

OPERATING IN THE AFFIRMATIVE

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IDENTITY

As a music student, I grew up with two contradictory pieces of advice which I was never able to reconcile. On one hand, as a future teacher, I was cautioned that one should always give advice in the affirmative; in other words, that telling a student "Do this!" was preferable to saying "Don't do that!" Nevertheless, "Don't sound like a tuba!" has been a staple of music school lexicon for my generation, most especially regarding the transcription of repertoire that predates the instrument, but by no means only in this case. This advice happens to be worded in a fashion that goes against the prevailing wisdom of contemporary educational psychology, but that is hardly its most problematic aspect. Rather, it seems to assume that anything which is idiomatic to the tuba itself is inherently undesirable, or perhaps even that there is no such idiom in the first place. By this logic, those of us who play the tuba are mired in a perpetual state of imitation which precludes not only a consummation of our instrument's true artistic potential and identity, but ultimately our own as well.

Arnold Jacobs famously remarked that, "The challenge of an accompanying instrument is a limited challenge and develops a limited musician,"¹ and encouraged tubists to use music originally written for other orchestral instruments as a means of attaining greater artistry. This, of course, should continue to be something that all instrumentalists task themselves with; rather, it is the idea that this process must be undertaken in order to mask the inherent deficiencies of the tuba that is an outmoded one. After all, *something* must be idiomatic to the tuba, but the challenge in forging these statements is primarily conceptual, not technical, and Jacobs' admonition is no less true in the former area than the latter. It is this greater conceptual challenge of consummating the tuba's identity (as opposed to the more limited one of evading it) that simply necessitates artistic and pedagogical frameworks dealing in the affirmative, frameworks which have been notably slow to materialize relative to recent progress in virtually every other facet of tuba playing (to say nothing of contemporary musical thought as a whole).

For the sake of comparison, consider the staggering variety of effects obtainable on string instruments, including the ability to imitate other orchestral voices. It is nonetheless difficult to imagine a string teacher telling a student, "Don't sound like a violin," even though there are markings, such as *flautando*, which more or less say just that. What's remarkable about this particular term? For one thing, it is specific and unambiguous in locating the object of imitation; it is also given, as every teacher knows it should be, in the affirmative; but most importantly of all, the instruction *flautando* was not imposed on the violin from the outside, but rather refers to an effect that is both idiomatic to and relatively easily obtainable on the instrument. Because tubists envy violinists for so many simpler reasons, it is unlikely that the privilege to be provided a

clearly stated sonic reference point without the accompanying divestment of identity so characteristic of the tuba world has made many tubists' lists, but it is at the top of mine. Our somewhat more limited (though by no means fatally so) sonic palette makes it awfully tough to beat string players at their own game, and so the obvious pedagogical value of pursuing this kind of imitation on tuba must not lead us to view it as an end unto itself. This is, ideally, a process of trial and error which ultimately reveals more about the tuba than it does about the object of imitation, the value of the experimental journey therein trumping that of the imitative destination and affirming rather than denying our unique identity and value.

NEW MEDIA

The artistic contributions of the great 20th Century player-pedagogues whose teachings now comprise the mainstream of tuba pedagogy were frequently imitative. The obvious explanation for this is that adequate solo repertoire for the tuba simply did not exist in their time, leading players to rely heavily on transcriptions, and therefore, to overtly imitate other instruments in the interest of authenticity. I would argue that there is more to it than that, though, starting with the question of instrumental advocacy. Compared with other musicians, tuba players have long been disproportionately concerned with changing minds and overcoming stereotypes about their instrument and those who play it. Did I not think this was in some sense a worthy endeavor, I would not have taken the time to write such a lengthy reflection on it. I do believe, however, that as harmless as this aspiration might be as one facet of a larger artistic vision, it becomes extremely problematic in an all-encompassing role as the tubist's *raison d'être*.

The efficacy of instrumental advocacy being mediated almost entirely by the sheer number of people it is able to reach, any musical product that sells poorly is inherently incompatible with it. Indeed, because unfamiliar musical styles tend to be an even tougher sell than unfamiliar media, astute instrumental advocates tend to avoid pushing the musical envelope at all costs, hoping instead that their (novel) horns might ride the coattails of their (pedestrian) programming. Such it is that tuba players' pathological preoccupation with advocating for their instrument has mediated their artistic decision making substantially towards the conservative end of the spectrum, and that not even recent technical advances have succeeded in eroding their galling contentedness with this low-brow musical purgatory. But does the instrument, novel as it remains to many, not simply *demand* stylistic innovation? Does stylistic innovation not simply *necessitate* new media? Are these two ventures not inherently symbiotic artistically, regardless of whether they are successful commercially? History certainly would suggest so.

Of course, as the greater landscape of artistic-versus-commercial polemics goes, The Case of the Middlebrow Tuba Recital hardly registers. (There are, of course, many commonalities here with the entire brass world, but even taken together, we comprise only a tiny corner of the musical universe.) It is, however, a particularly unfortunate example on account of the possibilities it has left untapped, possibilities on which tubists hold an enviable monopoly. Consider that more recent innovations in new media

(particularly the personal computer) have been said to be bringing about a “democratization of creativity” through increasing affordability and ease of use. If you make your living creating, this is good for society and bad for business; tubas, however, are still expensive to acquire and difficult to master, and it is hard to imagine either of these conditions changing substantially or quickly enough to create an overabundance of skilled tuba playing the same way digital technology has made mere hobbies of more than a few formerly lucrative vocations. Newspapers and compact discs die slow, painful deaths, the postmodern era we live in elicits constant complaints that everything has already been done, and yet it remains so obvious to so many of us who play it how much has *not* been done with the tuba! The other creatives would want to kill us if they knew we were dallying with the likes of Alec Wilder and Léo Delibes while we could have been forging the next musical epoch before anyone else saw it coming.

It is high time for our hyper-sycophantic tuba culture to rethink placing such disproportionate emphasis on convincing idiot savant in-laws, blue-haired churchgoers and stylistic-purist colleagues that we are worth the air we breathe. I do not apply the term “new media” as mere hyperbole, for the void that negation culture has created also presents an unparalleled opportunity for contemporary tubists. Yet while the various possibilities dangle, the artistic vacuum of instrumental advocacy feeds back on itself. Many tubists and a few sympathetic outsiders who grew up with this culture developed understandable fondness for the players and works which shaped it. Some of their students inherit this fondness through no fault of their own. Instrument-specific organizations, conferences and festivals sprout up, serving primarily as outlets for the peddling of negation culture wares and premature celebrations of organizational history. The outcome, paradoxically, is an affirmation of negation, an overwhelmingly backward-looking embrace of the specific players and works that helped the tuba take its first baby steps towards the limelight, albeit dressed up variously as a flute, violin or cello.

While it would be foolish to dismiss and forget this work outright, it would be a worse tragedy for the story to end here. Imitation of other instruments will always be part of tuba playing, as it is part of mastering most any instrument, but the ultimate goal must *always* be to sound like a tuba, even (or perhaps especially) if that means playing the tuba in a way that no one ever has. Future generations of tubists must not be allowed to believe that the greatest thing they can accomplish is to sound like something they are not. We will continue to imitate all kinds of things in the interest of musical growth, but we must not be afraid to form our own idiomatic statements, and consequently, an identity based on sounding like ourselves rather than like something else. This is where negation culture and instrumental advocacy have failed us, and also where future generations of tubists can and must make their greatest contributions.

DIRECT PATHS

Any musician seeking to identify what exactly it was that got them “hooked” on music in the first place in hopes of reproducing that effect on their own audiences is bound to discover a process which lays bare the curious and awkward relationship between self-

discovery and externally-imposed learning like few other areas of musico-pedagogical inquiry can. For many, this is wholly or partially a matter of developing a theory of causality between music and the emotions, an area of musicological discourse which, even among professionals, is dominated by a colloquial imprecision unbefitting one of Western musical thought's great unresolved polemics. Nowhere is this more counterproductive than in pedagogical matters, where such flawed logic can be propagated in the minds of future generations of musicians (and in the case of formal academic training, subsequently held over their head for a grade). A renewed focus on direct paths to musicianship is in order, one which rightly denies the feasibility of reverse engineering music's emotional impact, and instead deals wholly in terms of its root cause: namely, sound.

That different listeners may experience unique emotions during the same musical presentation is well-documented. This is not merely an unavoidable fact but also an essential form of biodiversity in any musical ecosystem without which the collective creative ferment of society would become dull and monotonous, and as such, this diversity is to be celebrated, not lamented. Yet many otherwise well-intentioned efforts in the area of music appreciation continue to treat it as a pathology, assuming instead that the ultimate goal of music education and outreach is to educate listeners into behaving alike rather than enabling each one of them to "find their own voice." (Trite as it is, this latter phrase, so often applied to music-makers but never, *ever* to listeners, really must to attain this broader currency if such outreach is to succeed in any meaningful way). There are many artistic and pragmatic reasons why such efforts have very low success rates, but their ignorance of (if not outright hostility toward) the diversity of their audience tops the list. Instead, I would argue that we must proceed not as if widely well-received pieces of music are those pieces which many people have learned to like, nor as if they are pieces which particularly strongly suggest or impose a certain listening style, but instead see them as music which appeals to the greatest total number of unique individual listening styles.

As with the question of musical emotion itself, though, this is a framework and not a model. Indeed, such modes of thinking most appropriate to the workaday business of a life in music are not usually good recipes for the creative process itself, heartily resisting reverse engineering for this purpose. The universally loved piece of music, hence, is the ultimate red herring in our hyper-diverse musical culture, one which many artists pursue nonetheless only to find themselves headed in the opposite ethical direction from that in which they initially intended to proceed. The desire for mass appeal is the only force in the universe both powerful and insidious enough to mitigate humanity's collective aesthetic diversity in favor of the dullest conformity, leading the work of artists of wildly diverse backgrounds and circumstances to converge upon a staggeringly tiny set of outcomes. This is why one cannot simply equate the accessible with the altruistic, nor the esoteric with the nihilistic, for ultimately, the more artists who pursue the same recipe for mass appeal, the more similar their work becomes, and the fewer total listeners they serve. The artist who creates music that anyone could have made robs the world of the music that only they could have made. If musicians have a moral obligation to the world, it is not to procure the largest possible audience for themselves,

but rather to meet those unmet musical needs that only they can meet. That means following their muse even when nobody else follows them.

To this end, the physical, sonic phenomena which are ultimately responsible for any emotional content one might ascribe to music are best dealt with directly rather than obliquely. As just one element of musical appeal, whether widely shared or highly contentious, “emotion” per se cannot be dealt with generically. The range of possible emotions is too great, and most every conceivable emotion has been reported as a response to music by someone at some point. It should follow from this realization that musicians cannot learn to emote musically simply by emoting generically; there must be a more direct path. The challenge here lies in striking a productive balance between the conscious and subconscious in order to develop an informed fluency that is equal parts flexible and reliable.

One must be immediately suspicious of any musico-pedagogical approach that bypasses the conscious mind too greatly. On one extreme, there is so-called “playing by feel,” a prominent example of which is the application of descriptive terms to musical phrases in order to elicit a certain musical result from the student without helping them to recognize and understand the technical factors at play. The other extreme is the “trained monkey” phenomenon, where a physical task is simply repeated ad nauseum until it becomes a habit or reflex rather than a consciously executed action. Both methods facilitate strong results only when applied to a relatively narrow range of demands, and both severely limit the student’s adaptability to unfamiliar musical settings, most especially on short notice. A pedagogy better suited to consummate the student’s musical individuality rather than stifling it would deploy such extreme measures only in proportionally extreme situations, otherwise opting for the direct path of developing technique through imitation, adaptability through variation, and creativity through subversion. The exceedingly general, even trite, nature of this approach is not its weakness but rather its strength, as it is thus applicable to a broad range of musical styles rather than just one or two, and therein affords the student greater opportunity to personalize their technique.

Success in this realm is achieved first and foremost by putting aside (if not just for a moment) any sedimented emotional, literary and functional associations that have been imposed on musical works from the outside, and instead concerning oneself wholly with (1) inventorying and analyzing cherished sonic experiences one wishes to have inform their playing, and (2) developing the ability to both recreate and vary them at will using one’s instrument. Students should have as much say as possible as to which ingredients get added to their musical melting pot. This ensures maximum emotional investment in the process by enabling them to create music which reflects their identity, not just that of their teacher or institution. Musicians who are inclined and empowered from an early age to engage with a wide rather than a narrow range of musical styles will ultimately find greater fulfillment and create more compelling work.

In order to achieve any particular result, the student first must consciously understand how it is achieved. While the teacher should use whatever means necessary to elicit the desired sonic results from the student when such sounds are new or unfamiliar, it is

crucial that the student ultimately come to understand what made these results possible on a technical level, and that they leave lessons armed with as many relevant approaches for reinforcing such newly acquired skills as the teacher can provide. Where this information is communicated clearly, the student is enabled to take ownership of their development, ultimately becoming their own best teacher.

Varying amounts of repetition must be used to adjust how conscious the student is of their newfound technique, the degree to which it is applied always being a function of the student's particular musical ends and the given technique's role in them (fundamental or interpretive; highly internalized or highly intentional). It is lamentable that brass players in general tend to be notably intolerant of variation from traditional technical approaches, a situation which will continue to retard their collective artistic progress if not appropriately relaxed among future generations. While many brass students will undoubtedly continue to choose the traditional approach to their instruments, students who wish to fruitfully problematize any facet of it should be engaged on their own terms, and no fundamental technique should be off limits to constructive scrutiny.

Physical, sonic phenomena must be the unit of currency in any economy of musico-pedagogical ideas. Subjective emotion being an effect of such phenomena and not a cause, it tells us very little about how a performer might create or recreate a musical moment. By opting for the more direct path to musicianship, students can acquire the knowledge and ability to consciously and purposely realize musical intent and therein make contributions to music and the world that are bigger than themselves. Insofar as desired emotional responses to music are ultimately caused by sound, pedagogy must concern itself first and foremost with nurturing the student's ability to intentionally create sound using their instrument. Hence, rather than leaving students grasping for sonic equivalents to their unique emotions, teachers must ask students to (1) identify the sonic characteristics which lend a given performance its perceived emotional qualities, (2) imitate and vary these devices, and (3) apply the personalized devices to their performances as they deem appropriate. This is first and foremost a creative endeavor, akin to composing or improvising: the ultimate goal is not merely to "paint by number" by compiling an inventory of devices to be drawn upon one at a time without variation, but instead to synthesize this sonic inventory into a unique, personal voice that is never manifested the same way twice.

TONE AND TIME

In his 1967 essay "The Tonal Ideal of Romanticism," musicologist Edward Lippman makes a compelling case that the related qualities of "vagueness" and "blending" were characteristic and intentional elements of much nineteenth century classical music. Many of the composers Lippman singles out as especially important exponents of this aesthetic are the very same composers who first made frequent and effective use of the tuba and its predecessors, thereby validating and solidifying its place in the modern orchestra. In turn, much of this music continues to loom large in the world of orchestral

tuba playing, most notably that of Wagner, whose personal theater was built with an especially long reverberation time and a hood covering the recessed orchestra pit, and of Bruckner, who, in Lippman's words, "takes as a model the diffused and collective unity of the organ."²

Both facets of Lippman's romantic tonal aesthetic ought to be of interest to tuba players, though for different reasons. "Fusion, or blending" refers to the treatment of the orchestra as a unified timbral whole rather than a disparate collection of voices. This obfuscation of differences of color among the instruments resulted in large part from the previously unprecedented freedom with which romantic-era orchestrators mixed them, and the advent of the tuba could certainly be seen as furthering this aim by providing a true bass voice which was not only timbrally versatile enough to anchor both the conical and cylindrical brass sections separately, but also to unify them with each other when needed. However, it is the second characteristic, "vagueness," on which I want to focus.

Ours, of course, remains among the most problematic instruments in the modern orchestra as far as directional clarity of sound is concerned, and so there is a special irony for tuba players in Lippman's characterization of the era ("Hey, that's *our* era!") as not merely tolerating but in fact *desiring* a tonal "lack of definition." Compositional necessity is a sexier *raison d'être* than tonal vagueness, but if Lippman is correct in citing the latter as a significant and intentional aesthetic choice among romantic era musicians, one wonders if our horns were not in fact birthed out of both concerns, if not necessarily in equal parts.

Whether or not there is any merit to such speculation, the idea that the tuba might reflect or even embody ideas and events larger than itself (indeed, to hear Lippman tell it, larger than music as well), is tantalizing in a way, for it is just this sort of inextricable link with historically significant modern music (and, where relevant, the broader world of art and ideas behind it) which can ensure an instrumental culture's vitality for decades, if not centuries. And while compositional necessity was undoubtedly a greater force behind the advent of the tuba, there is no reason to view the kind of connection I am describing as achievable only at an instrument's birth, nor only out of the most urgent artistic necessity (the saxophone's centrality to American jazz and popular music provides the most visible support for this claim). What is required, simply, is an ear to the ground and a willingness to experiment.

If it is true, as it seems to be, that the aspect of the tuba (the sole aspect, really) which justifies its existence in the orchestral world is also its greatest handicap in virtually every other musical context, then it is also true that, as with the broader question of identity, the challenge in overcoming this handicap is presently more conceptual and cultural than it is technical. After all, the instruments, pedagogy and acoustical spaces tubists need to find artistic success outside of the orchestra pit all exist, and the repertoire, which has been slower to materialize, cannot be far off. What is spectacularly and painfully absent, however, is an instrumental culture which values these extra-orchestral possibilities to a degree commensurate with their artistic potential. If the need for such a thing is not already obvious, consider that Lippman, an eminent musicologist of his day writing here in an area of specialty, does not once refer to the tuba despite

numerous readymade opportunities to do so. Such is the extent to which today's tubists have come to need this aging repertoire even more than it needs them.

It is one thing to show the tuba to be capable of more than what it is asked to do in the orchestra; it is another thing entirely to show these capabilities to be *useful*. No matter how great the skill and artistry of future generations of tuba players, these generations will be stifled at every turn by any musical culture which places the same disproportionate emphasis on 18th and 19th century orchestral repertoire as is placed by the institutions through which most tuba players today receive their musical training. In order for other contributions to be valued, the musical styles and idioms in which they are to be made must be valued as well. The task of advocating for these new musical styles and idioms is both more vital and more arduous than that of advocating for one's instrument, and the latter will not be accomplished before the former.

The symphony orchestra repertoire is arguably the Western musical tradition's greatest contribution, but it has not, will not, and indeed cannot be the place where the tuba finds its voice as an equal instrumental partner in the contemporary musical landscape. That landscape will be shaped by a vast array of both traditional and experimental musical media, among them myriad settings to which the tuba has far more to offer than it does to the orchestra. Of course, any instrument has the most to offer to idioms which it helps to shape from the outset, and so the more tuba players who are active as creative voices rather than passive re-interpreters, the more prominent place the instrument will occupy in the future of music. Instrumental advocacy after the fact can never achieve as much.

Few would dispute that the tuba has repeatedly proven itself to offer enormous contributions to musical endeavors far different from those for which it was designed. The musicians, engineers and tinkerers whose collective efforts have yielded the modern tuba have truly created a monster, and nowhere in this essay is it insinuated that the tuba's characteristic tonal breadth makes it unsuitable for non-orchestral uses. There are, however, more and less productive ways to address this handicap, the most common of which serve only to make matters worse.

While all instrumentalists are at some point charged with exaggerating articulations and dynamics in order to overcome the limitations of their acoustical environment, the extent to which tubists are traditionally required or expected to do so is a cancer on their musical and artistic development. Band tuba playing in particular is less art than craft, and tubists are almost never allowed to trust their ears in this setting, certainly with dynamics, but also (and of more dire consequence) with regard to time. The handicap of the instrument cannot be denied, nor can the efficacy of such time-honored techniques in achieving their intended results be questioned, but given that the vast majority of tuba players receive their earliest and most extensive ensemble training in settings where such musical contortions are required of them as a matter of course (and indeed, where their necessity is a matter of wide pedagogical consensus), it is not a trivial matter that such training is useless in, if not downright counterproductive to, the development of high-level musical artistry.

Band playing is, of course, only the most egregious example; there are myriad combinations of orchestration and acoustics capable of creating severe enough discrepancies in perception between performer and listener for musical contrivances to become necessary. Experienced performers know that such situations can never be avoided 100 percent of the time, but also that performing under such circumstances is a fundamentally different experience from the ideal, and that to do so frequently is among the most frustrating and unfulfilling of lives for a musician to lead. As tubists, we must cease to accept such fate as a foregone conclusion and begin to find ways of living the truly musical life of a sound artist who works in real time; we must no longer allow ourselves to be trained to so thoroughly distrust our ears, forbidden to experience the full emotional impact of musical performance even while surrounded by a symphony of artists who would riot were such an injustice imposed on them; and we must instead find outlets in spaces, ensembles and musical styles which permit us full membership in the musicians' club, where we can play in time as it sounds correct from our chairs rather than being conditioned to avoid doing so at all costs.

CODA: COMPLETE IDIOT'S GUIDE TO OPERATING IN THE AFFIRMATIVE

After reading everything that I have written above, some will surely see fit to remind me that the undue stereotyping of the tuba and those who play it is still a reality, that the audience most tubists (including myself) face is not merely naive but in fact harbors strong preconceptions about the instrument, and that these preconceptions are mostly negative (and also mostly false). They would raise all of this (none of which I would dispute) to ultimately argue that by abandoning instrumental advocacy for its own sake, we make a deal with the devil whereby a blind eye is turned to such injustices in exchange for the privilege to crawl under a rock and make music that no one really wants to hear but us. If such a thought is just that scary to anyone who has read this far, I offer as a substitute for the entire preceding essay a mere couple of sentences from the notes to Howard Johnson's album "Gravity!!!" which more or less make the same point:

Some people, hearing what Howard and his colleagues have created, say: "it doesn't sound like tubas." But, as Howard is quick to point out, "*This* is what tubas sound like. I can't account for what you've heard until now."³

Of course, Howard's band is comprised of individualists, and so one could argue that they do not, in fact, sound like any other tuba players. That is very different, however, from sounding like something they are not.

"*This* is what tubas sound like." And *this* and *this* and *this*...

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NOTES

1. Jacobs, Arnold. "The Musician Plays The Instrument." *Portrait of an Artist*. CD. Summit Records, 2000.
2. Lippman, Edward A., "The Tonal Ideal of Romanticism" in *The Philosophy and Aesthetics of Music*. University of Nebraska Press, 1999. 123-35.
3. Henthoff, Nat. "Beyond Category." Liner notes. *Gravity!!!* CD. Verve Records, 1996.