Handout for Trombonists Who Can’t Band Good And Wanna Learn To Do Other Stuff Good Too

But wait, you might be thinking. He has no idea what music we’re playing. Why is he giving me a handout with helpful tips on my music if he doesn’t know what we’re playing?

Well, I’ll let you in on a secret: a few universal skills can hugely improve your ensemble experience. What piece of music you’re playing almost doesn’t matter – if you’re a great player and a great musician, the only thing left to do is learn the little details of each specific piece you’re playing. This is true for TMEA etudes, solos, or anything else you might be playing. Here are some tips to make you a better player and a better musician:

1. FUNDAMENTALS. Strive to make a world-class sound any time you make a sound at all – whether it’s a sixteenth note or a whole note, whether it’s melody or background. Always make your best sound, and always strive to make your best sound better. Learn to play in time, in tune, with a world-class sound, and you’ll go far. But how do you know what a world-class sound sounds like?
2. LISTEN. Take every opportunity to hear professional musicians (including trombonists) play. Take a serious interest in what they’re doing – especially what they’re doing that you’re not. It’s not just about how high or low or fast someone can play – are they really crafting phrases, is there a sense of line, of meaning to what they do? Probably. Also, listen to yourself – record yourself playing, then listen like you would listen to the professionals. Then try to make your playing closer to theirs.
3. MINDSET. This is important. You must realize a few things, the sooner the better: First, you’ll never, ever “get there.” The better you get, the better your ears will get, and so the more discerning your taste will be. It’ll never feel like you’ve achieved 100% mastery. Instead, adopt a constant growth mindset. Get 1% better every day. Nothing of consequence is achieved in one visit to the gym, but no improvements at all will be made if you don’t go to the gym. This is a long-term pursuit, not something to cram for. Also, be kind to yourself and to others.
4. GROW. Take steps beyond your comfort zone. Learn improv. Play duets with people. Take private lessons. Learn to compose. Learn to arrange. Learn to write marching band drill. Learn history and theory. Never stop learning – you’ll use everything you learn, because when you truly learn something, it’s part of who you are. You’ll have grown to include that new thing.

Look at this list any time you’re practicing and don’t quite know what to focus on.

Pick an element and try to improve!

* The Three Ts: Tone, Time, Tune
  + Play with a rich, glorious, resonant, world-class, vibrant sound. ALWAYS.
  + Practice with a metronome.
    - To improve your internal time, play with the metronome every other beat, every bar, every other bar, or every four bars. This makes YOU keep the subdivision instead of the metronome!
  + Practice with a tuner or a drone.
    - Don’t just stare at the tuner. You’re making sound! Tune with your ears. Play with your best sound, center your pitch on your instrument, THEN look at a tuner to see if your best sound is, in fact, in tune!
    - Drones are fantastic tools. You can find tuning drones online, even on YouTube. I like “Cello Drones for Tuning and Improvisation” but you should pick your own. Play with a nice loud speaker (or an earbud) so you can tune your full sound. Don’t lip things into tune, you play a tuning slide!
* Record yourself!
  + Do you hate listening to your voice on a voicemail? Everyone hears your voice anyway and still respects you. Your sound is the same way – you might hate listening to it, but that’s what you sound like! Get used to hearing what you really sound like and you will eventually make that sound something you’re truly proud of!
  + A purpose-made recorder (Zoom H4N, Zoom Q2HD, etc) is better than your phone for recordings, but using your phone for recordings is 1,000x better than not doing it at all!
  + Listen to your recordings with a critical ear just like you listen to professionals or other students.
* Mental wellness
  + Be sure to treat yourself kindly but fairly. Take breaks when you need, but earn those breaks with hard work.
  + Get up, walk around, get some blood flowing.
  + Drink water.
  + Stretch often. We carry tension that we don’t need, and then we add the trombone to that mix.
  + Be sure to incorporate music that you play for FUN every practice session! Practice is something that takes dedication, but the reward is that you’re better able to express yourself. And unless you’re a robot, you like to have fun!