

Universal concepts of “Embouchure Mechanics”

Despite humans' strongest desires and an inbuilt instinct to deal in absolutes, there is an element of individuality to every embouchure. The recurring universal principles of muscle use and mechanics are however more similar than different from person to person. I will try to outline sound pedagogical understandings and practices relating to embouchure-oriented instruction. I aim to, spread the knowledge (it took me some 20 years to collect), experience and develop an understanding within the brass and wind playing community to be able to help myself and others to have a more fulfilling playing (and therefore musical) experience. Having struggled but succeeded to attain the double register of the trumpet, it is my genuine belief that there are fewer people in the world who do not possess the physical potential to play up to double C than there are people that are, with the right instruction, able to attain this register. The differences between people are the compromises they will be required to make to achieve whichever range they wish to acquire. These compromises need to fit the sound and stylistic wishes of the individual, but are, to a certain extent, linked to the potential range that any given individual will be able to efficiently attain. That is to say in a manner whereby their embouchure is not manipulated past the point of losing its integrity.

The biggest challenge in teaching trumpet is helping players to learn how to change pitch and, ultimately, register with the least possible manipulation and with a uniform and linear increase in the intensity of muscular engagement and positioning using embouchure mechanical movement. There are many different ways of doing this, but without imparting a simple fundamental knowledge of at least the mechanical aspect of embouchure, many players fall foul to what is referred to as “Paralysis by Analysis”. This phenomenon has, unfortunately, led to the majority of high-level players who occupy teaching positions of authority to endorse “embouchure ignorance” or “Myopia Utopia”

“Embouchure ignorance” is born out of an understanding of physiology, that argues that the number of nerve endings and the limited range of mechanical movement involved in playing a wind instrument do not serve to be a valid way of understanding or attempting to consciously control playing “by feel”, due to a lack of useful feedback information to the brain. This is a very easily debunked ideology but it is with certain qualifications it must be understood: By expanding the mechanical range of movement in playing, by employing an Einsetzen/ Ansetzen approach to playing and sound production we are able to significantly increase the range of movement and for most players develop an intuitive “embouchure intelligence”. For other players, we need to employ a “squeak set” embouchure and learn to transition from this to the normal “Ansetzen” embouchure and back. By employing all three sets of embouchure and linking them together, we can develop the “embouchure intelligence” of our normal playing embouchure. The whole aim is to develop an intuitive understanding of the mechanical movement necessary for changing register in the most efficient way possible. That is to say that after we have become familiar with controlling these elements of the mechanical movement of playing through playing exercises, the ultimate goal is to allow the developed movements to become automatic/ intuitive. It is first here that the teaching ideology accredited to Arnold Jacobs (Song and Wind) becomes useful.