

COMPOSING FOR THE TROMBONE (revised, Oct. 2022)

IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER:

1) **SOUND** The Trombone is member of the Low Brass family and so the instrument's most comfortable range is consistent with the vocal range of most adult men (i.e. from alto to bass). Historically, the trombone was the instrument that kept the altos, tenors, and basses in line – so it had to be very vocal. The sort of clumsy nature of its plumbing was outmatched by the virtuosity of the violin in the 1600s and the sax and trumpet in the 1900s! But we persevere...and are important members of blues horn sections, orchestral brass sections, brass bands, big bands, mixed brass chamber ensembles and...on rare and beautiful occasions...as a clinician, chamber musician, and featured soloist :).

Comfortable range for advanced students: Tenor Trombone – from an E one octave and a sixth below middle C to the C an octave above middle C. With an F attachment the player can find true notes in the harmonic series from the F an octave and a fifth below middle C down to a C...the B natural is not really possible, though Bartok thought it was in his Concerto for Orchestra!

Comfortable range for intermediate students: The range is basically the E and octave and a sixth below middle C to an F above middle C.

2) Generally, trombonists read notes in bass clef though the classically trained players as they become more advanced learn to read in tenor and alto clefs – saving all those ledger lines! Trombonists in the brass band tradition read treble clef Bb parts to align their tunings to the physics of the instrument and with their greater family of brass instruments such as the cornet, Bb Euphonium, Bb baritone, and Bb Tuba. In the jazz tradition, trombonists solely play bass clef.

3) Because trombonists have slides they can glissando (“gliss”) between notes that other instruments are unable due to having keys or valves. In general, the glissando can only happen within the same partials of notes, i.e.....

From Tenor Trombone's First Position

Low Bb (Ninth below piano's middle C) down to or up from Low E

Middle F (Fifth below piano's middle C) down to or up from Low B natural

Middle Bb (Major second below middle C) down to or up from Middle E

D (Major second above middle C) down to or up from Middle Ab

F (next partial up) to or up from Middle B natural

Ab (sort of*) above Bb down to D

High Bb down or up from High E

Etc.

*doesn't really exist on the horn as its place on the harmonic series is very flat to equal temperament

The "valves" can turn a Bb Trombone into an F horn, and so the partials need to be thought of accordingly, where first position is the harmonic series associated with the length of tubing the valve allows.

There is a beautiful thing called a "natural slur" for a trombonist, which occurs when moving in legato between notes of different partials. In this case, there is a natural legato where the air is not interrupted but the movement of notes are clearly articulated rather than glissed.

4) **ARTICULATION:** Because we can articulate incrementally from a gliss to notes separated by considerable space – Articulation markings are important instructions for trombonists - as they tell us if and with what kind of separation between notes you would like. Options range from staccato, to staccato with a tenuto, to solely tenuto, to legato and then slurred. It is important to note that the faster notes are to be played the more legato they will sound. Sixteenth notes at quarter = 108 is about as fast as most players can single tongue, brief double tonguing faster passages are possible. Likewise, what kind of accent? Note that there is some variance in how certain accents are understood both in jazz and classical, and in older European and North American notation. However, one can over-notate, and as important as is the notated articulation is the **CHARACTER:** trombonists can be sweet/playful/royal/gruff – it helps the performer buy in to your imagination by designating what kind of character you want us to present.

5) **BREATHING** - We can generally play about 8-15 seconds at most before we must breathe – so please give us time for that (and for any changes of mutes – which I'll explain). Higher and softer notes can be held for longer duration than lower and louder notes.

6) **ENDURANCE**–We do all our heavy lifting with our mouth muscles; we can't play all the time (like pianists!) – so we need breaks, both from playing high notes (low notes are great breaks!) – and from playing period (give us a lot of rests! We're lazy!)

7) **WHERE TROMBONISTS FIND JOY:**

We rarely are asked to show our lyrical side – we are often used in larger ensembles as the punctuation mark (often the exclamation mark!), the clown, or the bass pad. I encourage you to listen to Jack Teagarden, Tommy Dorsey, and BC's own Ian McDougall to hear the best of lyrical playing! It is our story that Frank Sinatra copied his phrasing from his first "boss", Tommy Dorsey and we're sticking to it!

8) **MUTES:**

Top four mutes:

Straight Mute – Nasal (works well with muted brass and winds)

Cup Mute – sweet (works well with strings)

Plunger Mute – wa-wa – used to simulate vocal sounds – in jazz with a pixie

I'm also increasingly asked to play with the harmon mute, and sometimes a bucket (very covered sound).....

IMPORTANT! There should be non-playing space to place and remove mutes..at least 6 seconds for either change. Also know that a mute makes the sound softer (definition of “mute”) but also changes its colour. However, if the dynamic the player sees is soft, the special nature of that colour within a large ensemble will be lost. So, if you want the mute “colour”, and the sound softer, put a dynamic marking that is louder than you wish, but muted, so with the mute you'll get the dynamic and the colour you would like.

9) EXTENDED TECHNIQUE

There is a lot that trombones can do that extend beyond traditional technique. I don't discourage your composing for us to utilize some of these techniques, but before you do I encourage you to explore the traditional strengths of the instrument so that any “extension” is truly something you can thoughtfully develop rather than a means of sonic surprise, which often I think becomes boring rather quickly.

Some extended techniques that now are part of compositional tradition include:

Singing while playing

Rumbles and Rips

Non-traditional sounds utilizing parts of the instrument

10) Any questions? Please e-mail me, Jeremy Berkman, at

augwin@hotmail.com

Happy Composing!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

APPENDIX:

SOME ESSENTIAL PROPONENTS OF THE TROMBONE --- LISTENING (Find on Youtube)

Jazz:

Kid Ory

Jack Teagarden

Tommy Dorsey

Carol Jarvis

Tricky Sam Nanton

JJ Johnson
Ian McDougall

Classical:

Vinko Globokar
Catherine Motuz (sackbut, early trombone)
Greg Ingles (sackbut)
Benny Sluchin
Christian Lindberg

Important Classical Masterworks featuring well written parts for the the modern trombone:
Mahler Symphony #3, Mozart's Requiem, Hindemith Sonata, Berio Sequenza, Underhill
Trombone Quintet (ok, I'm biased – I recorded this with the Bozzini String Quartet).
Locally: *i tromboni* trombone quintet, Ellen Marple, *The Vancouver Symphony Orchestra section*
– *Andrew Poirier and Ilan Morgenstern (bass trombone)*

https://youtu.be/PL4sS_XIJOQ Owen Underhill's Trombone Walking
https://youtu.be/DuIXgN_5RkI Owen Underhill's Trombone Quintet (with Bozzini String
Quartet)
https://youtu.be/xUeGZX_LwQw Matthew Good's Lights of Endangered Species
<https://youtu.be/UBAkEP4JY9M> Improvisation for Little Chamber Music Society

Pop Music:

Chicago
Earth Wind and Fire
The National
Tower of Power
Matthew Good (*Lights of Endangered Species* – my favourite singer/songwriter's tune on which I
have recorded, with local lead jazz trombonist Rod Murray)

Jeremy Berkman, Trombonist

*Member: Turning Point Ensemble, One-Two-Trio, Vancouver Brass Orchestra, Jill Townsend
Big Band, Vancouver Opera Orchestra, the Peggy Lee Band....Awarded Mayor's Award (Music)
for City of Vancouver. Graduate of Juilliard School, and Oberlin College (Economics) and
Conservatory of Music – studies with Tim Atherton, Thomas Cramer, and Per Brevig. Recent
exploration of the music of the 16th and 17th centuries playing sackbut as a member of Cappella
Borealis, – and co-founder of No Chamber Music Society (mission of utilizing music-making and
listening to bring neighbors together)*

*Appears on over 40 CDs with among others Peggy Lee Band, Tanya Tagaq, Turning Point
Ensemble, Bozzini String Quartet, Vancouver Symphony Orchestra, Michael Bubl , Matthew*

Good, Jill Townsend Big Band, Hard Rubber Orchestra. Sessional Instructor at UBC.