue stroke. For most players the tongue will contact the upper teeth at the gum line. Experiment vocally, using the tongue to articulate a series of *doo's*, keeping the tongue close to the teeth, with minimal movement and almost no sensation of movement at the base of the tongue.

There should be no more visible sign of tongue movement inside the mouth than when holding a long tone. With long tongue strokes, facial signs reflect the laborious tongue movements; practice in front of a mirror to see and feel the effects of a shortened tongue stroke. When practicing this technique with the instrument, remember the earlier physical sensations. The pitch, dynamics, and speed should be comfortable.



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Once a player acquires consistency in this technique, try a slightly harder, more pointed articulation, gently intensifying the soft *doo*. The stroke will have a little more definition and a sharper point or hardness to each articulation. This syllable evolves by stages into a soft *too* and then the hard *too*. Usually a player experiences no great difficulty and in a reasonable time plays both syllables with facility.

There should be no spaces between the notes with either the soft or hard *too* articulation. This uninterrupted flow of air with a sharper point on each note gives a wonderful resonance and clarity in fast or slow passages. There also should be no change in the length of the tongue stroke when using the harder *too* syllable. The stroke remains the same regardless of articulation; only the syllable changes. The concept of changing the length of the stroke for different styles of articulation is as preposterous as changing the position of the mouthpiece on the lips for different registers or dynamics.

Once this tonguing method is natural and automatic, players can work on the almost endless variety of articulations now open to them. This spectrum of articulations encompasses every degree of softness and hardness, from the almost indefinable *loo loo loo* to the most percussive *too too too*. The ability to execute subtle shadings of articulation together with the knowledge of when to use them are characteristics of great performers. Without exception the great artists of bowed string instruments use bows to achieve nuances of articulation as well as for tone, technique, and dynamics.

The subtleties of articulation add immeasurably to musical performances.

The *loo* syllable is the softest articulation of all, and is a handy device to negotiate difficult slurred intervals. Expertly done, a player can simulate seemingly perfect slurs despite difficult intervals. The trumpet passage in the second movement of Prokofiev's Symphony No. 7 is a good place to use the *loo* syllable.

Trumpet in B \flat



An imperceptible articulation of the *loo* syllable in place of a genuine slur facilitates awkward minor sevenths.

A word of caution: using the sharply articulated *too* before the short stroke technique is secure can lead to a stiff, percussive effect that is not desirable as a regular articulation. Practicing the hard *too* prematurely often causes players to breathe through the trumpet in short spurts from note to note rather than with a steady air stream. In extremes, this articulation resembles the putt-putt-putt of an outboard motor more than a musical sound. Many method and etude authors sprinkle dots indiscriminately over all articulated notes, telling inexperienced players that all articulated notes should be dry, detached, and staccato. These authors do not intend that every note be short, but that they be punctuated with sharp articulation. The correct marking over the notes would be an accent symbol (^), and not a dot.

In many passages, however, articulation should be short, sharp, and dry. In the third movement of Tchai-



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kovsky's Fourth Symphony the strings are plucked throughout but become tacet when the brass enter with a series of short, dryly articulated notes that should imitate the pizzicato of the strings.

Trumpet in F
Allegro

By contrast in the slow third movement of Shostakovich's First Symphony the trumpet plays a very soft, sustained solo where the notes should be articulated legato, using a soft, dull *doo* articulation:

Trumpet in Bb
♩ = 72
p con sord.

Between these extremes of articulation lie many gradations that fine musicians employ.

Double- and triple-tonguing come only after a trumpeter has absolute command of the single-tongue technique. The basic task is learning to articulate clearly and sharply the *koo* syllable. To acquire the feel of this throat articulation, quietly pronounce the word cough several times with emphasis on the first part of the word. It is important to form the *koo* in the forward part of the throat. If the *koo* syllable is not exaggerated at this stage, it often emerges as a *goo*, which in time produces a *goo goo doo* or *goo doo doo doo doo doo doo* articulation that is not the real thing. Performed correctly, double- or triple-tonguing sounds as sharp, clear, and rhythmical as very fast single-tonguing.

Rhythmic evenness of the duplet or triplet comes with much care and practice. Often in what purports to be a series of evenly double-tongued notes, a misguided player produces an incorrect rhythm,

or incorrect rhythm and articulation both,

A series of evenly triple-tongued notes emerges as

This exercise should be practiced slowly in a comfortable range to develop even rhythm and clear articulation.

Continue the pattern, ascending chromatically to a C or D and descending back to the starting note. As with single-tonguing, concentrate on supporting the air column without spaces between the notes. Distorting the pitch in articulating the *koo* is common among careless players. The same practice procedure is useful for developing triple-tonguing with even articulation and rhythm.

Compare the evenness of multiple-tongued groups and single-tongued notes, by playing these notes single-tongued as rapidly as possible,

then double-tonguing them at the same tempo.

Differences in the rhythmic flow between the double-tongued and single-tongued groups become obvious.

The same test works to check the evenness of triple-tonguing, first single-tonguing the following notes as rapidly as possible,

and then triple-tonguing them at the same tempo.

Even the slightest discrepancy of rhythm between the single and multiple-tongued articulations should be followed by further practice at slow speeds before gradually increasing the speed of articulations. Avoid the exaggerated *koo* sound, and make each note equal in weight, be it the *too* or *koo* syllable.

Next extend the range in both directions, up and down but not yet to extremes. As with single-tonguing, the syllables vary with the registers, from *taa kaa taa kaa* in the low notes through *tee kee tee kee* in the upper. Keep this natural, without conscious effort. When a player has speed, clarity, and evenness on single tones, he should try scales and interval patterns, at first somewhat slower than the single pitch patterns to coordinate fingering and tonguing. After a reasonable time, increase the speed gradually.

Having mastered the conventional form of double- and triple-tonguing techniques, try placing the *koo* syllable on the second note of the triplet instead of on the third note.

This suits one triplet group at a time more than a series of consecutive triplets. This technique is relatively simple for players with good conventional triple-tongue articulation, and can be used in the fourth movement of Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*.

Trumpet in A

It would not be practical in a series of consecutive triplets because it is more difficult to maintain an even and smooth flow of the notes with this articulation as in the triplet passage in the third movement of the same piece, where the conventional *too too koo too too koo* works better:

Trumpet in Bb

Another form of triple-tonguing is articulating alternate *too*'s and *koo*'s with subtle accents on the first note of every three note group: *too koo too koo too koo too*, but most players prefer using the conventional articulation.

The ability to use the *koo* syllable in fast tonguing passages of unusual rhythms, such as groups of five notes

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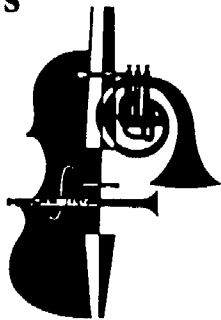
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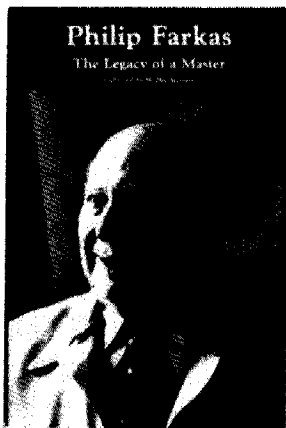
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or seven notes, is valuable. For example, in Stravinsky's *L'histoire du soldat*, the famous quintolet passage is easier using the *koo* syllable.



Either one is effective, and players should experiment with each and choose one.

Some trumpeters interpret the printed symbols over the quintolets as slurs rather than brackets, but on Stravinsky's recordings this passage is always tongued. Players who have mastered a variety of articulations and multiple-tonguings will have the satisfaction of playing whichever way a director indicates. □

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