In the last 2 posts I’ve encouraged adopting a method for staying in shape and gaining endurance and hopefully stamina over the summer via playing a rotation of etudes. I’ve also encouraged adopting a method of using an interval timer to increase efficiency and maintain focus while practicing.

Today I’d like to throw a wrench into things, dig a bit deeper and offer some ideas on how to practice within the parameters of 8on 4off (84).

Yes, I believe we need to put in the work to gain access to more strength and stamina and endurance and confidence - some of the things that make us great trumpet players and musicians. HOWEVER - many of us are under the impression that more practicing is always better and always the
First - I need to tell you I strongly believe in a concept called “Minimum Effective Dose”. For our purposes - the LEAST amount of practicing that will yield the maximum desired outcome. Yes, we need to play and get the repetitions in, but we also need to have a deep understanding of what our realistic daily, hourly, and 8 min goals are and when enough is enough.

To be clear, when I say least amount of practicing I’m not suggesting not to practice or to be unprepared! I’m AM, however, suggesting that endless/mindless practicing isn’t helpful. Endless/mindless practicing leads to physical and mental fatigue. The more we accept that physical and mental fatigue is normal - the more we no longer view fatigue as actual fatigue - we just think it’s normal. IT IS NOT NORMAL TO BE FATIGUED ALL THE TIME! Being fatigued all
the time leads to burnout and potentially overuse injuries.

Endless/mindless repetitions can also create a deep sense of mistrust in ourselves and what we are trying to accomplish on our instruments. It’s literally the opposite of what we need as musicians - CONFIDENCE!

So - How do we account for our need to perform to our exacting standards while not over-practicing? My solution - an equation based around VERY attainable goals within each segment of the 8 minute working blocks of time. Once those minuscule goals are attained - MOVE ON.

Outside of the trumpet player’s ever-present worries about “high notes”, I would argue that most of us get most hung up on issues surrounding tempo, so I’ll focus on that for this post.
The equation \( = (\text{End Goal Tempo}) \text{ minus (start tempo where there are no mistakes)} \text{ divided by (Time Frame)}\)

Example - Goal of 100 beats per minute (bpm). Start tempo where I don’t make mistakes is found to be 70bpm. Time frame is 2 weeks.

\[
100 - 70 = 30 \\
30 / 14 \text{ days} = \sim 2
\]

My daily practice on X piece of music is thus limited to 2bpm increase in tempo per day.

This equation requires us to be completely honest with ourselves, but what may start out as a seemingly ridiculous or frustratingly slow tempo - if we follow this equation, without ego attached, we will have a much deeper understanding of each and every piece of music or exercise we’re attempting to learn AND we will
start and end each practice session and playing day with a better, confident and HEALTHIER relationship with the trumpet and that music which we’re learning.

I’ll give you 2 scenarios. Both require a deep and honest personal assessment of an appropriate starting point and an end goal.

SCENARIO 1

Challenge - Learn Charlier 1 for my next lesson. The indicated tempo (goal) is 104-120 beats per minute.

My solution - REMOVE MY EGO, press start on my timer and find a starting tempo where I am absolutely sure I can play thru the entire etude without missing any notes. Let’s say I figure out that my starting point is a mere 60bpm. From there, I create my workable and trackable equation - The goal of 120bpm minus 60bpm = 60bpm. 60bpm divided by 6 Days = 10bpm.
10bpm faster per day is now my established daily goal. Note - my goal is to play the etude at 120 in a week from now, NOT today or tomorrow!

Having a realistic expectation of what work needs to be accomplished and when the work is due is key to remaining positive and confident!

I’m confident I can play at 60bpm and I want to remain confident as I progress. The issues surrounding tempo are generally related to coordination - so I will want to keep the jumps in tempo to a minimum so that I don’t actually notice the tempo changes. The goal is to trick my body into feeling at the end of the week that 120bpm is as easy as 60bpm was at the beginning. A 2bpm increase should do the trick to progress but keep myself coordinated.

Increasing the tempo 2bpm = 6
repetitions (60,62,64,66,68,70). It’s probable that playing Charlier 1 6x through is overkill and I’ll fatigue quickly, thus not necessary. So - I find the trouble spots, bracket them off and practice only those spots. I try to keep the bracketed trouble spots as exact as possible - as small as one interval and not more than 4 measures. I move the tempo up only when I’m confident I can play those trouble spots at each slow tempo. Today 60-70, tomorrow 70-80 and so on...

Let’s say I have bracketed 4 trouble spots. I play each bracket beginning at 60bpm and move up by 2 clicks. When I reach 70bpm I’ll play the entire etude at 70bpm and I’m finished and moving on to the next thing. In the end, I will have confidently played the complete etude at 60bpm (maybe again at 65bpm halfway thru the process) and at 70bpm. I will have practiced the 4 trouble spots 6x in increasing small tempo jumps. AND with the
timer running, this will have only taken maybe 2 8min segments. That’s 16 minutes of work on Charlier 1 for the day. That’s it.

Here’s the key - I started the work on the etude with total confidence and I ended the work on the etude with total confidence! My relationship to the trumpet/music never changed. I was always confident and was never frustrated.

SCENARIO 2

Challenge - I’ve decided to take an audition. There are many excerpts and some of them I need to play slowly to learn or re-learn.

Solution - quickly identify and separate out the excerpts that I know will require significant deliberate tempo work (Scheherazade, Pines 1st Mvt, Petrouchka Dance, Ravel Piano
Concerto - to name a few) from those excerpts that I know I can play well at any given moment and thus don’t need to play as often.

I will need to decide when I want the tempo work to be complete and begin running rounds to mimic the audition. Let’s say the audition is 8 weeks away and I want to start running rounds 2 weeks before - this means I have 6 weeks to do tempo work.

6 weeks = 42 days. I take 1 day completely off the trumpet every week. This leaves me with 36 available practice days.

I will take the the excerpts that need tempo work and subtract 36bpm from the desired end tempo. This is my starting point.

Scheherazade - 95bpm - 36bpm = 59bpm
Pines 1st Mvt - 90bpm - 36bpm = 54bpm
Petrouchka Dance - 116bpm -
36bpm = 80bpm
Ravel - 117bpm - 36bpm = 81bpm

By increasing the tempo 1-2 bpm each day - the simple equation guarantees that I will be “at tempo” with confidence and without frustration in 6 weeks from now. Also - by following this equation - I can expect to play thru an excerpt correctly 2x and MOVE ALONG.

Please understand - I don’t need the excerpts to be at tempo right now - I only need them to be at tempo in 6 or (even with a cushion of time) 8 weeks from now.

By increasing the tempo at an agonizingly slow pace, I’m allowing myself to concentrate on sound and articulation and coordinations - but I’m also moving QUICKLY and confidently by not getting bogged down with endlessly playing through each excerpt. These excerpts are short. I can confidently get the required work done on 4-10
Speed kills - so instead of trying to learn something as fast as possible and making mistakes and getting frustrated - I think of it like this - what’s the slowest pace I can deeply learn something in the available timeframe?

Hopefully you are beginning to see that by using an interval timer to limit the amount of continuous playing time - thus keeping us fresh, and by employing a well-thought out tempo equation that will allow us to confidently practice while being efficient in achieving very small daily goals and avoiding frustration and fatigue - these 2 things combined allow us to exhibit a certain amount of trackable control over what and how we practice each day. Having an efficient, quantifiable and trackable method of daily practice SHOULD allow us to move quickly and
methodically through a large amount of repertoire and be CONFIDENT in our performances!

What’s your equation? If you don’t have one, give mine a try and let me know what you think!

As always - if you’d like a PDF of this, I’m happy to forward this to you.

Happy Practicing!
- Chris