

Buzzing Basics

Brian Wendel

Buzzing is a long-debated practice technique. Some swear by it and others deplore it. In my practicing and teaching, I am a big fan of it, however I'm sensitive to some of the concerns I've heard over the years. Here is a list of some buzzing basics I like to keep in mind—I think it addresses some of the issues people raise with it.

Embouchure Set-Up

Brass playing functions through vibrating lips. The vibrations are initiated by an active flow of wind. If the lips are not connected, air simply passes through. To form a proper buzz and make a sound on the instrument, our embouchure needs to be set properly.

1. Place your lips in as if you were speaking the letter 'M'. This naturally sets the lips up to be connected, while it doesn't squeeze them together using pressure.
2. Separately, form the letter 'S'. This pulls back the edges of your lips (the corners in 'brass-speak') to create an anchor or strength point on each side of your lips. This anchor should remain firm at all times.
3. Combine these two lip formations ('M' and 'S'), and you've got an embouchure!
4. Another embouchure setting to keep in mind is to keep a flat chin, and not allow air to puff up under your lower lip.
5. As mentioned in passing just before, your lips should be connected but not squeezed! Without connection there will be no sound. Your *corners* serve as the muscle in the operation, so use minimal mouthpiece pressure (as in, don't use more pressure than you need) to allow for maximum flexibility on the horn.

Why Buzz?

I practice buzzing to:

1. remind my lips of the required wind + lip connection
2. focus on the core of my sound. Sound begins in your mind, transfers to your body, and the first equipment of contact is the mouthpiece. The sound you create while buzzing DOES matter
3. connect my notes in a fluid way and erase possible limitations or blockages caused by the tongue. Buzzing glissandos encourages wind-flow.
4. fix intonation
5. strengthen my corners

What to Listen For and What to Adjust:

1. Pure, focused, warm sound. Your buzzing sound can still be beautiful (in a buzzy kind of way).
2. No airiness. Airiness means I'm blowing too hard and forcing the lips to not buzz.
3. Close your aperture a bit. The buzzing airflow requires less air than the instrument. Since buzzing is a practice tool, it is *different* from actual playing. I always open my aperture again when I play the instrument
4. Remove tongue. Tonguing is useless while buzzing. It only interrupts airflow. I aim to have an immediate sound when I buzz (it's something to aspire to).
5. Buzz at mp+ or mf maximum. This prevents overblowing.

6. Glissando between pitches to encourage a constant buzz when you do play the instrument.
7. Always fix intonation! The pitch you get when you buzz is an indication of your pitch center while playing. The buzz is a microphone for pitch. If you can control it in the buzz it will be much easier to control on the horn. Other methods to work on pitch control are singing and whistling (thanks to Fergus McWilliam for that one!). Use a drone if you don't have a tuned piano to play with.

What to Buzz and How Long:

1. Simple scale patterns. Before I play the horn I start with a small interval of maybe a fifth, and then typically move onto a few octaves as I go on.
2. Simple melodies (for fun)
3. Whatever passage I'm practicing that needs work (usually goes hand in hand with flutter tonguing on the horn, actual glissandos, air attacks, etc).
4. I don't encourage anyone to buzz for minute after minute! My buzzing intervals are usually 30+ seconds. I take brief rests in between if I'm doing more extensive buzzing.

Free Buzzing:

I do bits of free buzzing, but much less than I do normal buzzing. Free buzzing should be used quite sparingly in my opinion, but it's a more close-up view of the lip activity, which can be informative. If you struggle with free buzzing, try placing your middle and index finger on your lips to simulate mouthpiece pressure. Lots of people use mouthpiece rims to be more precise in this way.

Can't Buzz (or can't get your students to buzz)?

1. Cover part of the mouthpiece opening with your pinky. As a buzzing beginner, covering more will simulate the resistance of the trombone itself. As you/they get better at buzzing, you can remove your pinky more and more.