

Alto Trombone **Savvy** Michael Lake



Alto Trombone Savvy by Michael Lake

Insights and method for alto trombone

In alto clef

Second Edition

MusicSavvy.com

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Cover photo of Michael Lake's Adams Sterling Silver alto trombone

Acknowledgments

I couldn't possibly acknowledge all the people who have influenced my playing and thinking about trombone and music that have resulted in the ideas within this book. But here's a start...

My parents encouraged my early musical studies and were equally encouraging as I went off into the great unknown to become a professional trombone player. Mom always said I would some day thank her for setting the egg timer daily for 30 minutes of mandatory piano practice as I wrestled with the small spinet in the corner of our living room. Thanks Mom!

I was fortunate that my elementary school music teachers happened to be trombone players and later to have attended Arcadia High School in Phoenix Arizona where Warren "Jeff" Jefferies was the dedicated jazz teacher. With Mr. Jefferies at the piano, he and I would play tunes after official school for hours as I struggled to crack the code on improvising over chord changes. His generosity and sage advice helped shape a young aspiring jazz trombone player.

My four years at Arizona State University intersected with a short teaching stint of Dan Hearle, a master jazz educator who would later teach for 35 years at North Texas State. Dan's jazz improvisation classes at ASU left

an indelible mark on me as did listening to him glide effortlessly over the piano on every tune I heard him play.

Dan's colleague and recording partner Jamie Aebersold provided me and the world with a lifetime of rhythm section accompaniment that built both my repertoire and improvisation skills. Without those invaluable tracks, practicing would have been neither as fun nor as productive.

My trombone studies at Arizona State were orchestrated by Gail Wilson. I am grateful to Gail for his patience and understanding of a young jazz trombone player doing his best not to swing the classical etudes assigned to him each week. I'm also grateful to Gail's graduate assistant Kevin Hedges who first introduced me to the alto trombone.

Numerous friends, colleagues, band leaders, trombone players both well-known and unknown, as well as a world of influential musicians all helped shape the highly opinionated musician who authored this little book.

I hope it provides you entertainment, inspiration and the ability to play alto trombone as you imagine you can!



Bear playing alto trombone in woods courtesy of Barry Kierce

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Preface

Thank you for buying this book. My hope is that by reading, playing the exercises, and thinking about some of its ideas, you will become savvy enough about the alto trombone to perform at whatever level you wish and will enjoy a greater confidence in your playing.

The section entitled *Finding Your Unique Musical Voice* explores one of the most important topics in the book, namely that you possess a great trombone playing potential, but only if you discover and follow your unique voice and resist the trap of long-term imitation. All that is required of you is determination, the right instruction, and a lot of hard work. Ready for that?

This book is a collection of my observations and experiences with the alto version of that most awesome of brass instruments called trombone. This is my opportunity to share with you what I have learned over a lifetime that seemed to have worked for me and others.

When I began thinking about this book several years ago, I asked myself how many people are interested in learning the alto. I still have no idea. You may be a really good alto player curious about some ways to get better. You might be a lifelong tenor player curious about the fun you could have playing an alto.

The group I'm most unsure yet hopeful of is that of young boys and girls beginning their school's music program. Is it too much to ask that this smaller, lighter version of the trombone be introduced to children?

There are alto trombone players who want to strengthen (begin?) their ability to improvise, so the jazz section remains an important part of this book.

As I was writing the section on improvisation, however, I soon realized that I had more to write and record as models and examples than I could fit into this book—so much so that I decided to write a separate book called *Trombone Improvisation Savvy*. Please refer to *Trombone Improvisation Savvy* for many more models, exercises, and thoughts about improvisation on *any* trombone.



I started playing tenor trombone at 10. I began playing the alto mid-way through Arizona State in the midst of my trombone studies and a regular gig that was paying for college. Wanting to be much more proficient than I was while playing both alto and tenor, I thought, *this isn't working so I'm going to play the alto full time*. And like any early explorer worth his salt, I burned the ship (sold my tenor) so it would be harder to slip back into the comfort of my familiar tenor.

Around that time, I had applied for and won a National Endowment for the Arts grant to study with the great Frank Rosolino. Frank's tragic death that fall left me looking for some way to spend the endowment or risk giving it back.

A good friend reminded me that he was spending that summer in Woodstock, New York at the Creative Music Studio. He also reminded me that trombonist George Lewis would be teaching along with Anthony Braxton and the Art Ensemble of Chicago. That was my kind of music at the time, so I fulfilled my public duty to spend the government's hard-earned cash.

A year later and immediately out of college, I spent four years at what I'll call a musician's boot camp in Minneapolis. It was a great experience where I gained a well-rounded education in music, sales, marketing and discipline.

I next played professionally from Philadelphia to Boston to New York performing lots of salsa, some jazz, and some recording. Along the way I played with some great musicians and found my way into a Grammy nomination with my four-trombone (three tenors and one alto) Boston-based salsa band called Caribbean Express.



I perform locally but my musical fire is ignited by the music I produce in my studio. With writing and recording—much like playing alto trombone—do something every day and you will improve. Maybe you'll even get really good at it.

If you wish to hear some of my music, you will find it at www.altobone.com/music.

I like to think of this book as the missing manual for the alto trombone. More than merely instruction for technique, I hope it will inspire you to make satisfying music with this wonderful instrument and help you become as alto trombone savvy as you imagine you can be.

A few years later, I crafted a deal in New York to buy a large inventory of entry-level recording equipment from a Japanese electronics manufacturer called Sansui. One of the units I kept for myself, a 6-track cassette recorder, started a life-long exploration of recording and music technology that has culminated into my recording/production facility.



A few years ago I needed a change so I moved back to my beloved Phoenix, Arizona. Yes, it's a dry heat and yes, I am scared of rattlesnakes, but it has always been my home.

Introduction

This book was born from dozens and dozens of questions about the alto trombone throughout the years from people like you who were intrigued by the possibilities of this little brother of the tenor. In fact, you probably bought this book for one or more of the following reasons:

1. You think the alto is cool and you want to play it.
2. You own an alto that has become a dusty fixture in your bedroom closet, and you'd like to again play, this time with more success.
3. You currently play the alto - perhaps classically - and think you might like to play a bit of jazz on it.



Whichever your reason for picking up this book, I take seriously the responsibility of providing you with the guidance you seek to help you reach your musical goals.

I hope that however this book influences you, we can help bring the alto trombone into the musical mainstream where it can attain the position it rightly deserves.

You can tell I am passionate about the alto trombone. I love performing and recording on it. I also enjoy answering the many questions I receive asking how to play the alto better.

Throughout years of conversations, emails, and comments, I've had the pleasure of connecting with players all over the world like you. Through this book, I finally get the opportunity to fully illustrate my playing philosophy, tips, and tools to help you play better.

As with any advice, some will work for you and some won't. Your task is to look through this information and find thoughts and exercises that work well for you, and once you've found them, practice and utilize them to make you the best alto trombone player you can be.

Can jazz be played on the alto trombone? Judging by how few play anything other than classical on the alto, you might be tempted to think not. But the belief I had back when I first picked up the alto was that it is a horn

built for jazz. Even more than jazz, I've played it on salsa gigs, recording sessions, big bands, cruise ships, combos and pretty much anywhere a tenor trombone would normally play. Yes, you can play more than classical music on the alto trombone.

The exercises within this book are crafted to take advantage of the different overtone series of the alto. For example, when first learning the alto, you will likely be tempted to bring your slide in to play F3 in first position as you've done your whole life on the tenor - rather than sixth. Building your muscle memory to the counter-intuitive alto positions is necessary for commanding the alto and for playing jazz fluently guided by your ear. The exercises throughout this book are designed to build your subconscious fluency with the alto.

I am frequently asked what key the alto is pitched in. This book focuses on the Eb alto. I've never played any other. Since the fundamental of the tube is Eb, it makes sense to consider Eb to be the key of the horn. However, just like the fundamental of the tenor is Bb yet it is a C instrument, I consider the alto to be a C instrument.

From the very beginning, I was never willing to consider the horn a transposing instrument like an alto saxophone nor could I demand that music be given to me in alto clef. So I play the alto as a C instrument in bass clef just like the tenor.

I have never owned an alto with trigger. My choice of horn was driven by the desire for simplicity of the instrument. After all, I never wanted to perform regularly within the "false" register from E2 to Ab2 so a straight horn worked perfectly well. The exercises within this book will work fine for a non-trigger alto.

Accessing and Playing with the Audio Files

The power of this book comes from the over fifty audio files available to you as examples and accompaniments throughout this book. They are organized as a SoundCloud playlist and can be accessed through the URL: www.bit.ly/altobonesavvy.

Each time a soundfile is available, you will see the music icon followed by the name of the file. For example:



bit.ly/altobonesavvy “Bach 50 full”



In the above example, you would go to the SoundCloud playlist at bit.ly/altobonesavvy and then select the file within the playlist called “Bach 50 full”. The SoundCloud playlist is in the order of this book.

I purposefully chose not to place these audio files on a disk within the book because I wanted to keep the cost of the book as low as possible. Plus, these days, it’s more of a hassle for most of us to play a CD. Accessing these digital files on-line should be more convenient for you.

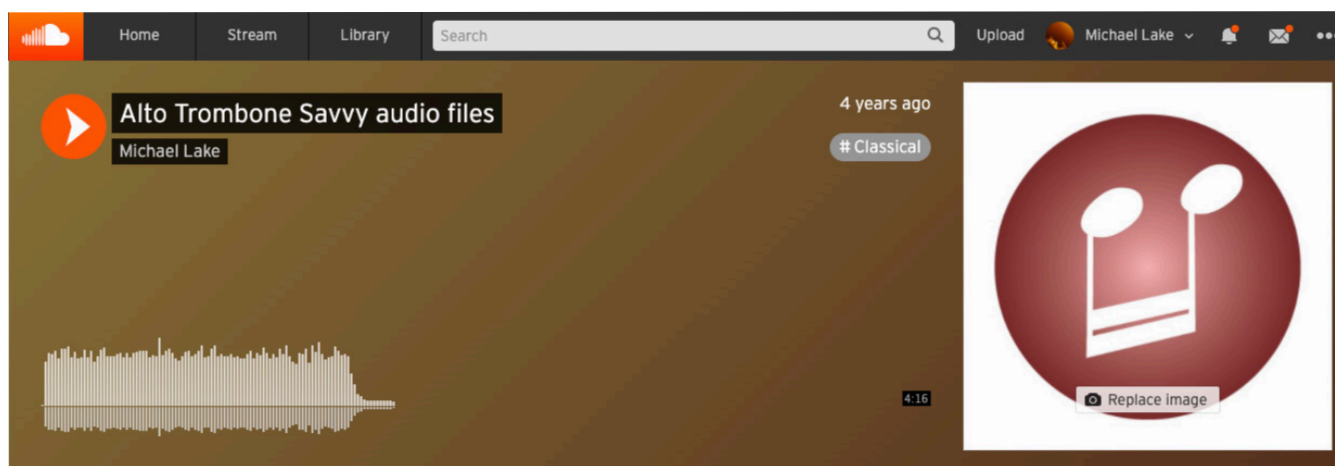
That said, I know this will inconvenience some of you. If you lack an Internet connection that feeds a sound system, find a fast connection somewhere and download some or all of the files to your local device. Then play them through your sound system, which could be anything from a state-of-the-art stereo to an iPhone. To download a file from the SoundCloud playlist, click to the right of the file and select “Download file” from the drop-down options.



The very bottom of the Playlist page displays some controls for going to the track, start, play/pause on current track and skipping to the next track. There is also a cycle link that will repeat the current track if you want to keep cycling the track. A good application for that would be to cycle the tracks *Strings for Gliss Warm-ups* or *Dreams of tomorrow* as you take your time warming up on the written exercises or improvise ones of your own making.

Hit the space bar for start and stop. The SoundCloud player controls:





The audio files on the SoundCloud playlist and used within this book

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| 1. Dreams of Tomorrow | 21. Rochut #1 Both Parts | 36. Dream Repair Rhythm Only |
| 2. Life is a Game | 22. Rochut #1 Melody | 37. Metro Crystals with Recorded Trombone Line |
| 3. String for Gliss Warm-ups | 23. Rochut #1 Counter Melody | 38. Metro Crystals Rhythm Only |
| 4. Nova Discovery For Warm-up Glisses | 24. Wee Small Hours Four Part | 39. Harp March with Recorded Trombone Line |
| 5. Intonation Exercise - Holding Tones | 25. Wee Small Hours Four Part No First | 40. Harp March Rhythm Only |
| 6. Bach #50 Full | 26. Wee Small Hours Four Part No Second | 41. String Bounce with Recorded Trombone Line |
| 7. Bach #50 No First | 27. Wee Small Hours Four Part No Third | 42. String Bounce Rhythm Only |
| 8. Bach #50 No Second | 28. Wee Small Hours Four Part No Fourth | 43. Jungle Dance with Recorded Trombone Line |
| 9. Bach #50 No Third | 29. Vibrato Examples | 44. Jungle Dance Rhythm Only |
| 10. Bach #50 No Fourth | 30. String Accompaniment with Trombone Line | 45. Three Feel Flexibility Track |
| 11. Bach #107 Full | 31. String Accompaniment for Rhythm Exercise | 46. Rhythm Flexibility Track |
| 12. Bach #107 No First | 32. Jazz Rhythm Exercise with Recorded Trombone Line | 47. Creative Slide Demo |
| 13. Bach #107 No Second | 33. Jazz Rhythm Exercise Rhythm Only | 48. False Tones From Upper Octave |
| 14. Bach #107 No Third | 34. Off Beat Bass Rhythm | 49. False Tones From Upper Fifth |
| 15. Bach #107 No Fourth | 35. Dream Repair with Recorded Trombone Line | 50. Improvised line over C7 |
| 16. Bach #154 Full | | 51. Walkin Blues |
| 17. Bach #154 No First | | 52. Now's The Time Rhythm |
| 18. Bach #154 No Second | | 53. Trading On Blues |
| 19. Bach #154 No Third | | 54. Held Blues Chords |
| 20. Bach #154 No Fourth | | |



Alto Trombone Equipment Savvy

While there isn't nearly the variety of alto trombones as there are tenors, several alto models do exist, each providing their own unique sound and characteristics. I have always played a Yamaha YSL671 with a dual bore: .470 and .490. I've always played a Bach 6½ AL mouthpiece and recently started using a Doug Elliott version. That may be a surprising mouthpiece, but from the beginning I wanted a big sound so that I could blend into the tenor trombones and not sound like an odd semi-trombone. Also I was playing the 6½ on my tenor before picking up the alto, so it also gave me some needed continuity when I switched.

Thein & Körner dedicate a portion of their terrific book, *The World of Alto Trombone (which you can find on Amazon)* to a survey of alto trombones. With their kind permission, I will share the results of their comparison test.

For the comparison, five trombonists performed 1. an individual blowing test, 2. the 1st movement to 32 from the concert for alto trombone in Bb Major from J.G. Albrechtsberger, and 3. the chorale from the last movement of the third symphony by Robert Schumann, as well as the beginning of the 4th movement - Allegro - of L. van Beethoven's 5th Symphony.

Alto Trombones

The following 11 alto trombones were played by: Prof. Christian Sprenger, Peter Körner, Sebastian Stricker, Thomas Schneider and Tamés Asztalos. For more on this unique study, I refer you to *The World of Alto Trombone* which you can purchase on Amazon.

1. Kühnl & Hoyer, model Slokar

Sound: dark, warm and clear with some calling it bright and solid

Intonation: good, clear and solid

Articulation: predominantly light and clear with one tester calling it loud and laborious, and another calling it a little bit difficult in the movement.

2. S.E. Shires, A-7Y-LW (configuration: 7.75" gold brass bell, soldered wire, lightweight A85/95N conical German slide/tuning slide)

Sound: complete, big and dark and partly as excellent

Intonation: partly described as blurred, not so clear, however good.

Articulation: a little late, hard, seems laborious

Miscellaneous: does not mix so well, too round in our set, few overtones, very dark, however with good intonation

3. Helmut Voigt, HV2

Sound: very rich in overtones, clear and bright with a dark soul. Indeed, sometimes as a little bit too narrow. With some, it sounded bright and clear but covered.

Intonation: clear and solid, sometimes not immediately classified

Articulation: a little late, however, very clear and lucid.

Miscellaneous: a very good section mixer was reached in piano, from mf-f, however, she sticks out over the setting.

4. Conn, 36H

Sound: dark, covered and warm, nevertheless it has bright parts. With some players, a little too cold or even brash.

Intonation: partly described as good and partly as difficult with the slide positions characterized as different.

Articulation: a bit heavy, even though not too late and clear

Miscellaneous: a little bit difficult. Otherwise it fitted well into the setting and did not stand out.

5. Lätzsche, model Schneider

Sound: very bright, brilliant, powerful, rich in overtones, however sometimes also as forced and a bit tight

Intonation: predominantly good and stable

Articulation: clear but a bit laborious

Miscellaneous: a good mix fitting in the setting. It lies well about the setting, sometimes too much over it (bright and close). Intonation in the setting was very good.

6. Miraphone

Sound: very dark, full, warm and covered

Intonation: good, sometimes not clear, the player needs to get used to it because of the unusual 4th position

Articulation: difficult, sometimes light and clear

Miscellaneous: a good mixing ability as well as a little bit mediocre intonation and a nice sound up to mf

7. Thein, Old German

Sound: excellent, rich in overtones, also dark and covered. Partly perceived as too narrow and small

Intonation: clear and stable

Articulation: good and centered, however sometimes a little late

Miscellaneous: a very nice mix and nice timbre on the Schumann. On the Beethoven, the sound seemed small

8. Thein Universal, Hagmann valve

Sound: clear, warm, brilliant and centered but sometimes too hard and strenuous. Widely classified as very resonant

Intonation: sometimes good and unproblematic and sometimes solid or hard to classify

Articulation: good and clear but with another player, difficult and laborious

Miscellaneous: its character was described as difficult but direct with a nice ensemble sound. However, it did not mix equally well with each player

9. Helmut Voigt, A13

Sound: big and very dark. For some players it was too large and too dark, almost dull.

Intonation: a little bit spongy and not particularly centered. It requires a lot of work.

Articulation: a little bit difficult and late

Miscellaneous: laborious, very slow, with a difficult intonation but with a nice ensemble sound. Very nice for solo concerts

10. Yamaha

Sound: big, dark and a little bit fluffy. Partly bright but in general it has a nice well-balanced beautiful sound.

Intonation: clear and stable

Articulation: clear, direct and secure

Miscellaneous: a good acoustic pattern and sounds confident, good and excellent with good intonation

11. Thein, Universal

Sound: light, excellent, large and covered. Some described it as light, nice warm sound in the upper register

Intonation: clear

Articulation: direct and good, sometimes a little laborious

Miscellaneous: a nice sound and a good balance. Mixes well into the setting and it appear to be very powerful.

Mouthpieces

No deep dive into alto trombone equipment would be complete without a bit about mouthpieces. I return to *The World of Alto Trombone* for their analysis of mouthpiece options for the alto. In general, there are four possible ways to find a suitable mouthpiece for the alto trombone.

1. Mouthpiece with a screwable rim

If a mouthpiece with screwable rim is used for the tenor trombone, it is advisable to use a special cup part for the alto trombone, with a shallower cup that is suitable for the rim. Many manufacturers offer this possibility. With models of Slokar, Lätzsch, Doug Elliot, Parke, Windhager, the screwable rim is standard.

The advantage of the screwable rim is that the lips always experience the same feeling, which is well suited for learning the alto trombone.

Because so much is different with the alto trombone (size, slide positions, backpressure, response, air, clef) having a feeling at the lips that resembles the sensation of the tenor is often welcome.

2. Copy of the rim of the tenor trombone mouthpiece

Another solution is a solid alto trombone mouthpiece (without screwable rim) with an exact copy of the rim of the tenor trombone mouthpiece. All manufacturers offer this, either as a standard mouthpiece or as a custom manufactured perfect copy of the personal rim. If the diameter is not too big, this solution has proven to be successful.

If the tenor trombone mouthpiece is very big and consequently the cup diameter for the alto trombone is big, and the alto trombone is played predominantly in the orchestra, one can master most works with this solution. It allows an easy changing from the tenor trombone to the alto trombone.

3. Copy only of the rim profile of the tenor trombone mouthpiece

Almost the same play feeling occurs with an alto trombone mouthpiece with the rim profile of the tenor trombone mouthpiece, but with a cup a little smaller in diameter. It facilitates the tonal production and the playing in the high register including a better intonation.

With this solution, the endurance profits as well. This is not to say that trombonists using mouthpieces with big rim diameters cannot intonate properly. It is simply easier to play in tune with an adapted rim diameter because fewer notes need to be compensated. This solution is recommended for those who prefer rather large cup diameters on the tenor trombone (e.g. mouthpieces in the size of a Bach 4 or 3G).

4. Absolutely different rim profiles and rim-cup diameters in comparison to the tenor trombone mouthpiece

Different rim profiles reveal a totally different playing feeling. This is an advantage for players who see the alto trombone as a totally unique instrument type and who play it intensively.



Mouthpieces courtesy of Barry Kierce

Survey of alto trombones and mouthpieces used by leading trombonists (from *The World of Alto Trombone* - pages 92-156) These are extracts from the book's comprehensive interviews with these great players highlighting the alto trombone on which they perform as well as their mouthpiece of choice.

Joseph Alessi - *Principal Trombone, New York Philharmonic*
Alto trombone: Thein Kruspe, Shires with gold brass bell,
 Conn with f attachment
Mouthpiece: Alessi-Greigo 1A and special mouthpiece from
 Daniel Morandini

Alessandro Benazzo - *Soloist and orchestral performer
 throughout Europe*
Alto trombone: Conn 36H
Mouthpiece: Christian Lindberg 15cl

Håkan Björkman - *Principal Trombone, Svedish Radio
 Symfoniorkster*
Alto trombone: Conn 36H
Mouthpiece: Conn 7C

Timothy Higgins - *San Francisco Symphony, Principal
 Trombone, Northwestern University Chicago*
Alto trombone: Glassl
Mouthpiece: Bach 6.5AM

Shachar Israel - *Assistant Principal Trombone, The Cleveland
 Orchestra*
Alto trombone: Thein "Old German Kruspe-style"
Mouthpiece: Thein, Greg Black, and Bach

Megumi Kanda - *Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra*
Alto trombone: Lätzsch
Mouthpiece: Yamaha 48

Mark Lawrence - *Principal Trombone, San Francisco
 Symphony (ret.)*
Alto trombone: Glassl with a sterling silver bell
Mouthpiece: Bach 6.5AM and 7C. Screw 6.5 rim for both

Don Lucas - *Trombone professor at Boston University*
Alto trombone: Shires
Mouthpiece: Griego Decco 11C

Michael Massong - *Aalborg Symphonieorchester, Soloist and
 Chamber Musician*
Alto trombone: Thein Modell Universal
Mouthpiece: Willie's Massong 4AM

J.C. Matamoros - *Soloposaunist Orquesta Nacional de Espana
 (OCNE) Madrid*
Alto trombone: Stomvi, TITAN Model
Mouthpiece: JK 8F

James Miller - *Los Angeles Philharmonic*
Alto trombone: Conn 1960s model with the bell crook
 reduced
Mouthpiece: Bach 7C

Fabrice Millischer - *Professor Hochschule für Musik Freiburg*
Alto trombone: Antoine Courtois Paris
Mouthpiece: Romera Brass model L3 - Daniel Lassalle

Michael Mulcahy - *Chicago Symphony Orchestra*
Alto trombone: Glassl - one brass and one gold brass
Mouthpiece: Glassl 6.5 and Bach 6.5 AM

Aline Nistad - *Soloposaunistin Oslo Philharmonic*
Alto trombone: Helmut/Stephan Voigt "Weite 1" -
 Rotmessingschallbecher Ms90, Stimmbogen Ms95
Mouthpiece: 7C cup with a 6.5 rim

Toby Oft - *Boston Symphony Orchestra soloist*
Alto trombone: Thein Kruspe
Mouthpiece: Doug Elliott with a small shank and C cup

Ralph Sauer - *Former Principal trombone, LA Philharmonic*
Alto trombone: Shires with Bb valve, red brass bell, .485/.495 slide
Mouthpiece: Schilke screw rim, Bach 4C and 12E cups

Dr. Ken Shifrin - *City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra*
Alto trombone: Yamaha YSL-673
Mouthpiece: Bach 12C with tenor rim

Christian Sprenger - *Former soloist, RSO-Berlin*
Alto trombone: Gold brass Kühnl & Hoyer model "Slokar"
Mouthpiece: BS Alto X, Screwable rim

Pierre Volders - *Principal trombone, Rotterdam
 Philharmonic Orchestra*
Alto trombone: Antoine Courtois, half tone valve option
Mouthpiece: Thein D1A

Jamie Williams - *Deutsche Oper Berlin*
Alto trombone: Yamaha custom YSL871
Mouthpiece: Greg Black

Survey of alto trombones and mouthpieces used by leading trombonists (from *The World of Alto Trombone* - pages 92-156) These are extracts from the book's comprehensive interviews with these great players highlighting the alto trombone on which they perform as well as their mouthpiece of choice.

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Alto trombone: Thein Kruspe, Shires with gold brass bell,

Conn with f attachment

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Alto trombone: Conn 36H

Mouthpiece: Conn 7C

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Alto trombone: Glassl

Mouthpiece: Bach 6.5AM

Shachar Israel - *Assistant Principal Trombone, The Cleveland Orchestra*

Alto trombone: Thein "Old German Kruspe-style"

Mouthpiece: Thein, Greg Black, and Bach

Megumi Kanda - *Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra*

Alto trombone: Lättsch

Mouthpiece: Yamaha 48

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Alto trombone: Glassl with a sterling silver bell

Mouthpiece: Bach 6.5AM and 7C. Screw 6.5 rim for both

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Alto trombone: Shires

Mouthpiece: Griego Decco 11C

Michael Massong - *Aalborg Symphonieorkester, Soloist and Chamber Musician*

Alto trombone: Thein Modell Universal

Mouthpiece: Willie's Massong 4AM

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Alto trombone: Stomvi, TITAN Model

Mouthpiece: JK 8F

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Alto trombone: Helmut/Stephan Voigt "Weite 1" -

Rotmessingschallbecher Ms90, Stimmbogen Ms95

Mouthpiece: 7C cup with a 6.5 rim

Toby Oft - *Boston Symphony Orchestra soloist*

Alto trombone: Thein Kruspe

Mouthpiece: Doug Elliott with a small shank and C cup

Ralph Sauer - *Former Principal trombone, LA Philharmonic*

Alto trombone: Shires with Bb valve, red brass bell, .485/.495 slide

Mouthpiece: Schilke screw rim, Bach 4C and 12E cups

Dr. Ken Shifrin - *City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra*

Alto trombone: Yamaha YSL-673

Mouthpiece: Bach 12C with tenor rim

Christian Sprenger - *Former soloist, RSO-Berlin*

Alto trombone: Gold brass Kühnl & Hoyer model "Slokar"

Mouthpiece: BS Alto X, Screwable rim

Pierre Volders - *Principal trombone, Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra*

Alto trombone: Antoine Courtois, half tone valve option

Mouthpiece: Thein D1A

Jamie Williams - *Deutsche Oper Berlin*

Alto trombone: Yamaha custom YSL871

Mouthpiece: Greg Black

My personal view of mouthpieces

Without a doubt, the question I am asked the most is about mouthpieces. Many people bring home their new alto and wonder if they should use the included stock mouthpiece or buy something different.

I'll give you the answer I give people pretty much each time I am asked what mouthpiece is best for alto trombone. "It depends."

I think it depends on the sound you are after and the style you wish to play on the alto.

When I made the switch from tenor to alto many years ago, I deliberately kept my tenor mouthpiece because I wanted to keep as much of my tenor sound as possible. After all, I couldn't sound thin and expect to blend with the big bands and multi-trombone salsa groups in which I was playing. For me, the alto was not a utility instrument for special situations – it was my musical voice and source of income.

Just to see what would come up, I recently Googled the title of this post. The first result came from the Trombone Forum in a post entitled "The right mouthpiece for the alto trombone". The author wrote something I thought was rather odd: The 6 1/2 AL is a high tenor mouthpiece. It is not any good in the alto trombone. The tone is not bad, at best, but it's not great, and your intonation and tone and range will suffer.

Well, the mouthpiece I have used since picking up the alto has been the aforementioned 6 1/2 AL. And I'd like to think that my intonation, tone and range have not suffered because of it.

As I've written many times in my blog and elsewhere, I think mouthpiece choices are highly subjective AND highly overrated. By overrated I mean that I think people give more credit (and blame) for their hardware than is due.

My personal philosophy is that if I don't sound the way I want to sound, I's to blame, not the horn or the mouthpiece. Sure, you could be playing a leaky or poorly constructed horn, but for the most part, I think horns and mouthpieces can be willed to sound the way the player wishes them to sound. After all, Charlie Parker played the s**t out of a plastic alto. Even if he had the money, I don't think he would have incessantly been trying different horns in order to find the "perfect" one.

A word about range

There is a misconception that the alto makes it easier to play in the high register. I never found that to be true. However, the shallower mouthpiece that many alto players use does make it easier to play higher, not necessarily because of the smaller horn itself.

Keep in mind that the shallower mouthpiece can make your sound smaller, so there is a trade-off. Since I've always strive to sound more like a tenor and blend better into a trombone section, the larger mouthpiece cup was necessary for me.

My alto range has always been what it was when I played tenor. But honestly, I've never been a squeaky-high player, preferring instead for the strained emotional sound of high notes as part of my musical voice.

So my answer to the question is: try the mouthpiece you currently use for tenor and play it enough to get used to the alto.

When you start out on alto, the tone will sound odd and your intonation will probably suck. But keep with it and don't succumb to immediately hunting for the perfect mouthpiece. After you've gained a certain level of proficiency and you still believe that the mouthpiece is holding you back, make a switch.

As your ear and arm acclimate to the alto, make an honest assessment of whether or not a different mouthpiece will make you a better player.

And, by the way, if you are playing the 6 1/2 AL, don't let anyone talk you out of it before you give it a fair chance. I love it!

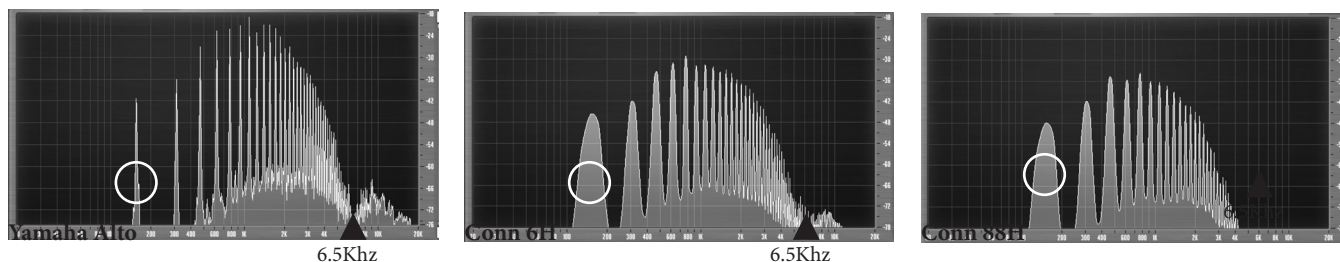
The harmonic signature of the alto

One reason the alto sounds higher is that it emphasizes higher harmonics. I am not referring the partials on the horn containing the notes. Let's call those overtones. The higher timbre of the alto is due to higher harmonics resulting from the shorter tube. As a result, the alto trombone has a certain bite when leading the top of a trombone section or ensemble. What do those overtones look like and how do they compare to those of both a small and large tenor?

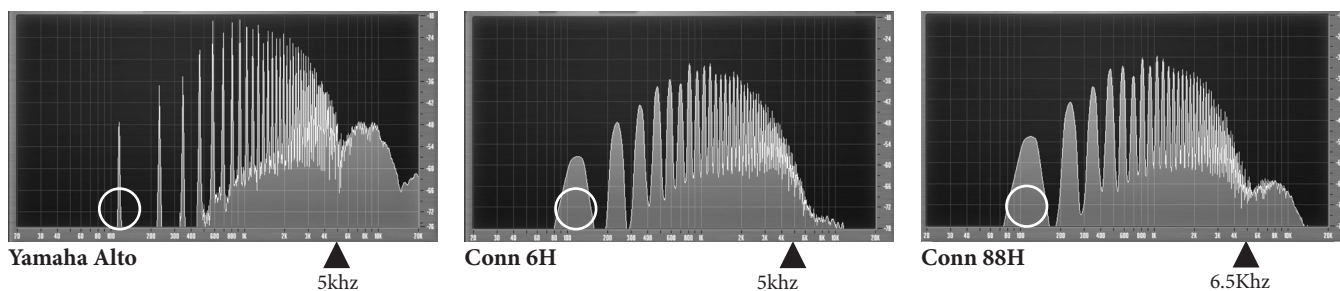
I thought it would be interesting to compare the sonic "fingerprint" of the alto with a small bore tenor and a large bore tenor. For this analysis, I used my Yamaha alto and a borrowed Conn 6H and a Conn 88H. I used a Bach 6½ AL with each horn (large shank obviously for the 88H) I recorded each using the same microphone, mic proximity, and signal chain.

Would different 88H's or 6H's make much of a difference? I'm not sure. I'm using these as representative examples of a small tenor and a large tenor.

I played a middle Eb for the first analysis. Here's the frequency spectrum comparison for the Eb played on all three horns. I've put a circle around the fundamental Eb in each. The spikes higher up the frequency range are the note's harmonics. In the case of a trombone, they are rich harmonics full of overtones.

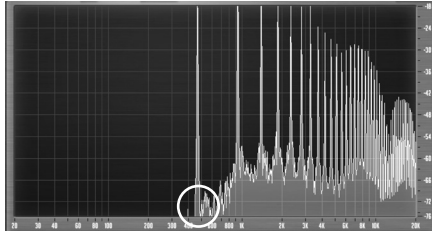


For the above Eb, notice the greater higher frequencies of the alto starting at 6.5khz. The 6H has some in that range and the 88H has none. More interesting is the narrower overtone range of the various harmonics on the alto and the much broader range of overtones of both tenors beginning with the fundamental. Bigger horns seem to create more overtones.

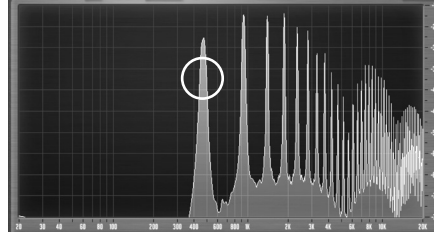


For this low Bb, again the harmonics of the tenors are much richer in overtones. And even though the alto has far more higher frequencies, it's interesting to see that the 88H had more than the 6H. In hearing both, the low Bb on the 88H was brighter and more resonant.

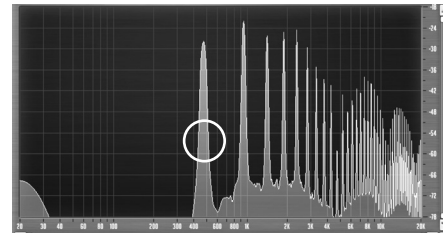
I next played the high Bb. Both the 6H and the 88H spoke very clearly on the high Bb. The high frequency harmonics were more similar between the three horns. Again, circles are on the fundamental pitches, Bb in this case.



Yamaha Alto

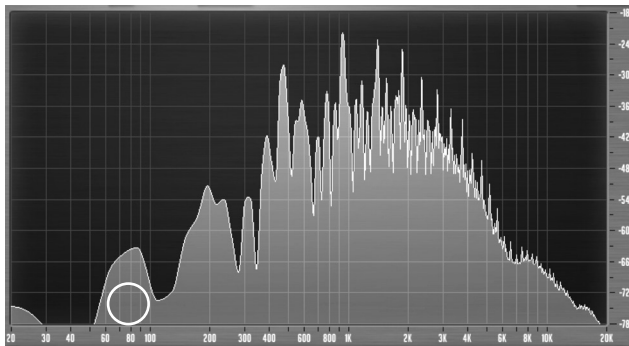


Conn 6H

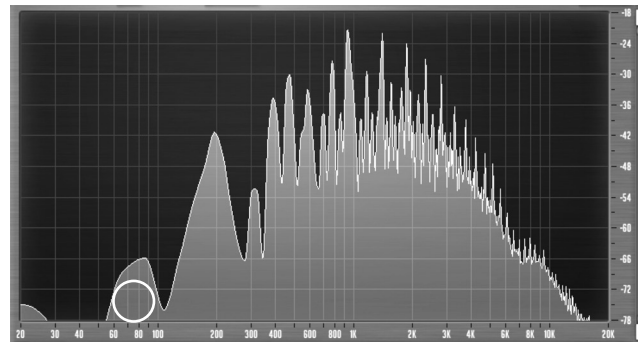


Conn 88H

Last, I played the pedal Eb which is the fundamental of the alto. Since the 6H has no trigger, the pedal Eb was played only on the alto and the 88H. Notice the high frequencies are pretty close. The Eb on the 88H was very resonant. Of course, because this Eb is the fundamental of the alto it is also very resonant. The 88H had more presence in the second harmonic but the much smaller alto nevertheless has a big pedal Eb containing a little bit more upper harmonics.



Yamaha Alto



Conn 88H

Alto Trombone Performance Savvy

Somewhat primitive versions of the alto trombone were thought to have existed well before Beethoven first used them for his Fifth Symphony. Combined with the tenor and bass, the alto played a role atop the trombone section throughout much of the 19th century for composers such as Beethoven, Brahms, and Berlioz.

Use of the alto however waned in the beginning of the twentieth century although a few composers such as Mahler, Bartok, and Berg took advantage of it within a few of their works. Regardless, it is fair to say that the role of the alto trombone has been minor throughout most of its existence.

The alto holds several advantages over tenor in the performance of jazz and other popular idioms. Its timbre resulting from higher overtones provides for a greater presence in both sectional playing and soloing over bands and rhythm sections.

- The smaller, lighter slide makes it easier to maneuver quickly through jazz phrasings for both written music and improvisation.
- The shorter slide requires less distance between positions and again provides for quicker response.
- The shorter horn size demands less air be put through the horn resulting in a quicker speaking instrument and one that allows for different means of expression and nuance.
- Because of alto's position on the overtone series, there is more "room" between neighboring notes, therefore allowing you to target the higher notes with a bit more ease.
- The shorter overall size between the back of the bell section and fully extended slide makes it easier to perform in a cramped big band setting.
- Showing up for a big band gig with an alto shortens the discussion over who plays lead!

I understand the difficulty alto holds for career tenor players. Even though the alto has the same number of slide positions and it sounds like a trombone, the similarities pretty much end there. The distance between positions is shorter, all the notes are within different overtones, the fundamental of the alto is a fourth higher, the low A to E notes are missing on a straight alto, and the intonation adjustments are slightly different.

For jazz players, the additional challenge is that playing the alto requires reorienting your inner ear/arm coordination to a whole new place on the overtone series. Your natural instinct to go to second position for the seventh of an Eb7 will not serve you! Db-3 is now in third.

I mentioned earlier the difficult change I made in college from tenor to alto. I am certainly not advocating that you similarly must abandon your tenor in favor of playing alto. Plenty of fine tenor players including the ones profiled on page 14 perform on alto at a high level even though I think they would admit that their facility on alto is less than that of tenor. They've all spent much more of their lives on tenor.

That may sound discouraging, but this book has been written with exactly those challenges in mind. I remember much of what I did to get the alto under my belt and I will share those ideas with you. The methodology outlined in this book will help you gain the necessary proficiency in as short a time as possible. But it will require work, so let's get started.

One of the most versatile trombonists I know is Tom Ervin, the retired professor of trombone from the University of Arizona. When the alto trombone is mentioned, invariably Tom's name comes up. He not only played both tenor and alto but played both at a high level in the jazz and classical idioms. So who better to ask how to maintain proficiency at both?

Being Proficient On Both Tenor And Alto Trombone... And Staying That Way If You Want To.

By Tom Ervin

1. Obviously, try to play both horns every day as your schedule allows.
2. Warm up well on your larger horn first.
3. For an alto mouthpiece, find one that eventually feels comfortable, and also produces a sound you like, a sound that lets the alto sound like it wants to sound—a comfortable voice. I liked smaller mouthpieces on alto, while many fine players wanted or needed the same rim. It's a personal choice.
4. While there is no one best alto trombone sound just as there is no one best tenor sound, certain fundamentals will aid in helping you best play your own particular style. Learn to produce a clear tone with none of the usual taboos like blat, pinching, over-blowing, fuzz, dull, weak, or forced sound.
5. Shrink and be happy about it. The bore is different and the positions are different. Accommodate yourself to that reality.
6. Learn to read and sight-read on the alto. The situation will arise.
7. For classical players, alto clef is an unavoidable reality so learn to read it as well as bass clef. Playing alto and tenor will require an extra bit of clef proficiency.
8. Again, most important is playing both often. Yes, alto will be harder, especially in the beginning, but that's why you'll need the discipline to play it often—every day if possible.

What are the positions on the alto?

The fundamental of the alto trombone is Eb. It is the Eb which is a fourth up from the pedal Bb on the tenor. In fact, the secret to the alto is that the entire overtone series is a fourth up from the tenor.

First position *alto* overtone series



First position *tenor* overtone series



The placement of pitches on the alto overtone series provides an interesting distinction (advantage?) over the tenor trombone. Because the alto overtone series is a fourth higher than the tenor, the “space” between notes is greater. For example, Bb3 is on the alto’s third partial while Bb3 is on the tenor’s fourth. The next higher note for the alto above Bb is Eb - a fourth up. The next higher note on the tenor’s fourth partial is D - a major third.

This greater distance between notes plays a role in alto trombone performance. Reaching for the high Bb for example, is made slightly easier because of the greater distance between neighboring F below and Db above. It’s as if being given a slightly larger target within which to hit the bulls eye.

Technically, a partial on a trombone is the position in the overtone sequence. Partial #1, or the fundamental, on the Eb alto is the ‘pedal’ Eb, #2 is the octave higher Eb, #3 is Bb and so on. When you do a lip slur, you are playing the various partials or overtones of the horn.

Hitting high Bb on alto



Hitting high Bb on tenor



Mastering the alto positions

Two staves of musical notation for alto trombone. The first staff shows positions 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2/7, 1/6, 5, 4. The second staff shows positions 3/7, 2/6, 1/5, 4/7, 3/6, 2/5, 1/4, 3/6, 2/5, 1/4, 3/5, #2/4, 3, 2, 1, 2, 1.

If you are beginning on the alto, not thinking about the positions requires regular practice and lots of repetition. Below and on the next page are a few simple four-bar melodic lines in various keys. Start slow and increase the speed of the phrases as you learn the positions.

I began the phrases in Eb to get off to a simpler start, but they don't need to be played in order. Start at any key with which you are having difficulty. I've deliberately left off position numbers for repeating notes in order to facilitate your brain and ear. Listen to the key and let your ear guide you. If you are stuck on a note, sing that note if you can.

On the pages following these, I've given you the exact same phrases, but this time without any position numbers.

Five staves of musical notation for alto trombone, showing various melodic lines in Eb. The first staff has positions 1, 4, 1, 1, 4, 6, 1. The second staff has positions 1, 2, 6, 4, 3, 6, 1, 6. The third staff has positions 4, 3, 6, 2, 6, 4, 2, 4, 2. The fourth staff has positions 4, 2, 4, 2, 2, 7, 6, 1, 4, 2. The fifth staff has positions 2, 1, 4, 2, 4, 6.

The musical score is written for Alto Trombone in 4/4 time. It consists of eight staves of music, each containing a series of eighth and quarter notes. The key signature changes throughout the piece: it starts in G major (one sharp), moves to A major (two sharps) on the fourth staff, then to D major (two sharps) on the fifth staff, and finally to B-flat major (two flats) on the sixth staff. The music is characterized by a variety of fingerings indicated by numbers 1 through 5 above the notes. Some notes are marked with a '2' above them, likely indicating a second ending or a specific articulation. The piece concludes with a double bar line on the eighth staff.

See how easily you can play the same melodies from the previous pages, but this time without the positions marked on them. Let your ear guide you as much as possible. These are not random strings of notes. They are simple melodies, so if you don't immediately know the position of the next notes, sing it. As you develop your ear for the alto, singing notes can help you find them on your horn.

Playing what you sing is a very important exercise for developing skill in improvisation, by the way.



The image displays seven staves of musical notation, each representing a different key signature and a specific melodic line. The notation is written on a five-line staff with a treble clef and a 4/4 time signature. The key signatures are: Staff 1: C major (no sharps or flats); Staff 2: D major (two sharps: F# and C#); Staff 3: E major (three sharps: F#, C#, and G#); Staff 4: F# major (three sharps: F#, C#, and G#); Staff 5: G# major (three sharps: F#, C#, and G#); Staff 6: A major (three sharps: F#, C#, and G#); Staff 7: B major (three sharps: F#, C#, and G#). Each staff contains a sequence of notes, primarily quarter and eighth notes, with some half notes and rests. The notation is clean and professional, suitable for a music book or worksheet.

The following exercise is harder than the previous. Instead of melodies, here is a series of random notes meant to strengthen your ear and arm for the pitches on the alto.

Find the notes as quickly as you can. You'll probably have to think about them until they become more automatic like your tenor positions. I've sprinkled in positions to help. The following page contains these same sequences, but without position marketings.

Treat this exercise like flash cards. Instead of a new card coming up, use the next note in these bars. Begin at the top, in the middle, work backwards or whatever. Start at the end of the 7th staff and play the pitches backwards. Be creative. Prevent yourself from going through this the exact same way so that you start to memorize the sequence. It's meant to be a kind of random note generator where the next note is always new.

The exercise consists of seven staves of music, each containing a sequence of notes with fingerings indicated by numbers 1-7 above them. The notes are scattered across the staff to challenge the player's ear and arm.

Staff 1: Notes are scattered across the staff. Fingerings: 2, 4, 2, 1, 4, 4, 7, 3, 6, 3.

Staff 2: Notes are scattered across the staff. Fingerings: 3, 1, 1, 3, 2, 2, 3, 6.

Staff 3: Notes are scattered across the staff. Fingerings: 2, 7, 4, 5, 2, 2, 4, 3.

Staff 4: Notes are scattered across the staff. Fingerings: 3, 6, 5, 1, 3, 7, 2, 3.

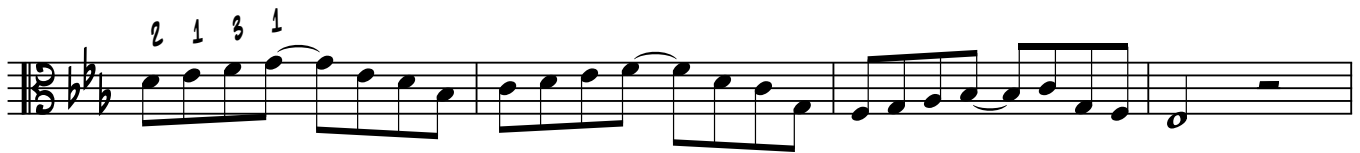
Staff 5: Notes are scattered across the staff. Fingerings: 2, 3, 1, 2, 3, 5, 4, 1, 2, 2, 3.

Staff 6: Notes are scattered across the staff. Fingerings: 3, 4, 4, 6, 7, 5, 1, 3, 4.

Staff 7: Notes are scattered across the staff. Fingerings: 3, 3, 3, 1, 7, 2, 5, 2.

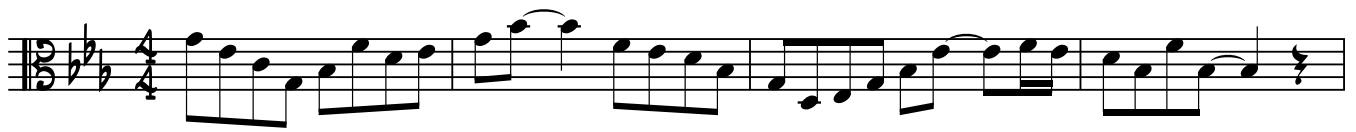
The musical score is written for Alto Trombone in 4/4 time. It consists of eight staves of music. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The music features a variety of note values including quarter, eighth, and sixteenth notes, as well as rests. Some notes are marked with a 'b' for flat and a '#' for sharp. The score ends with a double bar line on the eighth staff.

Now for something more musical. The following four bar phrases are in the fundamental alto key of Eb. They start out in first position and get progressively more difficult even while remaining in Eb. Swing them or play them straight. How fast can you play them accurately? Positions have been provided for the first bar of each stanza.



As variations on the earlier Eb phrases, these exercises move through both flat and sharp keys and are meant to challenge your facility with accidentals. Speed is not the initial goal. Rather, develop a steady flow throughout the phrases. Depending on your proficiency with the alto, you may need to start slow. Each four bar phrase is within a particular key. You can also play through these on the more familiar tenor in order to practice your sight reading.







Working the more difficult extended positions on the alto

Okay, maybe *every* position on the alto is difficult for you at the moment, but there are certain intervals that present more of a challenge. If you are not used to the smaller slide on the alto, seventh position will seem odd. From time to time, you may extend the slide off the inner tubes because you're used to the further out seventh position of the longer tenor slide.

I've read posts from players claiming that the Yamaha (and others) have no real seventh position. At least with the Yamaha I used to play (YSL671) and my current Adams, seventh position works just fine. I will admit that it goes out to the very end of the tube with not much room to spare. The challenge is that seventh position E (E3) below middle C is a very common note - I would say more common than the similarly positioned low B on a tenor.

In fact, you may find yourself moving your slide more than you do on the tenor since that E3 and F3 (respectively seventh and sixth positions) are commonly played notes. You'll be going there often, so it pays to gain muscle memory for those more difficult positions. Play these as slow as necessary to hit the pitches correctly and in tune.

To make it a bit of fun, play it against the track "Dreams of Tomorrow" in order to better hear your pitch. It's easy to fool ourselves thinking we are fully extended to the sixth and seventh positions when in fact we are creeping up and consequently sharp. Hear your pitch with this track to verify you are fully extended.



bit.ly/altobonesavvy "Dreams of Tomorrow"

Let's move into a more challenging exercise on these sixth and seventh positions. As with the previous exercise, play these at whatever tempo allows you to fluidly play the phrase while solidly hitting the notes full and in tune. Play each note as a whole note if needed.

Use the track "Life is a Game" to again make it a bit more interesting and to verify using your ear that you are truly landing on the correct pitches and not creeping up on sixth and seventh. By the way, the track is based on the Bb9 #11 chord.



bit.ly/altobonesavvy "Life is a Game"

The musical score consists of six staves of music in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat (Bb). The exercise is a continuous line of music with various fingerings indicated by numbers 1-7 above the notes. The music starts on a middle C (C4) and moves through various positions, including sixth and seventh positions as mentioned in the text. The notation includes eighth and sixteenth notes, often beamed together. The final staff ends with a double bar line.

Alternate positions

As with the tenor, certain notes on the alto live in more than one partial.

Play each note in the position listed, and quickly move to the alternate position, making sure to match the pitches. Play the positions designated in bars 13 through 20. Bars 21 -26 are meant to be fast slurred rips off the Bb root. The second and third notes of each triplet are approximate pitches. The first and last notes of each triplet are most important. These common intervals play well due to the unique nature of the alto partials.

The musical score is written for Alto Trombone in B-flat major (two flats) and 4/4 time. It consists of six staves of music, with bar numbers 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, and 24 indicated at the start of their respective staves.

- Staff 1 (Bars 5-8):** Features four measures of eighth-note triplets. Fingerings are indicated above the notes: 1, 6, 1, and 5.
- Staff 2 (Bars 9-12):** Features four measures of eighth-note triplets. Fingerings are indicated: 1, 4, 1, and #4.
- Staff 3 (Bars 13-16):** Features four measures of eighth-note triplets. Fingerings are indicated: 2, 6, 3, and 6.
- Staff 4 (Bars 17-20):** Features four measures of eighth-note triplets. Fingerings are indicated: 1, 5, 6, 6, 6, 5, 6, 6, 6, 5.
- Staff 5 (Bars 21-24):** Features four measures of eighth-note triplets. Fingerings are indicated: 3, 1, 3, 3, 4, 1, 3, 4, 3, 3, 4, 6, 3, 1, 3, 6, 3, 3, 6.
- Staff 6 (Bars 25-28):** Features four measures of eighth-note triplets. Fingerings are indicated: 1, 3, 1, 3, 1, 3, 1, 3, 4, 1, 3, 3, 4, 3, 1, 3, 4, 3, 3, 4.

Handwritten annotations above the staves indicate alternate positions for the notes:

- Staff 5: 8b7, 8b6, 8b, 8b6
- Staff 6: 8b6, 8b7, 8b6

Alto exercises for arm and ear

Warm-up exercises

Below are some warm-ups and lip slurs specifically for the alto. As you should know, accuracy in exercises is more important than speed.

As you play them, listen for consistent tone and articulation. Use enough air on the following two note glissandos (glissandi?) so that the second note speaks as clearly as the first and that the descending tone is consistently full bodied.

This exercise warms up your breathing as well because the descent to the second note requires more air. In fact, the larger the interval, the more air is required as you gliss down because the length of the slide grows larger. Again, listen for consistent tone as you descend. Each of the three sequences begins in first position.

You should also start on the second note of each pair and gliss up. As with both directions, hold the first note before going up to the second.

About breathing

There was no greater authority on brass instrument breathing than Arnold Jacobs, the former principal tuba with the Chicago Symphony.

“By studying sound, you are studying breath.”

“Order air as external wind, not as internal pressure.”

“Be conscious of how much air moves, not how to move air.”

“Breath to expand; don’t expand to breath.”

One of the great books for brass players is Mr. Jacobs’ *Also Sprach Arnold Jacobs* compiled by Bruce Nelson.



I’ve created two backgrounds over which you might enjoy playing these warm-up glisses. The first, *Strings for Gliss Warm-ups* is a simpler sonority based on a Bb9 chord. The second, called *Nova Discovery* is a bit more of a dense sonority that may challenge you to hear the pitches of your notes. As you hit the various notes, you’ll hear both consonance and dissonance. I could have created a simple sine wave tone, but what’s the fun in that?!



bit.ly/altobonesavvy “*Strings for Gliss Warm-ups*”



bit.ly/altobonesavvy “*Nova Discovery for warm-up glisses*”

Lip slurs

Here are some lip slurs for alto. Listen to how crisply you hit the upper and lower partials. If a particular interval is problematic, just go back and forth on just that interval, slowly adding more notes but only after improving your smooth landing on those difficult partials. These slurs are important warm-ups and/or exercises and gain familiarity with the alto overtone series. Start as slow as necessary to play full-tone, in-tune legato slurs.

“Practice does not make perfect. Only perfect practice makes perfect.”

- Vince Lombardi

FIRST POSITION



SEVENTH POSITION



FIRST POSITION



SEVENTH POSITION



FIRST POSITION



SEVENTH POSITION



More lip slurs. The usual rules apply: Big breath and play cleanly from one note to the next. Speed is less important than smooth legato phrases of centered tones.

First Position Second Position Third Position

Fourth Position Fifth Position

Sixth Position Seventh Position

This section contains three staves of music, each with three measures. The first staff shows first, second, and third positions. The second staff shows fourth and fifth positions. The third staff shows sixth and seventh positions. Each measure contains a lip slur exercise, indicated by a slur over the notes and a breath mark (a small 'v' shape) at the start of the phrase.

First Position Second Position

Third Position Fourth Position

Fifth Position Sixth Position

Seventh Position

This section contains three staves of music, each with three measures. The first staff shows first and second positions. The second staff shows third and fourth positions. The third staff shows fifth and sixth positions. The fourth staff shows seventh position. Each measure contains a lip slur exercise, indicated by a slur over the notes and a breath mark (a small 'v' shape) at the start of the phrase.

This musical score is for the Alto Trombone part of a piece. It is written in 4/4 time and features a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The score consists of 22 measures, organized into six systems. Measures 1-4 are marked *mp* (mezzo-piano). Measures 5-8 are marked *mp*. Measures 9-12 are marked *mp*. Measure 13 is marked *mp*. Measures 14-17 are marked *f* (forte). Measures 18-21 are marked *f*. Measure 22 is marked *f*. The score includes various musical notations such as eighth notes, quarter notes, and half notes, as well as dynamic markings and articulation marks.

The next warm ups are for both your chops and your ear. One phrase transposes from the previous. To learn the alto (or any instrument) you must hear the notes, not just memorize the connection of black dots to slide positions.

The first exercise moves by a circle of fifths. Each two bar phrase descends a perfect fifth which is a very common transposition sequence. The second exercise moves down by whole tones. If you know the positions on the alto try to play these cycles guided by your ear without reading the music. It's okay if you struggle a bit to hear/find the notes without the music. The point is to build your inner ear for the alto.

The first exercise consists of four staves, each with two measures. The first staff starts on B \flat and descends by a perfect fifth to E \flat , then A \flat . The second staff starts on D \flat and descends by a perfect fifth to G \flat , then B. The third staff starts on E and descends by a perfect fifth to A, then D. The fourth staff starts on G and descends by a perfect fifth to C, then F. The second exercise consists of two staves, each with two measures. The first staff starts on B \flat and descends by a whole tone to A \flat , then G \flat , then F, then E \flat , then D \flat , then C, then B \flat . The second staff starts on B and descends by a whole tone to A \flat , then G \flat , then F, then E \flat , then D \flat , then C, then B.

What other simple patterns can you create by ear cycling through by fifths and then the whole tones?

Maybe start with:

Two musical staves in 3/4 time. The first staff starts on B \flat and descends by a perfect fifth to E \flat , then A \flat . The second staff starts on B and descends by a perfect fifth to F, then C, then G, then D, then A, then E, then B.

An alto trombone hack

Here's a hack if you are a tenor player learning the alto. I created a video on this that can be found on my YouTube channel. It's called *A tip for helping you master the alto trombone*. It involves playing on the same partials/positions as the tenor which results in the pitches being up a fourth. Take Rochut #1 which begins on G2 in fourth position. On alto, begin it on C3 in fourth position and play the piece a fourth higher in the key of G with the tenor positions.

For some this works well and for others it proves difficult to hear a note that is different from what you are reading or anticipating from the original. I think that being able to play a fourth up from what you see on the paper has ear training value so I would recommend working on the skill of playing relative pitches away from what is written.

I played a fourth up in the tenor positions a lot when I was first learning alto because it gave me some relief from the hard work of learning the alto positions. I use it to this day because it allows a straight alto to play pieces like the Bach Cello Suites that at the written pitches, frequently fall below the low A threshold.

This is not a cheat for learning the alto positions, but rather a way to achieve some temporary gratification if you are struggling a bit with positions. Playing satisfying music on alto may be difficult if you are starting out. Playing the tenor positions may provide some relief. After all, they're the positions you already know.

I am not contradicting my earlier claim that I treat the alto as a non-transposing instrument. Instead, I am simply offering you a trick for practicing the alto that may provide some temporary relief from struggling with the positions and maybe a little ear training along the way (see chapter 10).

Below are some starts to a few standard songs. Begin the song as written and then continue it by ear in that key using the tenor positions for the standard key a fourth down. If you don't know these songs, try this with music you know (orchestral excerpts?). If reading these from a book helps, then by all means, use a fake book.

ON GREEN DOLPHIN STREET - ORIGINALLY IN C



AUTUMN LEAVES - ORIGINALLY IN G MIN



ALL THE THINGS YOU ARE - ORIGINALLY IN A



BACH CELLO SUITE #1 PRELUDE - ORIGINALLY IN G



Intonation Savvy

I don't think enough players realize how important a role intonation plays in the music they make on their instrument. For trombone, it's so much more than the correct slide position or a perfect alignment on a tuning app.

Your ability to center in on the frequency is more than just sounding correct within the harmony, but it determines a large part of your musical personality or voice.

Throughout this chapter, We're going to look at intonation a little differently and we'll work on it from a few different angles. In the end, if you follow along and play the exercises, I promise you that your intonation on the alto will improve.

Some player insist that accurate intonation is more difficult on alto, but I think the reason for that is that they are not practicing it - either at all, or in the right way.

Someone once remarked to Pablo Casals at how accurately he landed on the correct pitch of notes. "No", he replied. *"I simply adjust quickly."*

The two systems of tuning

Let's cover this quickly, but it is worth knowing.

When you play with a piano or guitar, you are playing equal temperament, meaning each note is one fixed correct pitch regardless of harmonic context. When you are playing with just trombones, brass, choir, etc., you are tuning to more of a perfect tuning called just intonation. Here' various intervals are more mathematically pure. The piano and guitar cannot accommodate just intonation because of their fixed tuning.

Let's start out with some equal temperament tuning. The point of this first exercise is to hold one note over a number of chords. I want you to deeply listen to your note over the various chords. Starting out, if nothing else, I just want you to hear the relationship between your held note and the different chords. Hear how the held note needs to move in some minute way to sound good over each successive chord.

This first exercise uses an audio file called *"Intonation Exercise - Holding Tones"*. It consists of one chord per bar within an eight bar section. Start by listening to the chords, perhaps sing the long note in order to get the sound in your ear. Remember that this sound file will be in SoundCloud as I showed you on page 9.

I recorded the chords from a synthesizer under equal temperament, but you should hear the need for tiny adjustments in your intonation. If nothing else, you will get to hear those long tones from different perspectives which will get your ear deep inside those pitches.

These chords are not meant to be cool progressions with a clear tonal center, but rather a sequence of chords chosen for the color it makes of the held tone. Your held note is important also because it is needed in order to complete the chord voicing.

The first chord is the root so that you can more quickly locate the proper pitch. The sixth position F and seventh position E may be more difficult if you are starting out on alto. By hearing the various placements of the F, E and other notes, your ear will become more aware of how to quickly direct your arm to a good place on the alto slide. Alternate between octaves as an additional challenge. This is also fantastic warm-up exercise.



bit.ly/altobonesavvy "Intonation Exercise - Holding Tones"

Eb Ab Cmin7 F7 Ema7 G7(#5) A9(#11) C7(#9)

C F Eb Dbma7 Ab A7(#9) B7(b9) D7

F Ebma7 Bb G7 Dbma7 E7(b9) B7(#11) A7(#5)

G Bb9 Eb C7 Dbma7(#11) A7 Emin7 Abma7

E F#7 Cma7 D9 Fma7 Bbma7(#11) Dmin7 Amin7

B Gma7 C#7 F#sus Fma7(#11) Abmin7 Bb7(b9) Eb7(#5)

F Bb Db G7 Bma9(#11) Abma7 F#ma7 Cmin7

The tuning slide

As a warm-up exercise, this will have the effect of centering you on the alto slide placement. I am not a fan of using strobes or tuning apps because I believe that *hearing* the note's place within various chords is far more valuable.

Are you one of those trombone players who have their tuning slides far extended? I haven't done any detailed research on this, but from my experience, an overly extended tuning slide is not ideal. It could be due to several things:

- A mouthpiece shank inserted too far into the lead pipe
- A poorly built horn
- Playing too tight - not relaxed
- A horn built sharp at the factory
- A habit of thinking that's where it belongs while not hearing that you are perpetually flat.

Every horn has a sweet spot where the tuning slide is ideally positioned.

There is no one place for the tuning slide. I do suggest, however, that if yours is extended through most of its length, listen to the consistency of your pitches as you go up and down the various partials. Also, push it in and see if you hear a difference in tone. Push it all the way in. Does the horn feel more centered? Less centered?

You may have difficulty hearing your own pitch. Have you ever experienced playing the tuning note in your ensemble, and subconsciously liping the pitch up or down to match it?

The next time you catch yourself doing that, play a centered note regardless of its intonation. Don't care if it is out of tune. Your focus should be on playing the most centered tone you can regardless of its intonation.

Then hear where that note falls relative to the tuning note and make the adjustment. So play first, then listen objectively. It might help to start your tuning note by slightly glissing up to it rather than hitting it hard and dead-on. That's harder.

And realize that as you warm up, your pitch center will probably change. Go ahead and adjust accordingly.

As a trombone player, you are in essence playing a tuning slide. Good pitch is our superpower. One of the hidden results of good pitch is a better and more pleasing sound. When your tone is centered, you just sound better. Think of the musicians you like. Their note placement is part of their musical personality.

How well do you listen to yourself?

Resist the temptation to simply run through the next few pieces of music then move on.

These intonation exercises are deceptively hard. The notes are not difficult but playing them in tune is.

We all possess a capacity to believe we're playing better than we actually are, so listening back to recordings is the only objective way to accurately evaluate your playing.

The quality of the recording doesn't matter so use your phone or small digital recorder. Position it so that you hear a balance between the recording and your playing.

Listen to the recording and be honest about what you can improve.

Tuning with Bach

Here are three 4-part Bach chorals. I've given you all four parts so choose one part and play along with the track with that part omitted. Each chorale contains five renditions: One with all four alto trombones and the other with three. Think "music minus one." How well in tune can you play them?



bit.ly/altobonesavvy "Bach #50 full", "Bach #50 no first", "Bach #50 no second",
"Bach #50 no third", "Bach #50 no fourth"

TROMBONE 1



TROMBONE 2



TROMBONE 3



TROMBONE 4

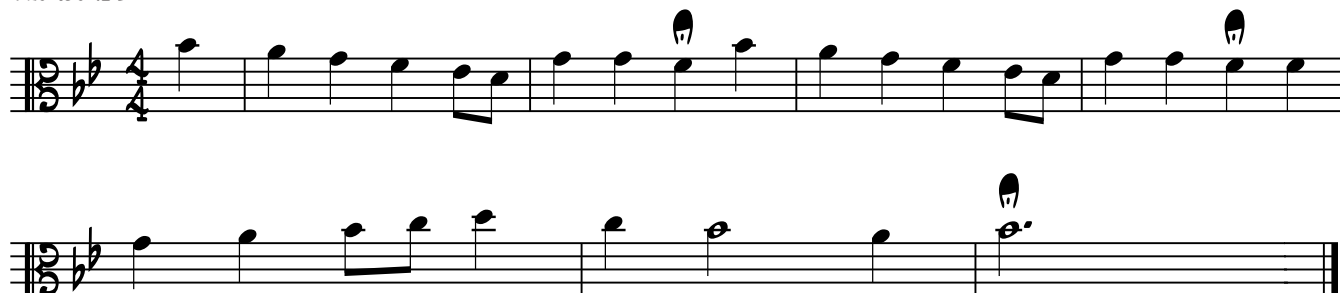


This second choral is the first stanza of *Herzlich lieb hab ich dich, o Herr*, translated means, *I Love You Dearly O Lord*. It is Chorale # 107. I transposed it down a fourth for trombone range.

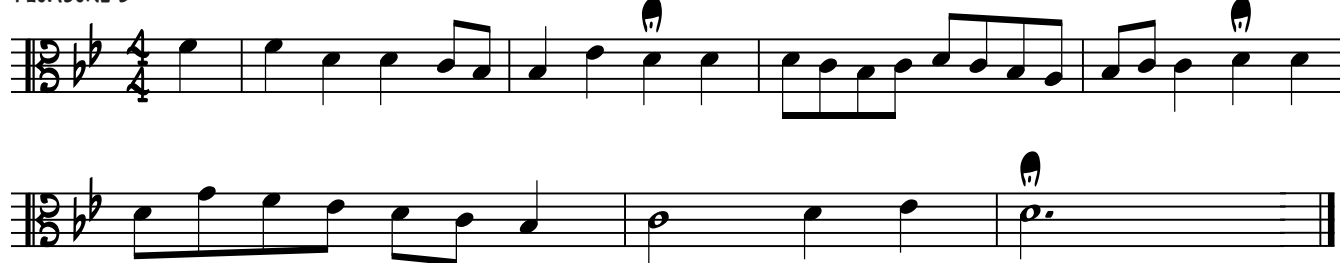


bit.ly/altobonesavvy “Bach #107 full”, “Bach #107 no first”, “Bach #107 no second”,
“Bach #107 no third”, “Bach #107 no fourth”

TROMBONE 1



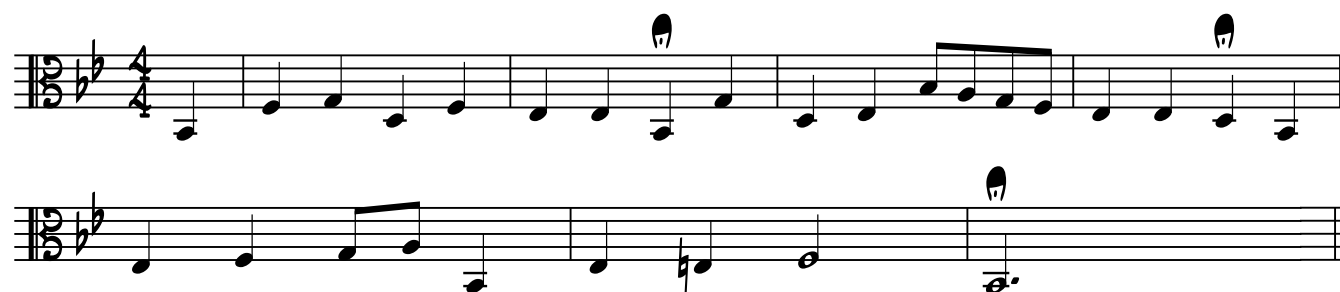
TROMBONE 2



TROMBONE 3



TROMBONE 4

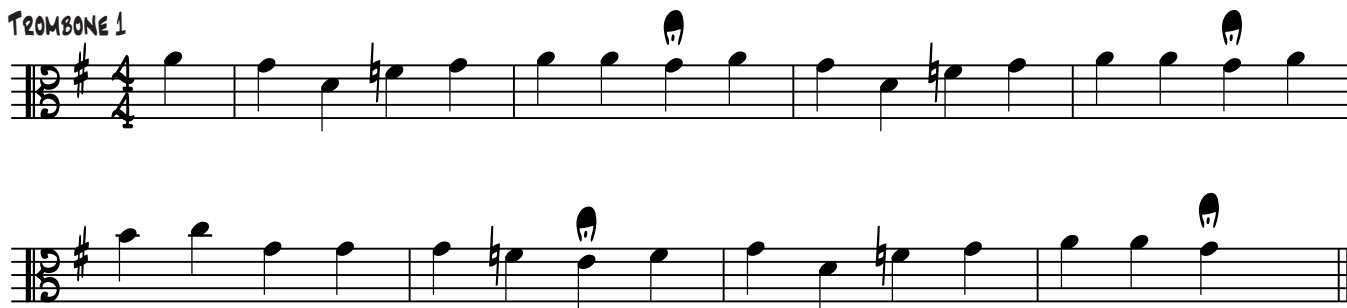


This last Chorale is the most challenging. With its syncopation and sharp 11 passing tones, I'd say Bach would have made a heck of a jazz alto trombone player! Here is *Der du bist drei in Einigkeit* or Chorale # 154.



bit.ly/altobonesavvy "Bach #154 full", "Bach #154 no first", "Bach #154 no second",
"Bach #154 no third", "Bach #154 no fourth"

TROMBONE 1



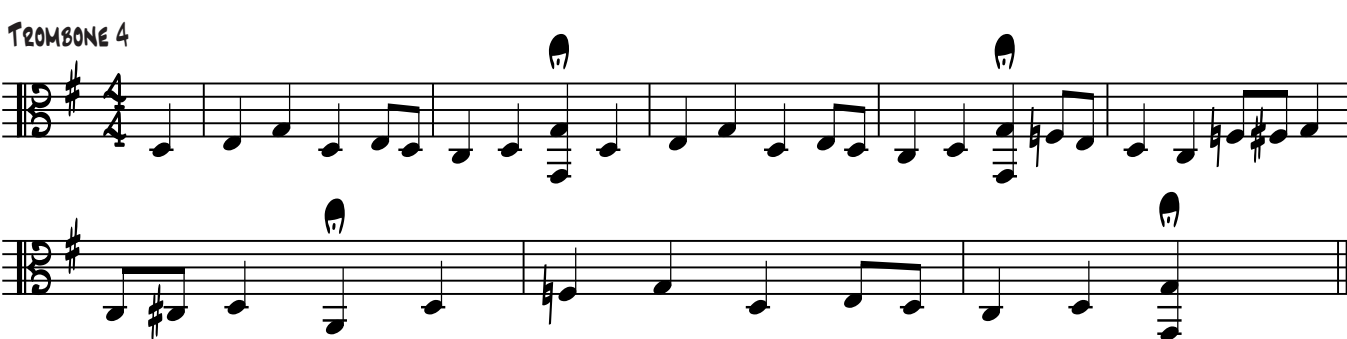
TROMBONE 2



TROMBONE 3



TROMBONE 4



Now that you are all tuned up, let's play some Rochut. Play Rochut #1 with an the accompanying second part on the next page.

Tom Ervin, mentioned earlier, wrote a wonderful book containing harmony parts to the first 20 Rochut etudes. With his kind permission, here is his counterpart to Rochut #1. Play with a friend or with the recording. You have three recorded files: one with both parts played, one with only the counter line and one with the original melody. How's your pitch?



bit.ly/altobonesavvy "Rochut #1 Both Parts", "Rochut #1 Countermelody", "Rochut #1Melody",

Melodious Etudes for trombone Book One

Andante (♩ = 60)

No.1

p

a tempo

ritard - - - -

p

cresc.

cresc.

mf

cresc.

f

dim.

Rochut Etude No. 1 from Melodious Etudes for Trombone by Marco Bordogni and Joannes Rochut

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Twenty Counterparts

Book One

Duet accompaniments to the Bordogni-Rochut
"Melodious Etudes For Trombone" #1-20

Tom Ervin

No.1

Andante (♩ = 60)

p

a tempo

ritard - - -

p

mf

f (sust.)

dim.

p

In the Wee Small Hours

Let's do this with a standard ballad called *In the Wee Small Hours*. This is a four-part harmony but unlike the Bach chorales and the Rochut, this tuning is equal temperament. You'll be playing with a piano, bass, and string section so the notes and intervals are fixed and therefore, not perfect (theoretically) like the a cappella chorale and duet were. Each of the four parts are provided as are rhythm tracks containing the full piece, and four versions each missing one part.



bit.ly/altobonesavvy “Wee Small Hours - four part”, “Wee Small Hours - four part no first”, “Wee Small Hours - four part no second”, “Wee Small Hours - four part no third”, “Wee Small Hours - four part no fourth”

TROMBONE 1

TROMBONE 2

TROMBONE 3

Musical score for Trombone 3, measures 1-19. The score is written in 3/4 time with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The first staff (measures 1-4) begins with a triplet of eighth notes (B-flat, A, G) followed by a quarter rest, then a quarter note (F), and a half note (E). The second staff (measures 5-10) continues the melody with various intervals and a triplet of eighth notes (D, C, B-flat). The third staff (measures 11-14) features a half note (A) and a quarter note (G). The fourth staff (measures 15-18) includes a half note (F) and a quarter note (E). The fifth staff (measures 19) concludes with a half note (D) and a quarter note (C).

TROMBONE 4

Musical score for Trombone 4, measures 1-19. The score is written in 3/4 time with a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The first staff (measures 1-4) begins with a triplet of eighth notes (B-flat, A, G) followed by a quarter rest, then a quarter note (F), and a half note (E). The second staff (measures 5-10) continues the melody with various intervals and a triplet of eighth notes (D, C, B-flat). The third staff (measures 11-14) features a half note (A) and a quarter note (G). The fourth staff (measures 15-18) includes a half note (F) and a quarter note (E). The fifth staff (measures 19) concludes with a half note (D) and a quarter note (C).

Words by Bob Hilliard Music by David Mann
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When pitch becomes a deliberate color

We've worked on hearing pitch more accurately but there is another aspect of pitch that deserves a bit of discussion.

This more advanced topic may not be of interest to you because at the moment, you are still trying to find the notes on the alto.

But if you are a more advanced trombone player and want to consider the role your intonation plays in your sound, read on...

Intonation is not just about aiming for perfectly accurate mathematically calculated frequencies. That's no more true than the idea that great musical time comes from hitting the metronome clicks perfectly.

But you do have to crawl before you can sprint, so the order of work on pitch is deliberate. First, hear the pitch. Then hear your pitch in the context of the harmonies and players around you. Then last, throw away rigid rules and express yourself using the freedom of intonation as you personally hear it.

I could write thousands of words on this single topic, but I think the best way to communicate about the emotional power of intonation is to give you some musical examples.

For these players, notes no longer are absolutes of "correct" frequencies like rigid stair steps up and down musical lines. Pitch becomes the smooth flexible elevator up or down that serves their musical voice in a way that cannot be played by locking into each tonal stair step.

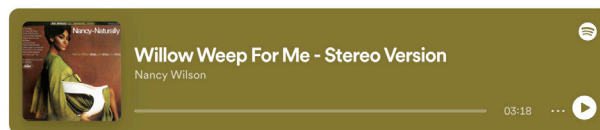
I've displayed 13 audio tracks on the right from artists whose styles exemplify the use of pitch to tell their personal story. These are not trombone players, by the way, because I am encouraging you to open your mind to consider pitch beyond trombone.

This is by no means an exhaustive collection of such artists, just a small sampling of some of my favorite masters to get you listening and thinking.

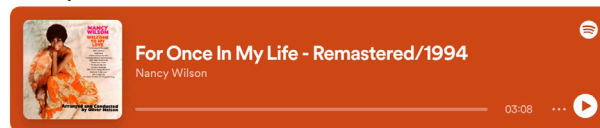
Listen to their manipulation and treatment of the pitch. These great artists use pitch to express themselves. I hope that you are inspired to find your personal way to use pitch.

The samples are Spotify tracks. Each track should be easy to find.

Nancy Wilson



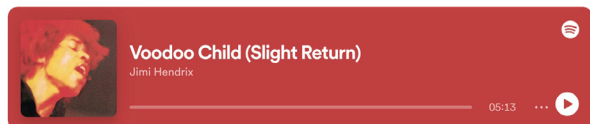
Nancy Wilson



Lester Bowie



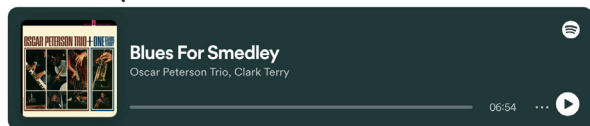
Jimi Hendrix



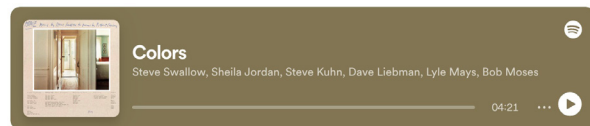
Dexter Gordon



Clark Terry



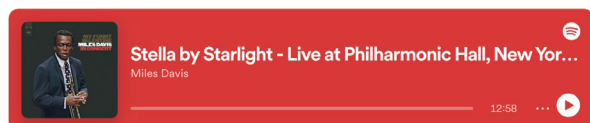
Dave Liebman



Dave Liebman



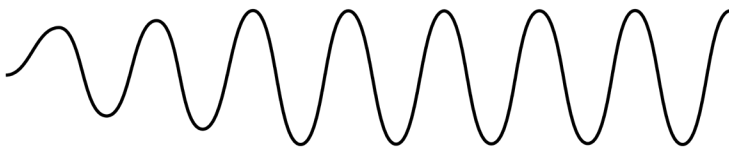
Miles



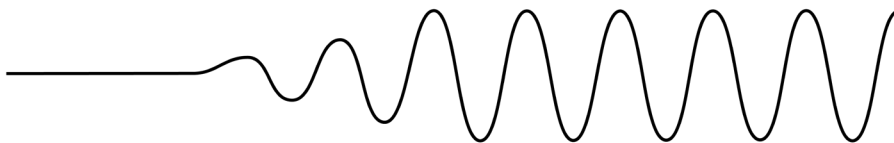
Vibrato Savvy

Vibrato is an important component in expressing your unique voice on trombone - alto, tenor or bass. It warms up your tone and gives it personality. My particular vibrato on the alto tends to be deliberately slower. There are as many “flavors” of vibrato as there are players, but here are three basic types:

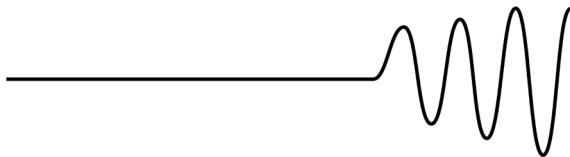
Steady, even vibrato immediately after producing the tone



Steady, even vibrato after holding a straight tone



Quicker vibrato at the very end of a straight tone



Here are some examples for you to hear of trombone vibrato. I recorded them in order from 1 to 7 below.



bit.ly/altobonesavvy
“Vibrato Examples”

- | | |
|------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Steady jaw | 5. Quick jaw at end |
| 2. Steady slide | 6. Quick slide at end |
| 3. Delayed jaw | 7. A combination of both |
| 4. Delayed slide | |

Classical players use a more steady, even vibrato, much like a classical singer. Jazz and pop trombone players tend to use a less even vibrato. These are broad generalities, but the key is to find your particular style.

Regardless of your style, there are two basic ways to create vibrato on the trombone: Jaw and slide. Jaw vibrato modulates the tone and dynamic and tends to be a bit more subtle. Slide vibrato modulates pitch and tends to be more pronounced since it can cover a wider pitch range. Trombone vibrato styles have evolved since the steady wide vibrato of Glenn Miller, just like vibrato in every instrument. But the steady modulation of pitch, dynamics, or tone, it makes music more human. More living.

Create a jaw vibrato using jaw movement in a “yaw yaw yaw” movement. You’re not changing pitch as much as you are modulating the timbre of the sound. A kind of closing - opening - closing - opening of the sound. The point is to create movement as apposed to a static tone. You can create any of the above three types of vibrato with your jaw.

To practice jaw vibrato, hold a tone then slowly close then open then close then open. The trick is to control the width, speed and timing of it in order to create a musical effect.

Slide vibrato is produced by short controlled modulations or movements of the slide. Those slide movements on alto are shorter relative to those on the tenor simply because the alto positions are closer together. Slide vibrato is done most effectively by moving your fingers and wrist as apposed to your arm. A nice steady slide vibrato is made more effective by keeping a full column of air traveling through the vibrato. Since more air is required when your slide moves out, you need to practice modulating the flow of air slightly as your slide moves in and out.

Some players are almost afraid of playing with vibrato. They may not be sure how to add that element of personality without sounding corny or silly. Vibrato requires a certain confidence. After all, you are putting an ornament on your sound. What should that sound like for you?

Start by practicing your vibrato. In the safe confines of your practice room, play a note. Exaggerate the width of your vibrato in order to break it in. Try the three types of vibrato I diagrammed on the previous page. Again, don’t be shy. What sounds like a wild exaggeration may actually sound good. You are just not used to hearing yourself like that.

One excellent exercise for gaining command over vibrato is to alternate between jaw and slide vibrato over a steady tone, keeping the same vibrato frequency. Practice both vibrato types with a steady pulse and try to match them as best you can.

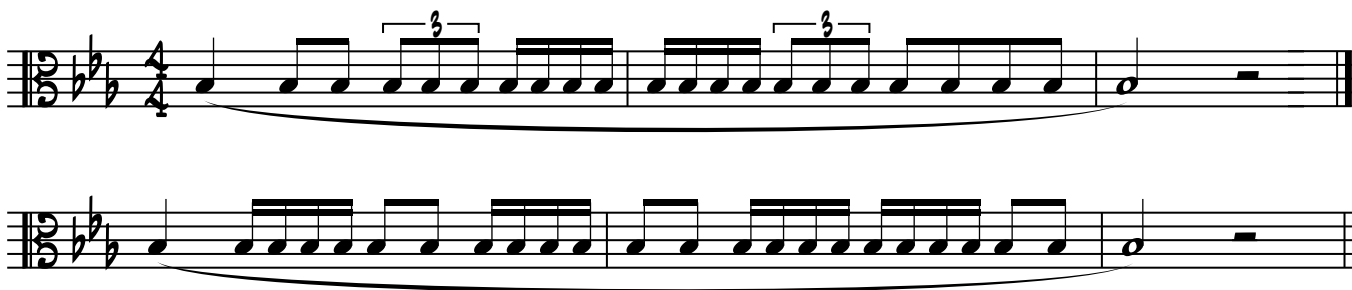
In case you are wondering, your vibrato need not match the tempo of the music. But again, vibrato styles are as varied as the musicians who play them. Find a depth and rate that works for you and use vibrato to enhance your musical personality.

Rhythm Savvy

A great sense of time and rhythm is critical to playing music well. I might go so far as to claim that rhythm is the most important element of music. The placement of each note in time depends on the style of music you are playing. In traditional classical music, notes are placed more on top of the beat than in jazz. In jazz, notes are typically placed slightly behind the beat. In my opinion, rhythm is more important than the right notes or accurate pitch in jazz. Regardless of the music you play, a big part of your musical skill is linked to your sense of time and rhythm.

The smaller size of the alto provides a different experience of rhythm from tenor or bass trombone. If you are a lifelong tenor player, the shorter distance and slightly quicker response of the alto will likely make it easier to stay in time. Less prone to dragging perhaps?

This section will provide you with several ways to strengthen your time and rhythm. On your own, you can play scales, etudes, musical parts and patterns along with a metronome. You can play exercises like this using the steady beat of the metronome which will also strengthen your tonguing.



Playing too much with a metronome, however, does have its disadvantages for which you must be on the lookout. Musical time is not metronomic time. You could have perfect metronomic time and not sound musical. Musical time is imperfect just like the beating of the human heart.

But I do believe that the foundation of an accurate internal musical clock is a prerequisite to good musical time, so let's look at a few exercises to strengthen your internal clock.

One good way to practice the above exercise is to give yourself a metronome beat *only* on one of each measure as you play the three bar phrases. How well can you hit beat one of each bar? Can you anticipate the beat?

Here are some play-along exercises that can help you hear a steady beat and strengthen what I'm calling your internal clock. Again, the goal is not to turn you into a metronome, but instead, a musician with a strong sense of time and rhythm.

Let's start with some click tracks that go beyond a simple metronome by providing you with a variety of click tempos and patterns. It's easy to play with a steady metronome, so let's mix it up a bit.

Starting with the first audio file of each tempo, you'll get a sequence of clicks with longer and longer intervals of silence between bars. Play a repeating note, scale, pattern, etude, or improvisation throughout the file while keeping a steady tempo through the silence and clicks. On the following page, I've given you four written-out 8-bar phrases to play over these click tracks.

Play whatever you wish over these tracks, but keep in mind that the objective is to feel the flow of time through the silence. Listen for your tendency to rush or drag through the silence.

You'll have two tempos over which to play: 110 bpm and 90 bpm.



bit.ly/altobonesavvy
Bar of click very other bar @110



bit.ly/altobonesavvy
Bar of click every fourth bar @110



bit.ly/altobonesavvy
Bar of click every third bar @110



bit.ly/altobonesavvy
Bar of click every fifth bar @110



bit.ly/altobonesavvy
Bar of click very other bar @90



bit.ly/altobonesavvy
Bar of click every fourth bar @90



bit.ly/altobonesavvy
Bar of click every third bar @90



bit.ly/altobonesavvy
Bar of click every fifth bar @90

"Rhythm is sound in motion. It is related to the pulse, the heartbeat, the way we breathe. It rises and falls. It takes us into ourselves; it takes us out of ourselves."

- Edward Hirsch

But mechanical exercises like these get boring and they only go so far in building your sense of time. One way to improve your time is to play musical phrases over musical rhythms, so I've created a few of these music tracks for you on the following pages.

These are fresh music tracks over which you can play melodies that I've written for each. Instead of working on your technical placement of notes, these exercises help you feel the energy of the music and your place within it. Music comes from playing a consistent rhythmic groove that gives energy to the music you are playing, and does so without dragging or rushing. (Not that trombones ever drag!)

But before you can play energetic music, you must have a solid sense of time. The first two exercises are called *Rhythm Exercise Over Strings* and *Rhythm Exercise Over Jazz Piano/Bass*.

1. Rhythm Exercise over Strings

This track begins with a string hit on quarter notes, then on beats 1 and 3, then only on beat 1 of each measure. The identical sequence begins again mid-way through. Play the music on page 58 with the audio file background. The idea is to match the tempo of the strings. You have neither a conductor nor any visual clues from other players—only your ears to anticipate the beat! And unlike a metronome, the beat also serves to guide your intonation.

A written out melody is provided, but you can play anything you wish over the track. You can play quarter notes, eighth-note scales, or patterns. I recorded the written line on alto trombone as a model. Record yourself and listen back to the recording of your performance, listening for a consistent pace throughout. Listen for how accurately you match my pace note for note and phrase for phrase.

2. Rhythm Exercise Over Jazz Piano/Bass

This track is a similar concept, but the style is jazz. The music is on page 59. Again, the background beat becomes more sparse and, therefore more difficult to play. It ends with 16 bars of offbeat bass quarter notes. I liked that groove so much I created a separate file of just the offbeat bass for practice once the fuller rhythm beat becomes (or is) too easy. See music file "*Off beat Bass Rhythm*". If you can maintain a musical flow and groove over the offbeat bass alone, you have a good sense of time. For both of these, is your playing consistent or does it sound a bit like the stretching and compressing of a slinky as you wander throughout the beat? Are you recording yourself?

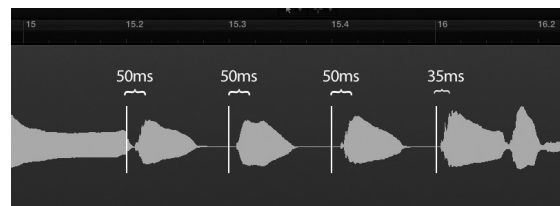
Feel free also to vary the articulations and to improvise your own melodies over each of these tracks. Listen back to the recording of yourself to hear how consistently you aligned yourself to the beat and to the feel of the rhythmic background. Consistency is the objective.

You can probably hear the contrast between the placement of my notes within the beats of the strings rhythm and the jazz rhythm. As mentioned above, the jazz notes are behind the beat much more than the classically-oriented strings melody—as is idiomatically appropriate. Take a look at the following sound file graphics to see just how much of a delay there is in my jazz notes. It is between 35 and 50 milliseconds between the beat and the attack of the note. The vertical white line is the downbeat of the rhythm.

Trombone attacks in the *Rhythm Exercise Over Strings*: the attack is on the beat



Trombone attacks in the *Rhythm Exercise Over Jazz*: the attack is behind the beat



RHYTHM EXERCISE OVER STRINGS



bit.ly/altobonesavvy "String Accompaniment for Rhythm Exercise"



bit.ly/altobonesavvy "String Accompaniment for Rhythm Exercise with Recorded Trombone Line"

A musical score for an alto trombone, consisting of ten staves of music in 4/4 time. The key signature has one flat (B-flat). The score includes various rhythmic patterns, including eighth notes, quarter notes, and half notes, with some measures containing rests. The staves are numbered 5, 9, 13, 17, 21, 25, 29, and 33. The final measure of the tenth staff ends with a double bar line.

RHYTHM EXERCISE OVER JAZZ PIANO/BASS



bit.ly/altobonesavvy “Jazz Rhythm Exercise with Recorded Trombone Line” (Michael Lake playing the trombone line with the rhythm track)



bit.ly/altobone “Jazz Rhythm Exercise Rhythm Only” and “Off Beat Bass Rhythm”

1

5

9

13

17

21

25

29

33

37

Next, here are five more rhythmic backgrounds, but instead of morphing throughout the track like the previous two, these are more consistent.

Remember that we are in the chapter on time and rhythm, so the point of these written-out exercises is to strengthen your sense of rhythm. Each of these pieces start out rhythmically fairly simply and get progressively more difficult. The purposes of the rhythm tracks is to 1. make playing these exercises enjoyable, and 2. allow you to not only listen for your note placement in time, but also to hear your pitch accuracy.

Each exercise is written in four-bar phrases, almost as if each stanza is a new rhythmic melody. You can begin on any stanza in order to mix it up a bit and prevent you from always needing to start at the beginning. These are also good exercises for strengthening your sight-reading ability on alto trombone. Don't always start at the beginning.

Each staff maintains the same key and rhythm so as an added challenge, vary your start. Start on beat 2 or 4. Challenge yourself to keep a consistent groove regardless of the feel of the background cycle. You are strengthening your musical flexibility along with all the other benefits of these creative exercises. What else can you come up with in order to get the most out of them?

Record your performances along with the background and listen back to it ruthlessly as if it was your student. Become comfortable listening to recordings of your playing. Your dislike of the process could be a sign that you need to record yourself more. Sorry! It's very easy to fall into a trap while we play of thinking we're in perfect time and pitch. Recordings don't lie.

DREAM REPAIR



bit.ly/altobonesavvy “*Dream Repair with recorded trombone line*” (Michael Lake playing the trombone line with the rhythm track)



bit.ly/altobonesavvy “*Dream Repair rhythm only*”

The musical score for "Dream Repair" is written in 4/4 time and consists of eight staves of music. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The score includes various rhythmic patterns, including eighth notes, quarter notes, and half notes, as well as triplets and a quintuplet. The first staff begins with a measure marked with a '2' above it. The second staff starts with a measure marked with a '7' below it. The third staff starts with a measure marked with an '11' below it. The fourth staff starts with a measure marked with a '15' below it. The fifth staff starts with a measure marked with a '19' below it. The sixth staff starts with a measure marked with a '23' below it. The seventh staff starts with a measure marked with a '27' below it. The eighth staff starts with a measure marked with a '31' below it. The score concludes with a double bar line.

METRO CRYSTALS



bit.ly/altobonesavvy “Metro Crystals with recorded trombone line” (Michael Lake playing the trombone line with the rhythm track)



bit.ly/altobonesavvy “Metro Crystals rhythm only”

The musical score for "Metro Crystals" is written for Alto Trombone in 4/4 time. It consists of eight staves of music, with measure numbers 2, 7, 11, 15, 19, 23, 27, and 31 indicated at the beginning of their respective staves. The key signature has one flat (Bb). The score includes various musical notations such as eighth notes, quarter notes, half notes, and rests, along with articulation marks like slurs and accents. The piece concludes with a double bar line at the end of the eighth staff.

HARP MARCH



bit.ly/altobonesavvy “Harp March with recorded trombone line” (Michael Lake playing the trombone line with the rhythm track)



bit.ly/altobonesavvy “Harp March rhythm only”

9

13

17

21

25

29

33

STRING BOUNCE



bit.ly/altobonesavvy “String Bounce with Recorded Trombone Line” (Michael Lake playing the trombone line with the rhythm track)



bit.ly/altobonesavvy “String Bounce Rhythm Only”

JUNGLE DANCE



bit.ly/altobonesavvy “Jungle Dance with Recorded Trombone Line” (Michael Lake playing the trombone line with the rhythm track)



bit.ly/altobonesavvy “Jungle Dance Rhythm Only”

The musical score for 'Jungle Dance' is written in 4/4 time with a key signature of one flat (Bb). The score consists of eight staves of music, each beginning with a measure number on the left. The notation includes various rhythmic values, slurs, and triplets. The first staff starts with a double bar line and a '2' above the first measure. The second staff has a '6' below the first measure. The third staff has an '11' below the first measure. The fourth staff has a '15' below the first measure. The fifth staff has a '19' below the first measure. The sixth staff has a '23' below the first measure. The seventh staff has a '27' below the first measure. The eighth staff has a '31' below the first measure. The score ends with a double bar line at the end of the eighth staff.

Playing alto trombone with good time demands more than just playing accurately with a metronome or beats like these last few background tracks. Good rhythm means being able to play a particular feel based upon the music you are performing.

Playing trombone in the back of an orchestra with good time playing requires something different than playing Count Basie charts in the trombone section of a big band. One requires not just being on top of the orchestra's time, but being a tiny bit before it in order not to sound late, while the other requires sitting back, so to speak, in the laid-back feel of the big band.

"I think the band can really swing when it swings easy, when it can just play along like you are cutting butter."

- Count Basie

The alto trombone speaks slightly quicker than tenor or bass, so part of your alto skill requires you to produce notes accurately as directed by the style, venue and type of ensemble. If you play tenor, you probably already have a sense of how to move the air in order to produce a given sound within a given rhythmic feel. Do you have that same ability with the alto?

Here's an exercise to help you build some flexibility with your sense of time, while providing you with a gauge for how to slightly modulate your sense of rhythm on alto.

Using a jazz beat, I've created a simple background. Over the background, I've recorded a melody line performed three ways:

1. Laid back swing
2. Less laid back swing
3. On top of the beat



bit.ly/altobonesavvy "Three speed flexibility track"



The three versions I played on the recording have subtle time differences, but those subtleties can make the difference between playing in time and not. Can you hear the differences in note placement?

Over the audio file called "*Rhythm Flexibility Track*", play with different feels and record your playing to hear your time variations. How well can you adjust your time to be laid back, less laid back, and more on top of the beat? Can you switch between those modes of time? This track is rhythm-only.



bit.ly/altobonesavvy "Rhythm flexibility track"

Alto Slide Savvy

As trombone players, we don't always use the one unique creative attribute of our instrument. At least not to anywhere near its full capability. We work so hard at hitting notes squarely and minimizing the artifacts between notes that we forget that we can create some truly unique musical colors using our slide.

This is about style, no doubt. There's no rule preventing us from sliding up to notes, playing microtones, falling after notes, etc. But the slide does provide us with those musical effects should we choose to use them in our performances. This obviously applies to jazz players and soloists rather than orchestral players. Your conductor won't be amused by your new-found creativity of sliding between notes on Beethoven's Fifth!

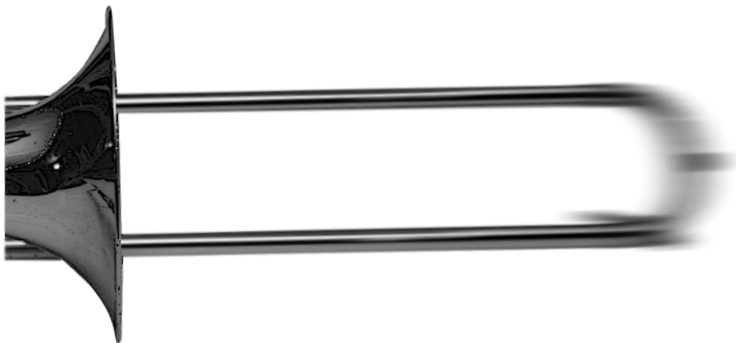
Let me demonstrate some of the possibilities that come to mind as I play the blues. I am not suggesting that you model what I am doing. I've not transcribed this. Rather, I hope that it opens your mind to using the trombone in some new ways to ornament your personal playing style—to bring out your personality. Be bold and experiment! Start out simple and just go where it feels right.

I purposefully made this recording “raw”. No effects and no making it studio pretty. That's part of the particular style of these two choruses. Pitch and note precision isn't always the standard. Sometimes it is and sometimes it isn't. As I wrote at the start of this section, in jazz, time and rhythm are the priorities over the “right” notes and pitch.

And this is one of those areas that is most definitely not just about alto trombone!



bit.ly/altobonesavvy “Using the Slide Creatively”



Ear Savvy

Playing any musical instrument well goes far beyond simply seeing black dots on the page and then quickly translating them into instrument fingerings. It requires the ability to translate to their instrument what one hears in their musical imagination. The goal for any musician regardless of style is for their instrument to become an extension of their musical imagination.

You might think, “But I’m a classical musician and I don’t need to play by ear.” You’re wrong. You may be reading those black dots on the page but if you don’t have a musical sense of the sound of those pitches and for the phrase you’re performing *before* it actually comes out of your instrument you will sound like a machine. So even though you don’t think of that as playing by ear, it is.

The point of this chapter is to elevate your ability to reflect the music inside instantaneously to your instrument so that you play music, well... more musically.

Taking advantage of the alto’s false tones

I have never owned an alto with a trigger. It always seemed unnecessary for me, loading me down with that extra tubing I never wanted. Without the trigger, we cannot play five notes cleanly. But we do have those notes as false tones below the seventh position low A.

Alto false tones:

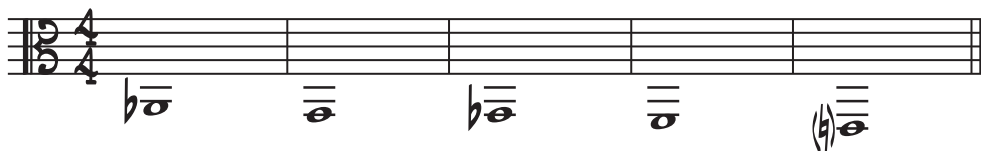


These notes do not exist naturally within the overtones of the Eb alto trombone. They ‘live’ in between the first and second overtones. There is an opportunity, however, to work on your musical ear within those five notes. Since they do not lock into a partial, you must create the pitch using only your ear to guide the frequency of your buzzing. Can you play these pitches without a trigger?

Here are a few different exercises to strengthen your ability to hear and play these false tones on a non-trigger alto. Even if you own the trigger alto, try these without using the trigger in order to build your ear for hearing these tones.

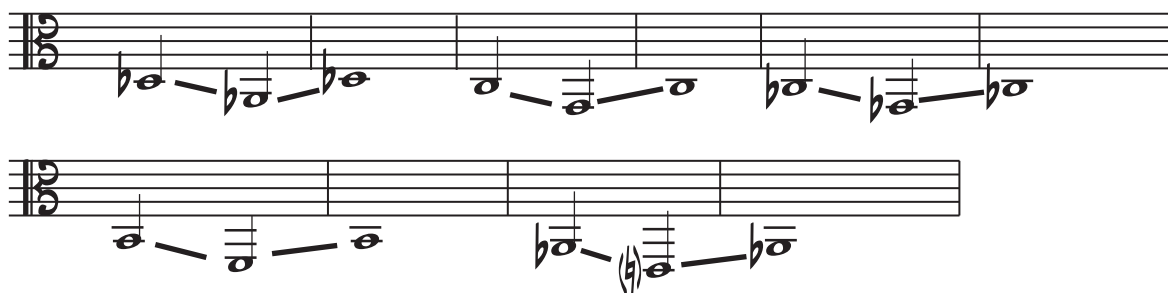
Again, the point is to be able to hit a defined pitch without the benefit of the horn’s facility to lock into a natural partial within the overtone series of the alto trombone.

First, play a natural tone on the horn and then lip-slide down holding the same position to the note a fourth down from the upper note. For example, play Db in the bottom of the bass clef staff and then lip down to the low Ab below it. Play the upper Ab in order to get that pitch into your ear. Move down a half step to C and lip down to low G. Continue that movement down to A to low E.



This exercise may be difficult if you have trouble hearing those lower pitches without being able to find a slot for them. Don't worry about the tone of those lower notes. Focus only on the pitch. Listen to the recorded examples at the bottom of this page of me playing these notes in order to confirm that the tone is not exactly beautiful!

Once you are able to find those lower notes, add a degree of difficulty to the exercise by sliding down and then back up to the higher note like this:



Last, rather than sliding down to those pitches, try hitting them. This will be more difficult, but this next step will strengthen your ability to hear these low notes and perhaps even use them when needed.

From time to time, I will be handed music that contains those false notes. In those moments, being able to play E through Ab comes in handy. They will never sound as clear as the pitches within the overtones of the extended tube (using a trigger) but they'll do in a pinch and more importantly, being able to hit those notes will train your ear to better hear those pitches and in so doing, improve your overall ear for the alto.

It may take you some time and effort to play them, but it is time well spent.

I recorded a couple of examples of hitting these tones. In the first example, I hit the upper octave and then the lower octave false tone. The second example is of hitting the note a fourth higher followed by the lower false tone.

Consider these exercises as great warm-ups for both your chops and your ear!



bit.ly/altobonesavvy "False tones from upper octave"



bit.ly/altobonesavvy "False tones from upper fifth"

Warming up your ear for playing the alto

What does it mean to warm up your ear? Hopefully, you are good at warming up on your instrument, but you probably don't think about warming up your ear? Why should you?

It goes back to a point I made in the previous section on false tones. No matter what music you play, your ear to instrument connection is critical. Even when reading music, you must hear the music as a split-second guide to producing it out of your horn.

If you are learning alto or improving your playing, which is why you bought this book, your ability to hear the instrument will go a long way towards playing it well. If you wish to play jazz on alto, your ear to instrument connection is even more important.

Start out by playing any single note on your horn. Hold it out for a couple of seconds and really listen to it. Now, sing that note. If you resist this exercise because you claim not to be able to sing, get over it. You probably can get a pitch from your voice, it just may not sound like Pavarotti. Do that a few times. Play-sing, play-sing.

Next, after singing the note you played, sing a new note—preferably one close to what you last sang. Now find that sung note on your instrument.

“I can't sing!”

You can. Singing is an important element of playing a musical instrument well.

Singing is the most direct reflection of your musical mind. If you cannot sing something, I contend that you don't really hear it—at least not deeply.

This is not about chops or technique. I'm not asking you to scat sing like Mel Tormé. Just find the pitch accurately. The gravely sound of your voice does not matter nor does your nasally or thin tone. Just find the pitch.

And when you do sing, listen for how long it takes you to zero in on the accurate pitch. I think you'll find that your singing does have a connection to your playing, so treat it as another musical tool helping you become a better musician.

Do this play-sing, sing-play exercise for just a couple of minutes as part of your warm-up. Then listen for any small shifts in your accuracy for finding notes on your alto. I think you'll be surprised by the effect this has on your playing.

Really hearing the alto trombone

I know that you can hear the notes you are playing on your alto, but this section goes way beneath the surface of merely hearing the sound coming out of your bell.

Think of a melody that you know so well that I could wake you up at 2am asking you to sing it, and you could. That melody could be the first phrase of *Three Blind Mice* or *The First Noel*. Whatever melody you choose, play only that phrase on your alto. If you are still at the stage of learning the positions, you've probably arrived at this part of the book too soon. Go back and continue working on your rudimentary alto skills before trying this.

If you could play that very simple phrase, now choose a different starting note and play that phrase. Below are some random starting notes:



How difficult is this for you? Resist the temptation to skip over this exercise and section because, “I’m not a jazz player.” This is not just for jazz players. It is a critical exercise for classical players. So for example, play the first phrase of Wagner’s *The Ride of the Valkyries*. Can you start that phrase on a different note?

I remember a conversation I had with Douglas Yeo, the former bass trombonist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra. We were taking a break from recording our album *Fratres*, and we were talking about playing by ear. He said that I’d be shocked by how few of the professional classical musicians can play even *Happy Birthday* without music.

While those musicians to whom Doug referred are making a good living playing strictly off the printed music, what more could they do if their ear was more closely connected to their instrument?

You will learn the alto faster and better by doing the exercises to which I’m introducing you.

Here are some possible melodies to play off random starting notes:

- *Mary Had a Little Lamb*
- *Happy Birthday*
- *Hey Jude first phrase*
- *Three Blind Mice*
- *The first phrase in Rochut #1*
- *Joy to The World*
- *The First Noel*
- *Jingle Bells*
- *America the Beautiful*
- *The two-phrase motif to Beethoven’s 5th*
- *Bye Bye Blackbird*
- *Amazing Grace*
- *76 Trombones(!)*
- *Auld Lang Syne*
- *Row Row Row Your Boat*
- *Silent Night*
- *First phrase of Ride of the Valkyries*
- *The first phrase of Beethoven’s Ode to Joy*
- *Bach’s Minuet 1 in G Major*
- *Wagner’s Bridal Chorus*
- *Silent Night*
- *Angels We Have Heard on High*
- *Over the Rainbow*
- *Never Be Another You*
- *Yesterday (Beatles)*

As you work your way through this exercise, keep a few things in mind that will make it easier and more fruitful.

First, choose melodies and melodic fragments that you can play in an original and most comfortable key without thinking about the next notes. Just starting with the first three notes of Three Blind mice is preferable to stumbling badly through *Ride of the Valkyries*. Keep in mind that you are building a complicated skill.

The power of this exercise comes from NOT thinking about each next note. If you play haltingly and find yourself hunting for notes, you’ve chosen the wrong melody for this.

Second, when you find yourself stuck for the next note, rather than calculate the interval or key, stop and sing that next note. You will discover how powerful singing is to this exercise. Hear that sung note then play what feels right on your horn. You may be surprised by how quickly you find it once you hear yourself singing that note.

Last, play what you hear! The goal of your playing this way is to listen to yourself play as if you were listening to someone else. The less effort you put into calculating and manufacturing your way through these melodies by ear, the more benefit you will gain and the quicker you will take command of the alto trombone.

Strengthening your ear with The First Noel

Let me help you ease into the exercise of playing simple tunes starting on different notes. I'll choose a Christmas Carol that you probably know inside and out: *The First Noel*. I'll give the first phrase in two keys. With the sound of that first phrase in your ear, finish the phrase in the following five lines where you are given the partial phrase.

If finishing the first phrase is easy for you, play the rest of the song or as far into it as you can play within each key. And don't let the key signatures distract you. Play the first note, then try to look away from the page as soon as you can. Pick other random notes to start on after these keys.

How easy or difficult it is to play this exercise? Sing first if playing is difficult.

The exercise consists of six musical staves, each representing a different key signature for the first phrase of 'The First Noel'. The first two staves are provided with a partial phrase and a double bar line with a repeat sign. The remaining four staves are empty for the player to complete the phrase.

- Staff 1: Key signature of B-flat (two flats), 3/4 time. Partial phrase: B-flat4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4.
- Staff 2: Key signature of B-natural (no sharps or flats), 3/4 time. Partial phrase: B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4.
- Staff 3: Key signature of C (no sharps or flats), 3/4 time. Partial phrase: C4, B3, A3, G3, F3, E3, D3.
- Staff 4: Key signature of D (one sharp), 3/4 time. Partial phrase: D4, C4, B3, A3, G3, F3, E3.
- Staff 5: Key signature of E-flat (three flats), 3/4 time. Partial phrase: E-flat4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3, F3.
- Staff 6: Key signature of E-natural (one sharp), 3/4 time. Partial phrase: E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3, F3.

Strengthening your ear with Happy Birthday

Let's do one more ear-training exercise and for this, let's use a tune that you also know very well: *Happy Birthday*. This will be more challenging for you than *The First Noel* because of the wider intervals you'll need to hear and play. Notice that at least in the first part of the carol, you are playing major and minor second intervals.

Below is the first two-bar phrase of *Happy Birthday* written out in four keys. Continue the song past the written first phrase if you can. After those first four phrases, you are given the first two notes of the song in the remaining eight keys. Play those first two notes and continue on through the song as far as you can play. I've purposefully left measures blank without rests to imply that you should keep playing, and if you need, to write out the notes in light, erasable pencil.

I've left out the key signatures in case they are a distraction or make you think rather than listen.

The image displays six staves of musical notation, each representing a different key for the first two-bar phrase of 'Happy Birthday'. The notation is written in a 4/4 time signature. The first two staves show the full two-bar phrase in B-flat major and B major. The next four staves show the first two notes of the phrase in C major, C minor, D major, and D minor, with blank measures for improvisation.

These are the types of exercises I use for teaching jazz improvisation. The next section is an introduction to playing jazz on alto trombone, but building your improvisation skills is not the purpose of the above exercises. Learn to play alto trombone by hearing the instrument rather than simply and exclusively memorizing black dots on a page.

Play by ear to hear where the next notes are on the alto. I promise you that by actually hearing the instrument better, you will play more musically, more in tune, and you will probably read music better on alto.

Improvisation Savvy

The focus of this book is on learning and improving your alto trombone playing. It is not primarily a book on jazz, but because I am such an enthusiastic advocate for jazz alto trombone, I feel the need to provide some guidance for improvising on alto.

The prerequisite for playing jazz is to connect your musical imagination to your instrument. The previous chapter on developing your ear is the first step. Continue to play melodies that you can begin on random notes. Do this with Bach, Rochut, jazz standards, orchestral excerpts, and anything you know well enough to exercise your ear to alto trombone connection.

Bach? What does Bach have to do with ear training? Play this short opening phrase to the Gigue in Bach Cello Suite #1. Now choose a different starting note and play the phrase. Can you play the entire Gigue in any key? I believe that is a worthwhile goal in order to build your ear for improvisation!



The challenge of jazz on alto trombone

Trombonists face a special challenge with jazz. Anyone can place their index finger on a piano's middle C and produce a great sound. Instantly. To create a consistently great tone on trombone, however, takes years. And once we master the tone, we have the added challenge of articulating those notes. We have no buttons to push or keys to press. Ta Tee Da Da...

So while pianists are rapidly running scales and chordal patterns, we may still be developing our clean articulation and slide facility to play a good sound in tune. Keeping up with the eighth note runs of the pianist (and trumpet and sax) proves more difficult. But we press on.

Then we hear J.J. Johnson, Frank Rosolino, Carl Fontana, Bill Watrous, Bob McChesney and others who are indeed keeping up with the piano, sax and trumpet. Our love and envy of their abilities sets the standard in our mind of how we think we should sound. And we press on.

Fast and high trombone playing is wonderful to behold, but it is not the natural sweet spot of the trombone. Our slide and the physics of the horn provide us with a distinct and wonderful contrast to those who simply push keys and buttons. How are you using that unique aspect of the trombone?

I'm not putting down other instrumentalists (I also play piano), but instead I'm trying to widen your perspective on what can be accomplished on this amazing brass sliding tube called the trombone. You might surprise yourself!

There are many excellent books available for trombone that provide ample exercises of scales and patterns in all twelve keys. I encourage you to invest your money and practice time in the best of them. In contrast, I want to help you learn or improve your jazz playing with a different focus: *your ear*. I believe that melody, whether complex and dissonant or simple and singable, is at the core of great music.

Learning or improving your jazz playing on alto trombone requires improving the connection between your inner ear—the music you hear in your head—and what comes out of your alto. Can you immediately play on trombone anything you can imagine in your inner ear? Few can, but let's set that as our goal.

Give yourself the starting Bb then sing this melody (an octave lower if that is easier). After singing, play it:



Do the same with this transposed version of the above melody:



We are back to the ear training of the previous section, but this time, not with song melodies, but with harmonic patterns. Pick a note—any note—and sing the above melody. You need not be a good singer, but singing is proof that you hear the melody and singing removes the complication of the trombone. Once the melody is in your ear, play it with the trombone. Like the singing exercise, pick a note randomly and play the melody.

If it is hard, then celebrate that you've found something worthwhile to practice and to improve!

I'm often asked how much harmonic theory must one learn before playing jazz well. The simplest answer is: none. Many of the legends of jazz knew no theory. Players like Chet Baker and Stan Getz played strictly by ear. I know that from the many conversations I've had with the great pianist Richie Beirach who played with both of them for years.

However, as long as it does not get in the way of your authentic musical expression, I recommend that you understand at least some harmonic theory. How can it get in the way? By distracting you from the sound of the music within which you are improvising.

Watch and listen to my humorous YouTube video that illustrates the problem of distractive thinking during improvisation. Does it feel somewhat Familiar?



www.youtube.com/@altobone

This video is within my YouTube Playlist called "Learn to be a better musician."

Playing over chord changes

I remember very clearly my struggle in high school trying to learn how to play melodies over chords. There are only a limited number of notes in any given chord, I reasoned, so how are these musicians playing so many notes and using them all to make really cool music?

The answer I desperately needed to hear goes something like this:

You can play any note over any chord. Some will sound better than others, but they all have a role and that role depends on context.

Scales correspond to chords. For example, all seven notes within the key of the C major scale work on a C Maj 7 chord and the seven notes within the G major scale work well also as long as you're aware of the color of the F#.

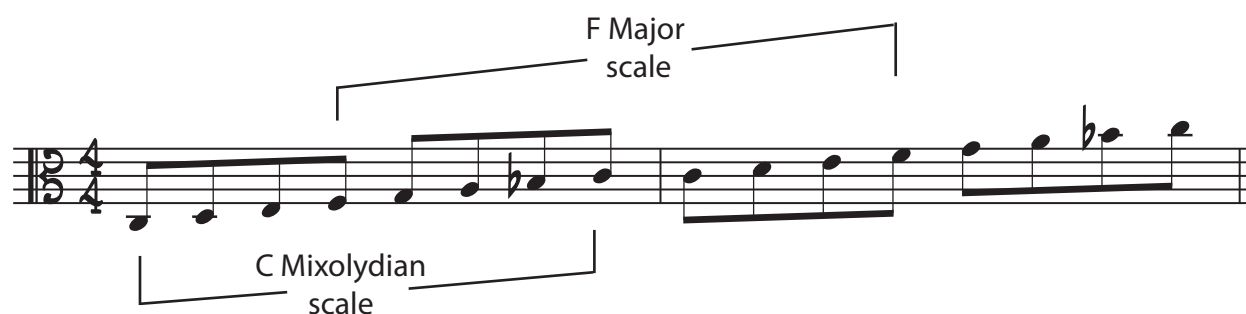
Don't get too hung up, however, on scales or focused on chord tones. Practice your scales and chord arpeggiations, but when it comes time to improvise, think melody. Melodies can be built on much more than basic scales and the handful of notes constructing the chord. And melodies are musical!

Create melodies that sound good within the harmonic context of the tune. Listen to the rhythm section and to the other players. After enough practice, inspiration for a melodic solo will come from listening instead of obsessing over scales.

Thinking in terms of scales is limiting and unmusical. Scales provide you with a predictable collection of relatively “safe” notes but they also provide you with a false sense that you are playing music over changes when in fact you really are just playing scales.

The same goes for patterns. Knowing your major, minor, and modal scales is an invaluable tool for practicing your alto trombone and for gaining some tonal familiarity with jazz changes. To play jazz well, however, your goal should be to focus on creating melodic phrases rather than running scales and patterns.

At the bottom of the page is a four-bar phrase played over a C7 chord. Conventional wisdom says you should play a C mixolydian scale which is an F major scale starting on C. There are four notes in that improvised line, however, not found on those scales. What gives? Listen to the audio of the line being played.



Improvised line over C7:



bit.ly/altobonesavvy “Improvised line over C7”



Again, context is crucial. Those four seemingly odd notes work because of the specific role they perform within C7.

Notice that the F# and D# both lead a half step up to important notes within the C7 chord. We call these passing tones. The F# and D# pass to more consonant notes within the chord quickly enough for there to be not enough emphasis on them to sound wrong. The same goes for the Db and the Ab.

Notice the passing notes resolve just as does the entire phrase. Four notes are outside of the basic chord structure, but we resolved their dissonance using the fifth, third and root of the chord. The full four bars resolves comfortably on the root.

Again, scales serve a purpose in that they give you a ready-made sonority to the chord over which they are played. By practicing scales, you'll gain a feel for the basic notes associated with the chord. But scales should never be confused with the authentic music we compose/improvise in real time on the alto trombone.

The iconic melody Phil Woods played over Billy Joel's *Just the Way You Are* is a great example of playing notes not found in the basic chords. In this case the two main altered notes are not passing tones, but instead they are important colors of the line Woods played—the hook. They are the sharp eleven of the seventh chords. The Bb at the end was simply a passing note resolving to the important fifth of the chord. (Play this as an exercise in various keys!)



I could make a case for there never being wrong notes when you play them deliberately. “Wrong” notes pop up when we don’t know what to play. Maybe we’re lost or struggling to remember the chord. The way out is to pause and listen to the rhythm section and sing melodies using your alto trombone.

Improvising over the blues

“Don’t worry about playing a lot of notes. Just find one pretty one.”

“It’s not the notes you play, it’s the notes you don’t play.”

- Miles Davis

One of the first places over which to start improvising is the blues. There are many variations of the blues, but the most common and basic is the 12-bar blues form.

For the remainder of this section on improvisation, we’ll use the 12-bar blues form in F. Let’s start by looking at one of the great solos from possibly the world’s greatest jazz musician, Miles Davis. The solo we’ll look at on the following page was recorded by Miles on his tune *Walkin’* from the collection called *The Essential Miles Davis*. Check out this track online to get a feel for it.

After the above discussion on playing melodies, this is a classic example of telling a story through improvisation. Miles is not in a hurry to play scales, a bunch of licks, or to play high or fast. The tune is called *Walkin’* and Miles is simply taking us on a leisurely stroll. One of his trademarks was his use of space. It is if he is saying a sentence, then letting that sink in before saying another sentence.

On this book’s SoundCloud rhythm section track called *Walkin’ Blues*, play Miles’ solo from the transcription on the following page. Listen first to how Miles played it on *The Essential Miles Davis*. As we’ve discussed earlier in the book, modeling is a great way to learn a skill. Not that you want to sound like Miles on alto trombone, but rather so that you can feel what it is like to play expressively over the blues.



bit.ly/altobonesavvy “Walkin’ Blues”

As you play this transcribed solo over the above F blues rhythm track, how close can you come to Miles’ masterful feel? How close can you come to playing the alto trombone with his phrasing? Are you laying back or are you playing too on top of the beat? Record yourself and listen back.

Next, play your own solo over this F blues track. Maybe first sing some melodies over the track. Play your horn with some simple melodies and allow for rests in between phrases like Miles did. Beginning jazz players (and experienced players) feel the need to fill the entire form with notes. Especially with a laid back feel like this, you want to create space. You’re trying to focus on good musical phrasing rather than scales, patterns, and chords. Melodies should feel intuitive.

Improvising over Be Bop changes

The next blues is a Bb blues and I’m using Charlie Parker’s *Now’s The Time* as the melody. Charlie Parker was a very different musician from the late 1950’s Miles who played *Walkin’*. Listen to Charlie Parker, or Bird, as he was known. The genius of Bird was his ability to fly over chord changes, fast or slow.

I won’t suggest playing a Charlie parker transcription, but instead, start by playing the melody of *Now’s the Time*. Notice the amount of alto slide movement required in order to go from 6th position F to first position Bb and back again. “Now’s the time” to use those alternate positions you practiced earlier in the book. Using alternate positions for much of this melody, you would play: 6-6-6-4-6-6. In other words, play Bb in 6th position.

Once you have a feel for the melody and the sound of the harmony, improvise over the rhythm track. If you’re new to improvisation, go ahead and arpeggiate the chords. Then pick out notes within the chords that can launch a musical phrase.

I know I earlier condemned scales and playing up and down chords, but if all you can think of is sequential steps up from the root, that’s at least a start to your learning improvisation. Maybe sing some melodies. Sing a note then play that note. Sing a phrase then play that phrase. Remember, you’re trying to develop your skill of projecting your inner musical ideas on the alto trombone. Your voice is that direct connection to your musical imagination.



bit.ly/altobonesavvy “Now’s the Time Rhythm”

Chords: Bb7, Eb7, Bb7, Eb7, Eb, Bb7, Ab7, G7(#9), C7, F7, Bb7, G7, C7, F7.

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If you're a more experienced improviser, play phrases over the rhythm that each have a musical beginning, middle and end. Play melodic phrases as apposed to finding “safe” notes plucked from the changes. All great melodies have an arc in terms of dynamics, note range, and emotional feel. So should your improvisation.

Jazz is as much about listening as it is about playing (more actually). As you play, be honest about what you hear. Be aware of when you start to fall back on scales or patterns or your usual licks. We all have them. In a performance, they can provide us continuity, but while practicing, ruthlessly seek and destroy them.

Practicing your improvising

Over the next several pages, I have created exercises over a blues from which you can model. The practice of modeling other players through learning their solo by ear or through transcription is powerful.

I've recorded my own improvisation over the next few exercises which will provide you with the opportunity to play along with the solos I recorded, then to play them yourself over the rhythm section. I've also created space for you to alternate between playing over my solo and then with only the rhythm section.

As you play along with following recordings and transcriptions of my playing, you are not programming yourself to sound like Michael Lake. Instead you are using these exercises to play certain melodies and phrases that otherwise wouldn't show up in your practicing. They are not yet part of your own vocabulary. The purpose of these exercises is to help you develop a natural instinct to think melodically whenever you improvise. These exercises are deliberately crafted for you to closely model some good jazz phrases and then, with that in your ear, to improvise melodically on your own.

“Everything comes out in blues music: joy, pain, struggle. Blues is affirmation with absolute elegance. It's about a man and a woman. So the pain and the struggle in the blues is that universal pain that comes from having your heart broken. Most blues songs are not about social statements.

- Wynton Marsalis

I recorded a track called “Trading on Blues.” It covers several 12-bar choruses alternating between 1. my improvisation and 2. rhythm section playing without trombone so that you can improvise yourself.

Below is a transcription of the first 24 bars (two choruses) I recorded. I have purposefully omitted the phrase markings and articulations so that you can use your ear to match the style.

Start by listening to my solo, then play it with me, then play it on your own over the next 24 bars of rhythm section. Listen to your phrasing. Are you able to match my feel? Are you matching the articulations and the time I played? How’s your intonation?



bit.ly/altobonesavvy “Trading on Blues”

“There will never come a time when you won’t have to practice anymore.”

- J.J. Johnson

“If you hit a wrong note, then make it right by what you play afterwards..”

- Joe Pass

The musical score is written for alto trombone in 4/4 time. It consists of two 12-bar choruses. The key signature has two flats (Bb and Eb). The first chorus (bars 1-12) features the following chords: Bb7, Eb7, Bb7, Eb7, Eb, Bb7, G7, C7, F7, Bb7, G7, C7, F7. The second chorus (bars 13-24) features the same sequence of chords. The melody is written in a staff with a key signature of two flats. The score includes various musical notations such as eighth notes, quarter notes, half notes, and rests. There are also some triplets indicated by a '3' over a group of notes.

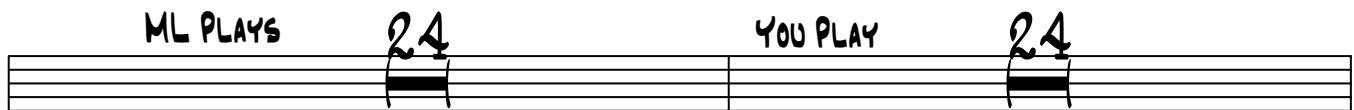
Next, play through my solo on the recording with me, then play on your own for the next 24 bars. By playing my transcribed 24 bars first, you will have some momentum to play your own improvisation for the next two choruses.



bit.ly/altobonesavvy "Trading on Blues"

*"Once I could play
what I heard inside
me, that's when I
was born."*

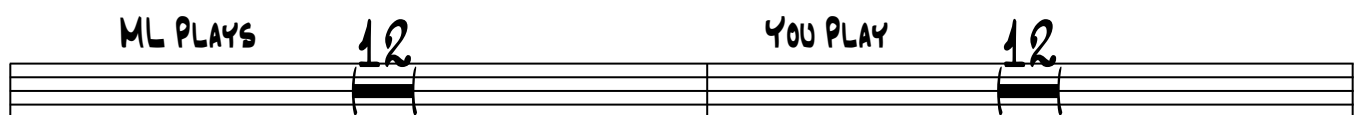
- Charlie Parker



Here is the next 12 bars I recorded that begin at 1:40 on the SoundCloud audio track. The transcription of those 12 bars is below. As with the previous transcription, you'll need to use your ear to hear the exact placement of notes and phrasing since this notation is approximate.

Do the same as you did with the prior 24 bars. Listen to the solo, then play along with my recording, and then on your own over the next 12 bars of rhythm section.

Once you have the transcription under your belt, play it with my recording then play on your own for the following 12 bars as you did earlier with the trading of 24 bars.



Last, at 2:30 on the SoundCloud track, you and I will trade four bars each. Below is the transcription of my four bar phrases. Feel free to model my four-bar phrases then play your own, or just listen to my phrases, then play your own as if we were playing and trading together live.

Chord symbols for the first phrase: $Bb7$, $Eb7$, $Bb7$, $G7$.

Chord symbols for the second phrase: $C7$, $F7$, $Bb7$, $G7$, $C7$, $F7$.

Chord symbols for the third phrase: $Bb7$, $Eb7$, $Bb7$, $G7$.

Chord symbols for the fourth phrase: $C7$, $F7$, $Bb7$, $G7$, $C7$, $F7$.

As a last bit of fun, I continue through the final 12-bar chorus where you and I play together. This is something I enjoy playing live as I feed off the energy of another soloist and vice versa. Listen for ways to contrast my phrases and notes rather than to just play over me.

Obviously, this is not live and therefore, we are not responding to each other, but it is still a worthwhile exercise.

Focusing on individual chords

Now that you've played over the full form, let's focus simply on the individual chords within this blues form. Using the audio file "Trading on Blues", each of the six chords will be held for a while without rhythm. The piano and bass will hold each chord. I'll play over each held chord then when that chord is again played, you play. Repeat this for each of the chords as well as one last Bb7 as a conclusion.

For each chord, try to create something fresh. Play as simple or complex as you wish but think melodically. If you feel yourself gravitating towards scales or familiar licks, stop. Hear a melody in your head then play that phrase. Get a good start in your head then finish it with a line or series of complete lines. Feel free to model any of what I played, but I didn't transcribe/notate any of these.

"Sometimes it works, sometimes it fails, but that's what we face when we're dealing with improvisation."

- Jan Garbarek



bit.ly/altobonesavvy "Trading on Blues"

Bb7	Bb7	Eb7	Eb7
ML PLAYS	YOU PLAY	ML PLAYS	YOU PLAY
Eo	Eo	G7	G7
ML PLAYS	YOU PLAY	ML PLAYS	YOU PLAY
C7	C7	F7	F7
ML PLAYS	YOU PLAY	ML PLAYS	YOU PLAY
Bb7	Bb7		
ML PLAYS	YOU PLAY		

Further Thinking About Music and Alto Trombone

It makes perfect sense that a book on playing alto trombone should be mostly about playing the alto trombone. But I don't want to short-change you by omitting some final thoughts on some other important related topics.

I believe that our brain and our lifestyle have as much to do with playing our instrument well as having a solid embouchure or a fast tongue. Integrate all of that to make you the best player possible.

So I can't help but end this book with a few articles from my blog, each sharing a worthwhile lesson to help you play alto trombone with great skill and savvy.



A gem of alto trombone history

When people talk of jazz alto trombone, the name Tom Ervin is mentioned first. Tom was the Professor of Trombone at the University of Arizona for 36 years and was principle trombone in the Tucson Symphony for 28. As that rare breed of instrumentalist who fluently plays both jazz and classical, Tom also has the distinction of playing both tenor and alto trombone.

I received an email recently from a man affiliated with the International Trombone Festival who heard Tom play jazz on the alto trombone back in 1978 at the ITF Workshop in Nashville. Reminiscing about Tom's alto performance, he wrote, "I thought then and still do now that that was one of the sweetest things I have ever heard."

Well, I forwarded that comment to Tom who replied back with what I think is a gem of jazz alto trombone history (you didn't know there was an jazz alto trombone history?). With Tom's kind permission to reprint, here's his story about the events leading up to the performance introducing his alto jazz chops to the trombone world.

"I had barely picked up the alto, an old Bach in the exhibits (the one with the bell in the wrong place and only six real positions). 1976 approximately.

I was noodling jazz licks on it, and you'll remember I simply pretend it is a tenor trombone and I "just play" as a saxophonist would, not worrying about the real pitches, which makes it easy unless I have to read.

Hank Romersa, the ITW director, had me on the faculty that year I think, but he came ALL unglued and demanded I perform on jazz night. I really did try to get out of it, aw shucks, but he was insistent so what the hell I agreed to a rehearsal with BeeGee and her fine combo; if the rehearsal went okay I'd try it, and if it wasn't comfortable I'd decline/refuse

The rehearsal went well so I agreed to play two tunes. I expected to go first, a warm-up act. But no, Frank Rosolino wanted to go first, and Bill Watrous wanted to play last, so I was stuck in between them. I was quite uncomfortable about this, all of it. But the combo played great and I got away with it, showed them some vibrato and some bebop and maybe a high G#. There are recordings someplace.

So for a few years I was famous as the Jazz Alto player. Hardly ever did it again in public."



What mouthpiece should I use for an alto trombone?

Without a doubt, this is the question I am asked the most. I'll give you the answer I give people pretty much each time I am asked. "It depends." I think it depends on the sound you are after and the style you wish to play on the alto.

When I made the switch from tenor to alto many years ago, I deliberately kept my tenor mouthpiece because I wanted to keep as much of my tenor sound as possible. After all, I couldn't sound thin and expect to blend with the big bands and multi-trombone salsa groups in which I was playing. For me, the alto was not a utility instrument for special situations – it was my musical voice and source of income.

Just to see what would come up, I recently Googled the title of this post. The first result came from the Trombone Forum in a post entitled "The right mouthpiece for the alto trombone". The author wrote something I thought was rather odd: The 6 1/2 AL is a high tenor mouthpiece. It is not any good in the alto trombone. The tone is not bad, at best, but it's not great, and your intonation and tone and range will suffer.

Well, the mouthpiece I have used since picking up the alto has been the aforementioned 6 1/2 AL. And I'd like to think that my intonation, tone and range have not suffered because of it.

As I've written many times in my blog and elsewhere, I think mouthpiece choices are highly subjective AND highly overrated. By overrated I mean that I think people give more credit (and blame) for their hardware than is due. My personal philosophy is that if I don't sound the way I want to sound, I look to blame me – the player – first. Not the horn or the mouthpiece. Sure, you could be playing a leaky or poorly constructed horn, but for the most part, I think horns and

mouthpieces can be willed to sound the way the player wishes them to sound. After all, Charlie Parker played the s**t out of a plastic alto. Even if he had the money, I don't think he would have incessantly been trying different horns in order to find the "perfect" one.

So my answer to the question is: try the tenor mouthpiece you currently use for tenor and play it enough to get used to the alto. When you start out on alto, the tone will sound odd and your intonation will probably suck.

But keep with it and don't succumb to hunting for the right mouthpiece. After you've gained a certain level of proficiency and you still believe that the mouthpiece is holding you back, make a switch. I'd be very interested to hear about your experience. As your ear and arm acclimate to the alto, do you really need to hunt for a different mouthpiece? Let me know.

And, by the way, if you are playing the 6 1/2 AL, don't let anyone talk you out of it before you give it a fair chance!



One mouthpiece I do not recommend is the one that comes with the P-Bone mini (alto)

Alto trombone for tenor players

I've had a surprising number of requests for my thoughts on how tenor players can best learn alto trombone. My sense is that there are a fair amount of alto trombones out there not being used to their fullest because of the difficulty for a tenor player to play both well.

That is precisely why I sold my tenor in college shortly after taking up the alto. I was trying to play both. After all, I had gigs around town, school groups and my trombone studies so I was trying to hang on to my tenor proficiency while learning the alto. But I got to the point of sounding bad on both. I'm not suggesting both can't be played really well simultaneously, just not by me back then.

So like early explorers wishing to remove the fallback of sailing back home once things got difficult, I sold my tenor and forced myself to get it together. It was a struggle, but I eventually wrestled it to the ground! I just needed to come clean on a little history because I do not think it is easy to learn the alto on the side with the full or greater proficiency many tenor players desire.

I would be remiss if I didn't at least mention my book *Alto Trombone Savvy*. One of my best selling books, it takes player from the basics of learning the positions and partials all the way through playing jazz. Check it out here and download the free preview.

Learning the alto trombone

First, I treat the tenor as a C instrument. I know that the fundamental is Eb, but the tenor's fundamental is Bb and we still read C music. For me, 440 hertz is A4. When I see the A above the staff, I simply play A440 in second position.

I hear some players say that they are doing mental transposition up a fourth in order to get the positions, and I recommend against that. I think learning the alto trombone means learning the new positions of the notes on sight. Middle C in 4th position, F above that in third, the F an octave below in sixth, and so on. In tune and on command. Even if you can accomplish the mental gymnastics of that sight transposing, how do you apply that to reading changes playing jazz?

Here are some tips:

1. Practice with some simple tracks playing in the background so that you can hear the intonation. Playing the C scale on alto a capella will help you to learn the positions, but hearing related harmonies along with your playing will help you hone your intonation.

One of the things you'll hear from most guys playing alto is that the intonation isn't clean because they're a little unsure of the slide positions. As trombone players we know that intonation isn't solely about positions, but your face can't yet compensate if you're still fishing for the positions, even minutely.

2. Like you probably do on tenor, practice intervals.

One of the harder notes on an alto is the F below middle C. It's in sixth position. Practice – slowly at first – going from F back to first position Eb. You'll need to have that movement down. Then play G (forth position) F, Eb. Yea, it's hard. Again, like I wrote above, practice this with some harmonies in the background to nail the pitch of that F. Then slowly play the Eb major scale. (Be careful not to pop off the slide when going for that F. It's a shorter slide!)

3. My one case for mental transposition is when practicing exercises like Kopprasch or Bach Cello Suites because much of those exercises go below low A which, without a trigger, cannot be played naturally.

So I read them in the tenor positions up a fourth. I play those Cello Suites A LOT. I do not do this as a cheat to learning positions. I do it to play certain great music and trombone exercises so that they fall naturally within the upper forth mechanics of the alto.

Last, let me reiterate that to play the alto well, and not just as a novelty sideline instrument requires dedication.

If you have the luxury, put the tenor in a closet for a week and force yourself to play the alto exclusively. I don't mean at concerts or recordings, unless you're ready. But maybe a period of time in which you can suffer through playing alto exclusively.

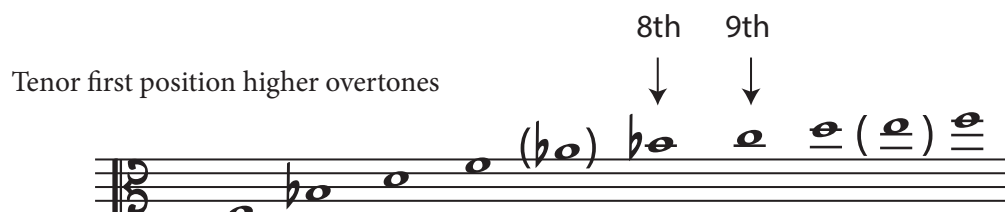
This is all coming from my experience, and maybe you are a more talented musician and trombone player than me. Maybe you can play both without a hardcore exclusive dedication to the alto. It's kind of uncharted territory because, honestly I haven't heard any really solid jazz/ improvisational alto players.

Is it easier to play high notes on an alto trombone?

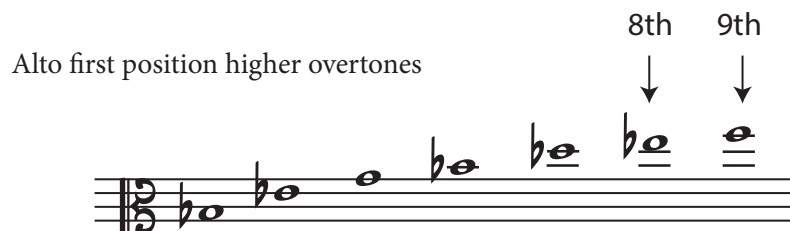
Several years ago, a trombone player and I were talking about the differences between alto and tenor trombones and how that affects playing in the high register. At the time, I'd never thought of it that way, but what my friend said made a lot of sense.

It's a popular misconception that it's easier to play higher on the alto because it is a smaller horn. After all, size must matter since tubas play higher than trombones and trumpets play higher than trombones. Common thinking is that since the alto is a fourth higher (and smaller) than a tenor, playing a high Bb should be similar to an F above the staff on a tenor. Speaking for myself and because I play a 6 1/2 AL tenor mouthpiece, the higher register does not correlate in that way. But the alto does provide a benefit which my friend identified.

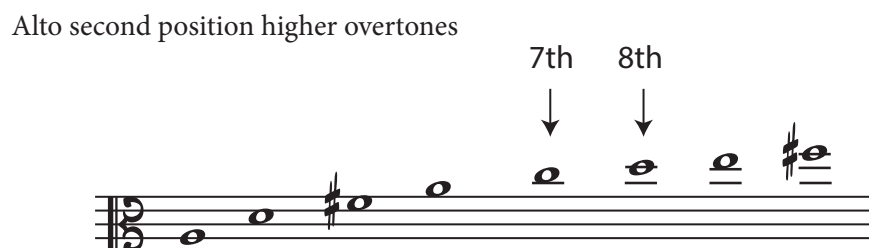
Because the alto is a fourth higher than the tenor, the first position high Bb on the alto is the same partial (6th) as the F on tenor. And the second position high C on an alto is the same partial (7th) as the G on a tenor.



Notice that on the following first position overtones on the alto, the high Bb (6th) is separated by a minor third above and below. On the tenor that Bb (8th) is separated by only whole tones (see above). While that may seem subtle, when aiming for that Bb, the alto player has more room to pick it out. The tenor player has to pick it out between two neighboring whole tones.



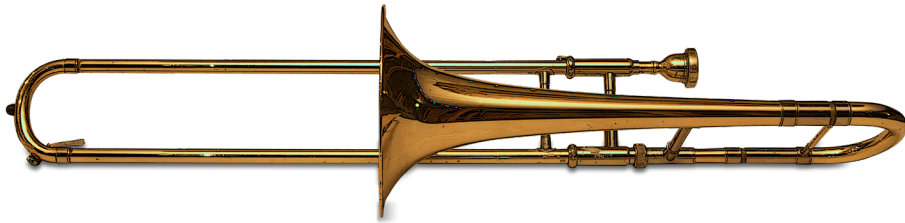
The same is true for the high C. On an alto, that note is played in a pulled-in second position (the flat 7th partial) and is a minor third above the A in the 6th partial. On a tenor that C is separated only by whole tones in the 3rd position.



The same is true for the high Eb and F in that they are separated by whole tones on an alto but by only half steps on a tenor. Again, a small distinction, but that little bit of extra room is beneficial when you're stretching for those notes. Like the tenor, they are still high notes that, especially with a typical tenor mouthpiece, still require practiced effort to pull off.

Regardless, I think my friend made a good point about that extra room making it a bit easier to pick out those common high notes.

Is it easier to play high on alto? I think it depends on the player and the mouthpiece, but the slotting on the alto certainly makes things just a bit easier on that smaller tube.



Must you read alto clef in order to play alto trombone?

Take a look at excerpts from the music written in the 18th Century for the first trombone and you'll find music written in alto clef. Here's an example from Beethoven's Fifth Symphony:



The principal reason for alto clef was to make the higher parts easier to read by using fewer ledger lines. That first note in the above excerpt would require three more ledger lines in order to display that high C.

Modern trombonists, however, have developed the ability to quickly discern three, four, and five ledger lines, so bass clef is the standard clef for trombone.

Classical music adheres to the alto clef, however, other forms of music are principally written in bass clef, with some in tenor clef. Tenor clef makes sense for parts that are consistently written above F above the staff.

Let me firmly and without reservation dismiss the seemingly obligatory connection between alto trombone and alto clef. It is perfectly acceptable to read bass clef for the alto trombone.

I've said this many times, that my playing career would have been non-existent if I had required alto clef for the big band, trombone choir, salsa, pop, and other music I've recorded and performed.

The dependence on alto clef

I discussed the topic of alto clef one time with a well-known orchestral trombonist who said that most trombonists he knows who play alto can ONLY play the horn by reading alto clef. That seems like a huge mistake and will limit those musicians' musical abilities.

When I was writing my book *Alto Trombone Savvy*, I originally had no intention of writing an alto clef version. In fact, I had pretty much finished writing the book when I sent a copy to the great trombonist Carsten Svanberg for his review. He loved what I had put together but added that I should create an alto clef version.

I took a deep breath and began diving into creating an alto clef version of the book.

Full disclosure, I have not read very much alto clef in my life. Once I start hearing what I am playing, I can acclimate to it pretty well, but I don't do my best sight reading with it.

But my issue against needing alto clef for playing alto trombone is not because of my personal limitations with alto clef. Players are limiting themselves, not just by needing dots on the page, but to needing those dots to be in a specific clef.

I can sightread very well in treble clef as well as bass. Seeing music on any clef should be a recognition of what the music sounds like instead of a mechanical reaction to a symbol. I would also be encouraging those weeded to alto clef to get better at playing by ear. Play Happy Birthday in just three different keys anyone?!

The market speaks

As it turns out, about 50% of the buyers of the book opt for the alto clef version, so from a business standpoint, it was a good suggestion and worth the effort to create the book in alto clef.

And here I am six years later revising and rewriting the book in bass clef and trying to justify in my mind why I should not expending the effort to also translate this new version into alto clef. Don't worry you lovers of alto clef, I will make a version for you.

Honestly, I'd like to convince prospective buyers to not buy the alto clef version and only use the bass clef version. I guess this post is my attempt to do that!

You see, my guess is that 90% of the players who buy *Alto Trombone Savvy* are primarily tenor players. They visualize music in bass clef. They've probably become proficient readers of bass clef. They see a concert Bb on the staff, hear Bb, and play Bb.

Everyone's relationship to their instrument and to the printed sheet is different, so I'd be interested in your experience with alto clef/alto bone.

Discover Your unique musical voice

We trombone players tend to obsess a bit over our technical prowess. We constantly want to play higher, faster, and louder, and view ourselves as players in terms of our command of those much sought-after attributes. Okay, maybe not you, but a lot of players!!

Improve your ability to play faster, higher and louder but realize there is another critical aspect of trombone playing. Perhaps this applies more to the jazz/Latin players and other improvisers than to the classical players, but then again maybe not.

That aspect is finding and playing true to one's unique personal musical voice.

It's natural to be drawn to emulate musicians with incredible technique. Who doesn't love Watrous' high range, Rosolino's angularity, or Fontana's speed? But can good music be made on the trombone without superhuman physical powers? And, more importantly, is the advanced playing of those trombone-athletes part of YOUR individual inner voice? While were at it, what IS your individual inner voice for trombone, anyway? Do you hear it or is it being drowned out by the little voice in your head screaming that you still don't play high enough, fast enough or well enough?

Your individual voice on trombone is a beautifully unique personality that plays music to the fullest extent of your musical gifts—regardless of your current technical level.

Faster, higher, louder. I am proposing that if you assume that your playing necessarily requires those attributes, you may be limiting your potential to perform great music.

Did Miles chase after Maynard's range? Did Paul Desmond chase after Bird's speed? Did Monk chase after Art Tatum's flawless technique? No. They each pursued their inner voice, and along with their supernatural musical gifts they became great musicians.

Think about a very technically proficient trombone player you've heard who played lots of high notes throughout their improvisation. Did you resonate

with the playing emotionally? Did it move you or simply blow you away with their technique? Did it say something musical to you?

I'm not suggesting that you forgo developing your technical proficiency. I'm suggesting instead to develop your proficiency as a means to an end, not as an end in itself. The trombone's mechanics are far different from other instruments so why do we assume that playing jazz well consists of rapid high notes - a style much

more suited to trumpets, sax, piano, and most others.

Now for some trombone players, that's their personal music voice, but must technical proficiency be the standard by how all trombone players are judged? Can you make music on the trombone without always playing fast, high, and loud?

In the end, there is no wrong way to use the trombone if

music is the goal. Armed with whatever musical talent you possess, you have the best shot at making great music if you first hear your inner musical voice and then stay true to it with whatever level of technical proficiency that music requires. Before Jimi Hendrix, feedback was considered wrong.

Am I giving you a pass on improving your technique? No way. I don't call it art simply because something happens to dribble out of an instrument. Art is a purposeful focus of expression that requires a command of the medium. The question is: what are you commanding? Is it the vehicle of your inner music or is it the mechanical reproduction of artists you think you should sound like?

One morning in the late 1940s, Ray Charles had an epiphany. He realized that he was building his reputation by sounding like two of his heroes, Nat King Cole and Charles Brown. He was doing fairly well, but he wasn't setting the world on fire.

He remembered his mom admonishing him to be himself and to not be someone he's wasn't. He also remembered Nat Cole telling him "You're going to want to find your own way." Ray admitted being a bit scared to



do his own thing but he did. The rest is historic music.

“But I don’t have Ray Charles’ musical talent” you might think. Well, this isn’t about the amount of musical talent you may or may not possess. It’s about getting the most out of whatever happens to be inside of you.

The question you must ask yourself is, am I playing what I hear inside or am I chasing after what you’re hearing from the media, your teachers, your peers and anyone you think has a more weighty opinion than you.

Now, there’s context here. If you are just starting out learning to play trombone, it’s okay to model someone. If you are trying to learn to play the trombone, it’s okay to model someone as I been encouraging throughout this book.

The modeling, however, is simply a tool to improve an aspect of your playing you believe is necessary to your overall development as an artist. Please transcribe solos - lots of them. Use them as a means to learn improvisation, not as a substitute for your own improvisations.

How will you know your unique voice?

I think everyone recognizes it differently. Perhaps some naturally fall into it and don’t have to think about it much. Others must dig deep in order to hear it. As a trombone player, are you trying to sound like a player you admire? If so, how’s that working for you?

Do you feel that your playing has been a long-term struggle to sound a certain way and you can’t seem to get there? Do you ever feel that if you played what you hear and in a way that would feel more natural, you would be rejected? Worthwhile questions I think.

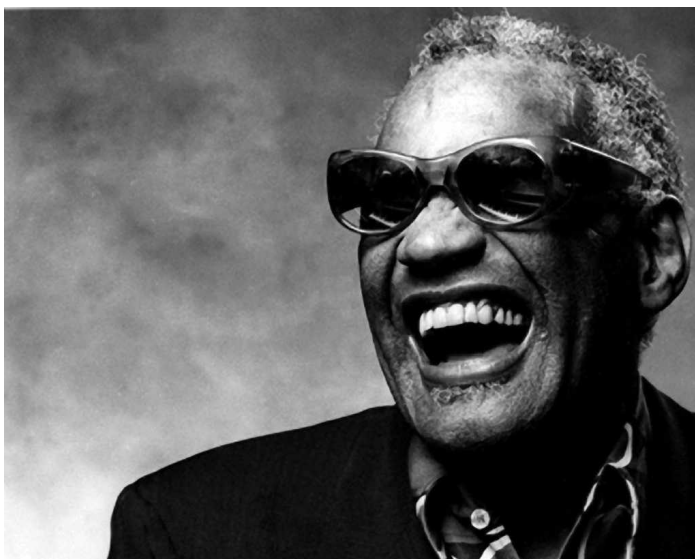
There’s more context to this subject. As an orchestral player, your job is to sound a certain way. You were hired because you have the sound and style the orchestra was looking for. As the trombone player in a Broadway pit, an odd and unique approach is probably not welcome. As a soloist, however, you may have more stylistic latitude. As an artist creating your own music, you have perhaps the most latitude. So consider all of this within the context of your musical and professional goals.

If you aspire to be a creative artist on the trombone,

listen to the voice inside. Be ruthlessly honest with yourself and admit if you are chasing someone else’s ideal of how trombone should sound. It can be scary but I know of no great artist who reached that stature by clinging long-term to how others thought he or she should sound.

I tried to find a rhythm, and I stopped comparing myself to anybody else. One of the great phrases for me is “Compare and Despair.” If I compare myself to Kate Middleton or Dame Judi Dench, I’m going to come out at the bottom and be sad.

- Jamie Lee Curtis



Finding your big magic

I just read for the second time a book by Elizabeth Gilbert called *Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear*. If Elizabeth Gilbert sounds familiar, she wrote the best selling book behind the film *Eat Pray Love*.

Big Magic is Gilbert's hypothesis for how creative ideas make their way to each of us, and how to recognize and deal with them once they arrive. It's a book about effectively living as a creative person. My original reaction upon first seeing *Big Magic* was wrong. It's not full of rainbows and unicorns, but instead it's a very practical book for artists – even trombone players!

The book is organized by short sections within the main chapters, each telling an engaging and often funny story with an important lesson for those pursuing their art.

One section called "Shit Sandwich", borrows from blogger Mark Manson's question of creatives: "What is your favorite flavor shit sandwich?" Because if you love and want something enough—whatever it is—then you don't really mind enduring the most disagreeable aspects of that work. Gilbert illustrates how to endure one's disappointment and frustration, and how that is part of a creative's job. Gilbert even suggests that handling one's frustration is perhaps the single most important part of the work. "Frustration is not an interruption of your process; frustration is the process."

However, do not take solace in believing that this is a book promoting the suffering artist. One of the most refreshing aspects of the book is its refutation of that long-standing and rarely discredited belief that great art must come from great suffering. She writes about the many jazz musicians who became heroine addicts thinking that it would elevate them play like Charlie Parker, despite Bird himself begging people not to emulate this most tragic aspect of his life.

As great a scientist as Francis Bacon was, he was dead wrong when he stated, "The feelings of desperation and unhappiness are more useful to an artist than the feeling of contentment, because desperation and unhappiness stretch your whole sensibility."

How's this for a refrigerator magnet: "I've suffered enough. When does my artwork improve?"

Gilbert isn't denying the existence of suffering for a great many artists. As she puts it, "I simply refuse to fetishize it." With that, she writes a section entitled "Our better angles." About this, she writes:

"My desire to work—my desire to engage with my creativity as intimately and as freely as possible—is my strongest personal incentive to fight back against pain, by any means necessary, and to fashion a life for myself that is as sane and healthy and stable as it can possibly be."

Within the Trust chapter she writes about what she characterizes as The Martyr vs. the Trickster. We all have some of each in us, and for many, a lot more martyr. According to Gilbert, the Martyr says: "I will sacrifice everything to fight this unwinnable war, even if it means being crushed to death under a wheel of torment." The Trickster says:

"Okay, you enjoy that! As for me, I'll be over here in this corner, running a successful little black market operation on the side of your unwinnable war."

Martyr (Sir Thomas More) always ends up dead in a heap of broken glory, while Trickster (Bugs Bunny) trots off to enjoy another day.

Gilbert's shit sandwich reference above refers to those aspects of life that are unpleasant in pursuing your dreams, not that one's entire life and pursuit of art should be revered as a shit sandwich. An important distinction.

There is much more to this well-written gem including how to recognize your next big idea before it travels off to someone else for its implementation, the nobility of earning your living outside of your art, the relationship between talent versus hard work, done is better than good, the indispensable role of curiosity in an artist, and implementing your personal method of summoning creativity.



Conquering your frustration

There was an interesting post on the Trombone Forum by a player having a difficult time getting over the frustration of not playing as well as he wished. There was a lot of good advice from other players. My thoughts on this subject are as follows:

It's very normal to be frustrated over not sounding today like the player you wish to be tomorrow. There's an element of frustration that is productive if it motivates you to practice more and better. If, on the other hand, frustration gets the better of you and fosters negative self-talk ("I'll never be a good trombone player", "I'll never figure out how to improvise." or "I'm really awful at this.", etc.) you will only end up reinforcing your negative self-image as a player.

It has been shown that we unwittingly program ourselves based on our self-talk. Your brain conforms your actions to its programming—good or bad. If you are convinced you will forever be a poor trombone player, your brain will accommodate that programming. You've probably noticed in those moments when you are feeling good about yourself and confident in your abilities that you perform well. Now, you might think it's a chicken and egg cycle, but your attitudes and beliefs determine your actions. Sure, experiencing a moment of efficacy boosts your confidence, but you can't wait around for something good to happen in order to begin feeling good about yourself and your abilities. Attitude determines effectiveness.

Back to frustration. Are you feeling frustrated over an aspect of your playing? We sometimes become overwhelmed by frustration and end up feeling bad about *every* aspect of our playing. At that point, take a deep breath and do a quick mental exercise: At what aspect of playing are you good? Focus on that for a moment. Visualize doing that really well.

Think about your trombone playing. There's very likely something about your playing that you do well. Maybe, it's your clear tone, clean articulation, rapid tonguing, open low range or accurate intonation. Perhaps it's something you played well on a recent performance.

Remember, we're trying to get you in a better frame of mind by feeling good about some aspect of your playing (or life) that you do well.

Next, play a bit and focus your playing on that aspect that you identified as a strength of yours. Play it and feel good about it. It matters not how easy or simple it is. If you are just starting out on the horn, maybe a strength is your ability to just play a note. You're simply trying to collect a win in order to gain your confidence.

Hopefully, your feelings of frustration have subsided and you are open to the idea that you can indeed play certain aspects of the trombone well. Now, turn to that part of your playing that is challenging you. Start very

basic. If you are working on tonguing, don't start with 16th notes at 130bpm. Start at 60. If it your high range, don't start with double high F. start with the highest note you play well and work up from there.

Frustration can be very counter-productive if it starts you on a downward spiral of self-doubt. Once that self-doubt kicks in, you will find it very difficult to play anything well and

playing will cease to be fun. Again, your mental state determines your playing state. As goes your attitude so goes your performance.

Once you feel your frustration affecting your playing, stop. Immerse yourself in an aspect of your playing that you believe is good. Feel good about that, then go back to the challenging aspect of your playing. If nothing else, celebrate the fact that you've identified something that you can work on to play trombone better.

Something Bill Watrous told me long ago was that improvement is rarely linear. You work and work and work, and then all of a sudden you hear a leap of improvement. It's more like stair steps than a smooth ramp.

Making it up each step requires a positive state of mind that fuels the confident belief that you will become the player you wish as long as you are clear on how that player sounds and avoid the unproductive frustration that prevents that player from eventually emerging.



Embrace your limitations?

Adam Morgan and Mark Barden wrote an insightful book called *A Beautiful Constraint*. The theme of the book is that great things can come from recognizing and embracing one's limitations.

Face it, no matter who we are, we all have limitations. As trombone players, we are limited in our range, our speed, our timbre, just to name a few. But each of us individually has our limitations, and the issue this book brings to bear is: how best to work within the limits each of us naturally face.

The book starts out with the example of Google's founder Larry Page. In the very beginning, Larry's limited coding skills and budget constrained what he could put on Google's home page. The result was a stark white page with one field in the center. Larry's limitation ended up becoming Google's strength – a uniquely clean page with crystal clarity of its sole purpose. Many at the time thought it was design and marketing genius.

As I read it, Morgan and Barden are encouraging us to embrace our limitations as the first step in freeing our artistic potential.

This is not a book on lack, however. Instead it is a book on looking a new way at your potential.

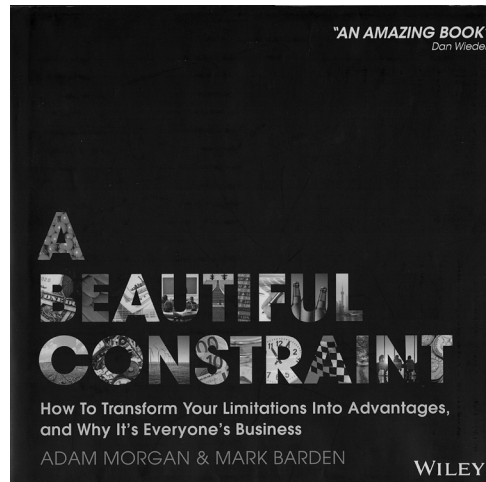
The chapter called Break Path Dependence illustrates the behaviors that prevent us from seeing "opportunity in constraint."

They basically ask and answer three questions:

1. How does success today blind us to what could create success tomorrow?
2. How does the language we use lock us into ways of thinking and behaving that will limit our ability to see new possibilities.
3. What can we do to surface and move away from unhelpful paths on which we have become dependent, in order to reveal newer, more productive paths?

Required of each of us is an attitude they label, *can-if*. Can-if is the opposite of *can't-because*. Can-if is a powerful frame for conversation and introspection in asking the propelling questions and finding the potential in an apparently challenging constraint.

What is the value of can-if?



- It keeps the conversation on the right question.
- It keeps the oxygen of optimism continually in the process.
- It forces you to take responsibility for finding answers rather than identifying barriers.
- The story it tells us about ourselves is that we are people who look for solutions rather than someone who finds problems and obstacles.

This book is in the genre of business but I am recommending it for individual musicians because we face constraint as a way of life.

What is a limitation you continue to face with your playing? Articulation speed? What satisfying music can you create without playing tons of notes? (Think Paul Desmond.) High range? What satisfying music can you create within your range (One Note Samba anyone?) Overall technique? (Listen to Monk.)

See your limitations as pathways to a new way of thinking about your art. I'm not suggesting you stop improving your playing. On the contrary, work hard to develop your strengths but end the unfruitful struggle with aspects of trombone playing that aren't core to your inner musical voice.

Don't fight your natural limitations. Instead, develop a playing style that capitalizes on what emerges from solutions. What does your "home page" look like without huge resources allowing you to fill it with everything everybody else has? Yes, high and fast trombone is cool but so is the confident focus of your inner musical voice projected through (an alto) trombone.

Want more energy?

Playing trombone requires energy. For me at least, it requires a lot of energy. Diaphragm, arm, facial, back muscles and more all working in coordination to pull music from this slippery tube of brass.

I see a lot of older players struggling with their horn, and when I see their physical condition I wonder if they could significantly improve their playing by making a few simple lifestyle changes.

Changes that would charge them with more energy which could elevate their playing more effectively than simply practicing more.

No matter your age, the furnace providing energy for your everyday activities, let alone playing trombone well, needs care and attention. A fact too few of us consider.

Our bodies are incredibly resilient and can seemingly withstand years of junk food, lack of sleep, lack of exercise, too many recreational substances and stress, but what if we actually give our body some help?

This doesn't mean you must live a lifestyle of deprivation. Instead, perhaps look at some of your lifestyle choices and see if some incremental changes might be worthwhile.

In line with the modeling method promoted within this book, I'll share with you some of the things I do within three main categories. Consider these my strategies for maximizing short and long-term energy levels. Maybe some of them will work for you.

Diet

Around a dozen years ago, I started learning the importance of food and beverage consumption habits from none other than Tony Robbins. Tony has a four day weekend/Monday event in which Monday is dedicated solely to diet. He starts the day by explaining the defensiveness and anger that occurs when dietary changes are suggested. So, let me just say that I am merely sharing what I do, and without proselytizing, offering you up some "food" for thought.

Around that time, I also had the privilege to stay for a week at the Hippocrates Institute in Hollywood Florida. Hippocrates was the ancient philosopher who famously suggested to "Let thy food be thy medicine and medicine be thy food".

Residents at the institute learn about nutrition, the various systems within the body, and are given access to a variety of fascinating tests that illustrate our individual

level of health and vitality. After that week of eating, learning, testing and talking to other residents (many come to Hippocrates to overcome their cancer) I dramatically changed my nutritional habits.

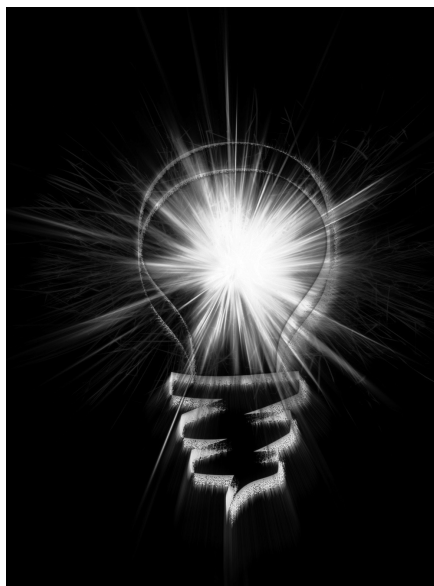
I eat mainly a plant-based diet. Robbins calls it a water-based diet since plants are largely water-based. I start my morning with a juice I squeeze from about half a dozen vegetables. I mix the veggies since I believe that variety is beneficial. Lunch is light – a bowl of granola or a bit of turkey on a slice of sprouted bread like Ezekiel. Dinner is usually a salad composed of sprouts and veggies. Again, variety is key, so

plants like sunflower sprouts, broccoli sprouts, sprouted beans and legumes, cucumber, micro greens like Kale, radish, and mixed varieties, and miscellaneous vegetables like spinach, purple cabbage, red bell peppers, and sometimes steamed broccoli. And every salad with a half an avocado. Avocado is key. It contains lots of high quality clean burning fuel.

Since this article is about maximizing energy, it's only appropriate that I elaborate a bit on fuel - the stuff we eat and drink.

It's been said that we should get 20% to 35% of our calories from fat. But there's good fat and bad fat. Polyunsaturated fats are beneficial and can be found in nuts, seeds, vegetable oils such as corn and safflower oil, and fatty fish. This category encompasses omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids, which are known as essential fatty acids because our bodies don't make them—we have to get them from food.

You can also get calories from sugar/carbohydrates, but



sugar fuel is a bit like lighting a match. You get a big burst of heat/energy that doesn't last long. Fuel from good fat is like lighting an oil lamp. You get steady long-term heat/energy. That's why I eat a salad with a lot of avocado and fish before a big performance. I need my energy to last.

Why sprouts? Because at the stage of a sprout, the plant contains the highest amount of nutrients of which it's capable. Do I eat all organic? No. I think the label "organic" is often a marketing term. Read Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma* for the details. Plus, I'm unwilling to pay \$2 for an organic cucumber at Whole Foods!

I don't eat much dairy, although I'll always love cheese. I eat some fish (salmon and trout) and poultry. I don't like beef. Never have. I keep my alcohol consumption to a minimum so if you're looking for a drinking buddy at a party, I won't be much fun. Sorry.

Exercise

This is easier to explain. Just do it.

I've always loved exercise. In earlier years, I played daily basketball games and did distance running. Now, I ride my road and mountain bikes up the hills in my local Arizona streets and trails. I also walk since that's good for the back. I lift moderate weights for reps and to keep my upper body strong and limber. Trombone playing seems to require more of that upper body strength and coordination than other instruments.

Find an activity of exercise that you love. You'll never develop the habit if you dread working out. I love being outside, so running and biking has always been something I looked forward to. I used to do the Insanity Workouts, but as I got older, the pounding and relentless exertion of them became counterproductive. If you have lower back issues like me, get the big exercise ball and use it as a chair at your desk. It prevents you from slouching, works the necessary muscles and keeps the lower back from becoming compressed. Think swimming, running, dancing, walking, hiking, lifting, jumping. Get your body moving.



Mental State

This is probably the most difficult part. My energy levels are suppressed when I am not in what Tony Robbins calls a "peak state". Think of a peak state as when you feel positive, optimistic, and empowered to accomplish your goals. Feel the energy in you at those times when you are getting applause or kudos for a job well done. How do you feel when you've accomplished something worth while yet difficult? Feel the energy in those moments. Remember that feeling and learn to create it at will as often as you can. That is another example of modeling: modeling yourself in peak moments.

The reason you walk across 15 feet of hot glowing coals at a Tony Robbins event is because at the end of the walk, you really believe you can do ANYTHING!

Dopamine is the feel-good chemical released by your brain when things are going really well. Increasing your body's production of it will make you feel

better and will have many positive side effects.

Exercise increases blood calcium which stimulates dopamine release and uptake in your brain. Dopamine has been tied to feelings of wakefulness, so in order to get that wakeful feeling, get 7 to 8 hour of sleep a night. I would be lying if I said I get that much sleep, so I try to make up for it in other ways. But, sleep is a good thing! And eating colorful vegetables increases your intake of antioxidants. Dopamine oxidizes easily, and antioxidants reduce free radical damage to the brain cells that produce dopamine. Think red berries, red peppers, purple cabbage, etc.

That's a long answer to the question of how to maximize your energy, but try some of these things. Start slowly and work your way up. Along the way, you might lose weight and start feeling better about yourself. And in the end, you just might even find yourself playing trombone better!

"I really like this interesting and well-disposed book. So many good thoughts, facts and tips on alto trombone. Great guidance for the searching alto souls out there. A must-have for the shelves."

– Håkan Björkman, Principal Trombone at Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra

"For anyone interested in learning to play the alto trombone, whether for classical or jazz, this book is a must. Clearly written, with excellent exercises and links to audio examples, Michael Lake has provided the trombone world with a wonderful new resource."

– Ralph Sauer, Former Principal Trombone, Los Angeles Philharmonic

"I highly recommend Alto Trombone Savvy for players around the world wanting advice on handling the alto trombone at the highest level. Classical and jazz players both share the same challenges, and it's great to have this book in either bass or alto clef to help answer some of those challenges."

– Carsten Svanberg, International Trombone Soloist and ret. Professor of Trombone at the University of Music and Arts Graz

"Michael Lake has a unique perspective and has written a unique book. Alto Trombone Savvy covers a wide range of topics and, in combination with sound files, gives students a solid aural basics to improve on the instrument. Michael's excellent playing—used in structured imitation exercises—is particularly helpful."

– Dr. Brad Edwards, Trombone Professor, Arizona State University Author of Lip Slurs. Lip Slur Melodies as well as the Trombone Craft and Simply Singing series.

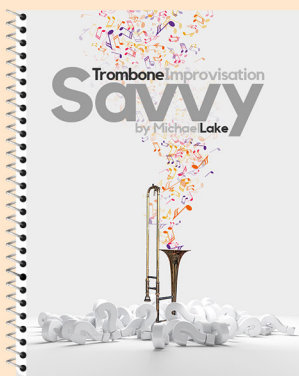
"Alto Trombone Savvy is the most comprehensive book on mastering the alto trombone. With a keen attention to all aspects of playing, Michael answers all the questions and gives the best advice for improving one's playing. He helps us break all the secret codes of the alto trombone."

Being familiar with the great alto trombone playing of Michael Lake, I can attest that his words of wisdom don't come from a theoretician, but from a remarkably accomplished artist. I highly recommend this great book!!"

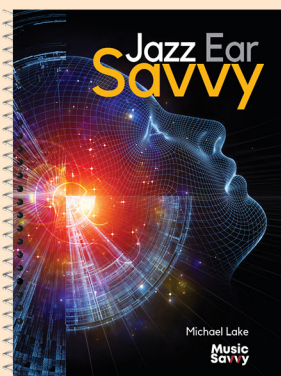
– Cristian Ganicenco, Principal Trombone, Cincinnati Symphony Orchestra

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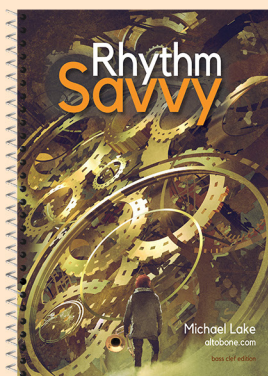
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