

BLANCHARD BAND EMOUCHURE CONDITIONING & PRACTICE TECHNIQUES

EMBOUCHURE CONDITIONING

Besides the obvious fact that practicing everyday will make you a much better player, there are some exercises you can do that will improve your embouchure and will also improve your playing ability, particularly your stamina. The bonus is that most of these exercises can be done anywhere! Terms to know are:

"The Burn" - When your body produces lactic acid, it splits into a lactate ion (lactate) and a hydrogen ion. The hydrogen ion is the acid in lactic acid. It interferes with electrical signals in your muscles and nerves, slows energy reactions and impairs muscle contraction. The burn you feel in any intense physical exercise is caused by the hydrogen ion.

Recuperation - It's extremely important between exercises not only to relax but also to encourage blood flow. Engorging the muscles and tissue with blood will bring nutrients (oxygen, minerals) to the affected area, which will in turn promote development of muscular strength and increase in tissue size. Bending over while buzzing your lips or a good facial massage certainly will do the trick for wind players, and shaking out hands will do it for the percussion.

Woodwind & Brass Exercises

MMM - This exercise is accomplished by merely holding your lips closed, as in making the sound "mmm". When done correctly, your lips should roll slightly inward. Hold on to this position as long as possible until "the burn", then rest and repeat.

The Pencil - Place the unsharpened end of a wooden pencil (or the eraser end) snugly against your closed teeth. Grasp the pencil with both your upper and lower lips and let go holding the pencil straight out in front of your face with only the muscles of your lips and embouchure. Continue holding the pencil until "the burn", then rest and repeat.

The Smooch - Roll the corners of your mouth as far forward as possible (pucker up). Slowly close the center of your lips by focusing all your energy to the center of the lips as if you were trying to hold the pencil from the exercise above in place tightly. Continue holding until "the burn", then rest and repeat.

The Lion - Also used extensively as a Yoga face stretching exercise this exercise can build the muscles of the cheeks that are connected from the ear to the mouth. Open your mouth as widely as you can while trying to touch your chin with your tongue. Open your eyes as wide as you can while looking straight up into the sky with your eyes. Continue holding until "the burn", then rest and repeat.

The Coin Exercise - Much like the **MMM** this exercise focuses your energy more specifically on the center of a coin. Place a coin (dime for woodwinds and upper brass, quarter for lower brass) between your upper and lower lips (in the center of where your aperture is located while playing/buzzing). Assume the **MMM** position with the coin appropriately placed between your lips. Being careful not to use your teeth in any way while grasping the coin with your lips, roll your lips towards the center of the coin exerting as much pressure as possible towards its center. Continue holding until "the burn", then rest and repeat.

The Shank (brass only) - This exercise can be done either in a standing or sitting position. Begin by first cleaning and drying the shank of your mouthpiece. Once the shank of your mouthpiece is dry, dry the inside of your lips. Slowly bend over at the hips facing the ground. Grasp the shank of the mouthpiece with your lips. Be sure to place one hand under the mouthpiece to catch it if you lose your grasp. Continue holding until "the burn", then rest and repeat.

Percussion Exercises

Knocking - It's as simple as it sounds! If you lay your arm flat, like on a dining room table, and knock, this is the action that is most important to percussion. Make sure you pull your wrist up towards the sky quickly in order to

make the muscles work like they do when you play. Listen to music while doing this and knock to the beat, in 8ths, or in triplets. Do this until you feel “the burn”, then rest and repeat.

Finger poppers – Ball your hand into a fist and then pop all of the fingers up and stretch them like a hi-five. Once your fingers touch your palm, pop them back up. Listen to music while doing this and knock to the beat, in 8ths, or in triplets. Do this until you feel “the burn”, then rest and repeat.

The Approach

This is a **daily** regimen!! Choose two or three of the exercises a day to do and keep rotating them making sure you're working each muscle group at least every other day.

Most importantly;

- 1) Go to "The Burn" and stop.
- 2) Remember to rest the same amount of time it took you to create the burn.
- 3) Repeating the exercises twice a day should be sufficient.

If you experience extreme fatigue it's OK to take a break from your daily regime for a couple of days to let the muscles recuperate and to allow the tissue to build (increase in size).

After a couple of months, every other day should suffice to maintain the strength you've developed.

PRACTICE TECHNIQUES

The best approach to practice is detailed practicing. Each time you practice pick 2 fundamental aspects of your playing that you're going to improve (major scales @80bpm*, slur 2-tongue 2 exercises @120bpm, even open rolls @100bpm, increasing your tempo to 144bpm, etc.). Then do a warm up (long tones, 2 note, 8 on a hand) and focus on each of your goals for 10-15 minutes. After working on your goals, work the show music, particularly the spots that are more difficult for you.

*bpm= beats per minute; this is the setting on your metronome

If you're having trouble with an articulation, make one of your practice goals relate to what you're struggling with. Remember: don't go too fast-start slow and speed up gradually; if you mess up in the middle- don't go back to the beginning-fix what's broken; and stay calm. Getting frustrated doesn't help anything. As things get easier, you can start to focus on memorization of the music.

Remember that while this is work, and most people don't love work, this is going to make your band experience much better! This is for you to be the best you can be and to encourage and inspire those people around you. Be honest with yourself, work smarter, not harder, and keep in mind that the more you give, the more you get, but the more you get, the more you have to give. **YOU'RE AWESOME!** You can do this!!

Attached is an achievement chart to help you focus your practice to make the most out of the time you spend improving. The chart has a section called “strategies”. This is what it's referring to:

Practice Strategies

| | | |
|---------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|
| Clap and count | Finger and say | Simplify the rhythm |
| Long-short-long | Play rhythm on one pitch | Slow it down |
| Use a metronome | Three times perfect | Say articulation syllables |
| Pattern recognition | Chunking | Work back from the end |
| Isolate one aspect | Record your playing | Build from the middle |

**“To triumph, you must add UMPH to TRY!”
So let's do it!!**