

Notes from a Joseph Alessi Seminar
By Dave Tall

Joseph Alessi holds the Principal Trombone chair with the New York Philharmonic. Dave took these notes at the Alessi Seminar held Aug 8–15, 1999 in Nyack, NY. Many thanks to both Joe and Dave for giving us permission to reproduce these notes here.

Note: you will find some repetition (and imperfect grammar) throughout. Dave decided to leave it that way, as it retains the informal feel of the original seminar.

Air, Sound, and Articulation

Buzz the mouthpiece, but don't buzz loudly.

"Doctor's office breath." Breathe naturally and without tension or artifice. We do different things when we breathe with the instrument in our hands. Joe believes it should be the way you breathe in for the doctor—no more complicated than that.

Don't let playing the horn get in the way of breathing well.

Start your warm-up with breathing exercises. For example, 6 counts in; 2 hold; 6 out; 2 hold. Goals: even breath in and out; no "hitches" or speeding up/slowing down; no tension in and out. When holding in, don't use throat or glottis, just breathing muscles.

Don't remove the mouthpiece from the lips when you breathe.

Breathe in slowly whenever you have the chance.

Never breathe with tension.

Practice with a full sound. Play or practice to fill a large room, not just a practice closet.

To open up your sound, use a larger, slower, thicker air stream.

Much concentration on an open, tension-free sound. Establish this sound on one note, then expand the range.

Practice your sound/long tones/etc. with eyes closed, concentrating on the sound you hear.

Instant sound: no hesitation with the air at the beginning of a note. Notes should be slices of a long tone.

The trombone bore is small compared to the size of the body. The instrument won't take the maximum amount or speed of air we can supply and maintain a relaxed sound.

In soft playing, don't try to control the sound with the lips. Control it with the air.

Joe believes that the aperture does not get smaller when you play soft—only the air slows down.

When nervous, think of slowing the airspeed (fogging up a mirror concept).

Work on taking in breaths without tension or stress.

Immediate air/immediate sound.

For "hat" notes: add fast air at the front of the note, **not** tongue.

Slow down air.

Don't remove mouthpiece from its "spot" when breathing.

To combat the "wah wahs": **Immediate air/immediate sound.**

Staccato/short notes: don't move the air too fast. Practice legato to train the air to be slow.

Play on the middle/bottom of the notes to keep sound open & dark.

Don't let the end of long notes go sharp from added tension.

Upper register: breathe from a relaxed gut. Air should be compressed in the gut, not in the throat or mouth.

Keep **energy** in the softest playing.

Keep air slow in the bottom range. He doesn't like "non-round" low register.

Don't squeeze the chops or change the tone for soft playing.

Don't let air build up behind the tongue.

For clarity, use more tongue when playing soft, less when playing loud. Soft: more tongue; louder: less tongue; loud: little tongue.

Don't tongue too hard. Let the air predominate, rather than the tongue.

Glottal control of air stream. Whistle 8th notes—the glottis is controlling the air, not the tongue or breathing apparatus.

When playing loud below middle F, keep it round. Don't let the sound "bark."

Be careful of overblowing notes in the low register, not hitting exactly in the middle of the note, or blowing the notes out of shape.

Maintain your "long tone sound" no matter what you're playing.

Find a balance between your air and the resistance of the horn.

Fill up the horn with a large, rich air column.

Don't use separate air for each note of a legato phrase. Blow all the way through the phrase.

Note releases: in general, not a "karate chop" but a bit of a taper.

Embouchure

"Fireman's net" concept: 8 guys pulling equally on the net/lips.
Keep your corners firm.

High register playing depends on "pucker," not "smile." Keep things "in." The airstream supports the note. Use the tongue level to speed up the air. You can demonstrate this by whistling a note and changing the pitch. The pitch changes with the front of the tongue.

The high register embouchure is a battle between the kissing and smiling muscles. No one group of muscles wins out over the other.

Set your embouchure **before** you breathe, not after your actual attack. Practice no-tongue notes and attacks.

Joe uses a spot on his bottom lip as the "anchor point" for the mouthpiece. He wants to feel teeth underneath the anchor point, not gum.

Change mouth cavity size (through tongue level) for register changes.

Practice techniques

"There's nothing like fear to make you practice."

Tricky rhythms: simplify and practice to ensure the beat is steady.

Tricky passages: "fragment" the passage. Play each fragment 10 times without a mistake. If you make a mistake, go back to the first time.

Be able to concentrate on several things at once.

Practice tuning by playing intervals against a constant tone. You can make a tape of yourself playing long tones, work with colleagues, or use anything that makes a complex sound (not just a sine wave).

Make bound practice books of music you're currently working on. Joe bought a spiral binder to do this at home. He had a book with him of works he was soon to perform/record (and probably other stuff in there too).

Be careful of intonation, especially when playing with piano. Listen to the accompaniment—don't just play your part.

Practice playing with identical shapes and lengths of notes (i.e. early Arbans)

Performing, Posture, and Attitude

Don't bury yourself in the stand or music. Memorization is preferable, **if** you are comfortable with it (Joe isn't).

The question about memorization is not whether you can memorize a work, but whether you are comfortable with performing the work memorized. Most solos you play will be memorized to some degree just from repetition of preparation. If when you perform a memorized work, you become more distracted or concerned about the memorization and less involved in the music because of this distraction, you should consider having the music on stage. It's most important to produce your best musical performance when you perform.

Playing/projecting: "Pontificate to the audience. Attract attention to yourself on stage."

Don't stand/point too far off axis. It looks like you aren't sure whether or not to play for these people.

Play confidently.

Vary the color on long notes with subtle dynamic shadings, adding & subtracting vibrato, or changing the speed of the vibrato.

Perform!! Play for **them**, not for yourself. Break out of the box. If you don't perform, it's business as usual and boring.

Simplify your posture.

Use lots of dynamics in a recital.

Keep the back straight, not leaning forwards or backwards. Don't play the trombone with the shoulders.

Hold the bell/horn up both for sound reasons and visual reasons. Be outgoing in your playing.

Don't stay dynamically static.

Never let notes in the middle of a phrase die out completely—then you have to "restart" the phrase.

Practice performing.

Be more concerned with line than individual notes.

Let your body be loose & free.

Develop a **great** jaw vibrato, **then** experiment with slide vibrato.

Always be ready for the first note of an entrance. Have the horn up. Breathe slowly well before the note.

In a solo, "be a participant, not an observer."

Efficiency: don't channel energy into the body. Joe looks relaxed, even static, when he plays solos. There should be a balance—music should be in your body but don't let it make you tight or cause tension. Dave Taylor moves a **lot** when he plays, but his body is very loose and tension-free.

Don't gather tension the longer you play.

Tuning note with piano: play a full (not necessarily loud) note, not a shy note.

Play the way you will perform.

Don't play tentatively with a withdrawn sound.

Soft playing must have energy and penetrate to the audience. Keep the bell pointed high and up at the audience, not down towards the floor.

When you're nervous or tight, **let** the air flow, don't **make** it flow.

Vibrato must go both above and below the pitch.

Don't snap into a good posture just before you start playing. Establish good posture before you take your first breath.

"Someone playing soft enough to be uncomfortable doesn't sound soft, they sound like someone in trouble."

Think of many levels of dynamic shading. "There's not only 4 and 5, there's 4.5, 4.25, 4.125, etc."

Always play a clear, great, strong first note in phrases.

No matter how much you work on technique and intonation, always be true to the music.

Naturally crescendo when descending.

"If there's one ounce of guessing about rhythm, you're in the wrong business." Be an artist, not a student, when you perform.

Don't hunch over looking at the music. Stand up tall & relaxed. Point the bell straight out at the audience. Keep the bell up.

Play to your audience.

When playing ascending licks, think of a pyramid. Full(er) sound on the bottom of the lick.

Beat vs. line: let the line be ascendant.

Don't slow down for each cadence in a very cadential piece. It will sound disjointed.

Slide Technique

When playing legato, move the slide immediately at the end of the note, as late as possible, but no later.

Move slide immediately after each note ends (for separated playing). Exercise: play a slow staccato scale. Move the slide immediately after each note ends, so that the slide "waits" in the new position for the next note to start.

6th and 7th position: don't let slide position dictate posture or mouthpiece position.

Use alternate positions for faster passages, but not on long notes for color reasons.

Be sure to have fingers on **both** sides of the slide brace.

Use a firm grip on the slide for fast, technical passages, and a lighter grip for slower, lyrical passages.

Don't use wrist motion to move the slide. Always hold the slide firmly—no bouncing between fingers or throw & catch.

Always keep firm control of the slide.

Technical passages: have the rhythm in the slide. Feel the rhythm of what you're playing in your slide hand.

In one case, a person complaining about a sound problem in a specific range/piece really had a slide coordination problem.

Legato: move slide at last possible instant, well coordinated with the tongue.

When playing soft or slow, hold the slide with very little pressure ("like a baby").

Very little tension in the body; slightly less tension in the chops.

Legato with the valve: experiment with the speed of pushing the trigger.

Don't play with a "lazy" slide.

Don't move the slide prematurely.