



Taking the Mystery out of Trombone Legato

by Micah Everett

The correct execution of legato articulation is one of the most vexing problems encountered by both beginning and advanced trombonists. While players of other wind instruments grasp the concept of slurring with relative ease, for many trombonists the achievement of an equally smooth articulation remains a seemingly unattainable goal.

To a certain extent, this is understandable. The handslide mechanism eliminates many of the possibilities for true “slurring” that are available to other wind instrument players, so that even when a piece of music indicates that the trombonist should slur, he or she will need to use the tongue in some way in order to avoid an unwanted glissando. The coordination of air, tongue, and slide needed to produce a smooth yet clean legato on the trombone is quite a feat of execution, requiring determination, practice, and most importantly, a correct sound concept if it is going to be mastered.

Unfortunately, it is in the student’s early playing experience that so many errors are ingrained. The explanations of legato provided in many beginning band method books seek to explain legato primarily if not solely in terms of means of execution, usually providing directions regarding the use of “soft tonguing,” rather than in terms of a sound to be achieved. This leads to students seeking the achievement of a certain feeling or sensation, rather than of a desired sound. Students wind up with a vague idea of what they think legato should feel like, but absolutely no clue what it should sound like. Therefore, when teaching young trombonists how to execute legato, our first question needs to be not “how does one play legato?” but rather a much simpler question: “What is legato?”

WHAT IS LEGATO?

One of the first questions I ask of new trombone students when they enter my studio is “What is legato?” In almost every case the initial answers are something like “du or lu tongue,” “soft tongue,” “trying

to minimize the sound of the tongue,” or some other related statement. In other words, these students define legato in terms of what they think they are supposed to do physically, rather than in terms of the sound they should seek to create. My follow-up question is then something like: “Ok, then, how does a violinist or a pianist play legato?” The tongue is not a concern for these people, yet they do play legato, so there must be a definition or concept of legato that is independent of the peculiar mode of execution of legato on the trombone. This becomes immediately apparent to most students, so my goal then is to provide the student with a definition or concept of legato that is not tied to the technique used to play legato on the trombone.

The New Harvard Dictionary of Music defines legato as “Played smoothly with no separation between successive notes; the opposite of staccato.” Notice that this simple definition describes how legato should sound with absolutely no reference to how it is executed. The goal of all legato articulation is to produce this smooth, connected sound, not to achieve the physical sensation of light tonguing. The truth is, a student can use a “du or lu tongue” or some other form of soft tonguing, and still have separation between the notes. Thus, trombonists’ habit of constructing a concept of legato based on tonguing technique alone leads to a faulty result.

WHAT IS THE RESULT OF A FAULTY CONCEPTION OF LEGATO?

When students associate legato with “soft tonguing” they often are unaware that the goal here is not merely to have notes that are lightly articulated at the beginning, but to have all of the notes connected to one another. Moreover, because they are admonished to “tongue lightly,” young trombonists seem to develop a fear of the tongue, at least in legato passages. The result of this is actually a step further away from the goal of smooth, connected playing, because many students will—whether consciously or unconsciously—

reduce the airflow at the beginning of each note in an attempt to minimize the sound of the articulation (as well as eliminate glissandi due to poor slide technique). While the sound of the tongue is indeed minimized by using this method, the student is even farther from the goal of smooth legato because the sound is in fact more, not less, broken by using this method. The result of all of this is frustration, if not apathy. The student has been told to play smoothly and that the way to play smoothly is to tongue lightly. That has not worked, so he or she tries to minimize the sound of the tongue even more, and this only makes things worse. The student then gives up and ceases to even try to play legato, and even worse, begins to lose interest in playing altogether because of this seemingly insurmountable difficulty.

TRUTH: LEGATO ARTICULATION IS DIFFICULT TO EXECUTE ON THE TROMBONE

Even the apathetic students have one thing right: legato articulation on the trombone is difficult to master. The student must produce smooth, connected notes on an instrument that will not allow true slurring in most cases, yet also without the presence of glissandi or “smearing.” The margin for error is very low, requiring very precise coordination of air, tongue, and slide. This takes much patience and practice on the part of the student. Most importantly, the student must have a correct aural concept of how legato should sound. Many students associate legato with the feeling of light tonguing; we as teachers must work to instead develop in our students a concept of how smooth, connected trombone playing should sound. Demonstration is one great way to do this. A band director that is a trombonist, or one that plays trombone reasonably well as a secondary instrument should be able to do this relatively easily. If this is not possible, then purchase recordings of professional trombonists playing slow lyrical pieces to provide an example, and perhaps from time to time bring in local professional trombonists, university teachers, good university students, or other local trombonists to demonstrate proper legato sound to middle school and high school students. The object here is to provide young students with a goal, a target to be achieved, so that when they begin to practice legato playing they are trying to replicate a sound they have heard, rather than simply a physical sensation they have seen described in a method book.

THE SECRET TO GOOD LEGATO: CONSTANT AIR

If students are to produce a legato that sounds like legato, we have to dismantle the idea that “soft tonguing” equals “legato.” Besides demonstration, an important step in this is to return to the actual definition of “legato,” which is “Played smoothly with no separation between successive notes; the opposite of staccato.” If there is going to be no separation between the notes, the beginnings of the notes must not only be articulated softly (and, granted, they usually are), but also the end of one note must connect to the beginning of the following note, and so on throughout any legato passage. No amount of skillful manipulation of the beginning of a note will make the end of that note connect to the following note. The answer to this dilemma is quite simple, and is the same as that for slurring on every wind instrument: if legato playing is to take place, the airstream must remain constant and uninterrupted throughout the passage. This perhaps seems simple and even obvious, but judging by the playing that I have heard it is clearly not so, and yet this concept is missing from every beginning method book I have examined—even where it is implied, it is not explicitly stated. If we want our students to play smoothly, we must teach them to maintain a continuous, uninterrupted flow of air throughout any legato passage.

THE TONGUE IS NOT AN ENEMY

Furthermore, we must strive to eliminate the fear of the tongue that trombonists seem to develop with regard to legato. In fact, if legato playing is to be both smooth and clean, proper tonguing is absolutely necessary. Think about it: if we want our students to play legato we need to teach them to maintain a steady stream of air throughout the passage, and yet if air is passing through the lips and instrument while the slide is in motion there will be a smear every time. This is where the tongue comes into play. While from the “perspective” of the breathing apparatus the airflow must remain constant, the air is indeed briefly interrupted during legato passages—every time the tongue strikes. This makes tonguing a very important aspect of legato playing that must not be minimized. While legato tonguing is often somewhat softer than “normal” tonguing, it must be sufficient to interrupt the airstream for a split-second at the beginning of every note, giving the player time to move the slide so that the smear is avoided. The difference in the use of the tongue between “legato” tonguing and “normal” tonguing should not be overemphasized. After all, the difference between a “t” and a “d” consonant, in terms of tongue placement, etc., is really quite minimal. Better to explain legato primarily in terms of constant

airstream, to demonstrate it either by live examples or recording, and to mention the concept of soft tonguing, but, again, not overemphasize it. If the student has a good concept of how legato should sound, and knows to keep the air moving, chances are he or she will figure out how to make the tonguing sound right.

TECHNIQUES FOR MAKING LEGATO WORK

If the student is going to master legato, it is necessary first of all to have a handslide that is in great condition. If the student is blowing constant air into the instrument, then he or she has only the brief split-second when the tongue strikes to move the slide. A slide that is dirty, poorly lubricated, or in need of repair will prevent the student from producing an acceptable legato.

The first step in lubricating the handslide is to clean it. A thorough cleaning with a leaning snake, soap, and water is not necessary every time the slide is lubricated, but should be performed periodically. Most of the time, wiping out the outer slide tubes with a cleaning rod wrapped in cheesecloth, or using one of the special cleaning rods with a reusable “trombone slide-sized” towel made by Slide-O-Mix, then spraying water on the inner tubes and wiping them off, is sufficient for regular cleaning, and should be done every time the slide is lubricated.

Once the slide has been cleaned, apply a small amount of Slide-O-Mix “Rapid Comfort” on the lower half or so of each tube, then move the slide to distribute the lubricant, then spray with water. “Rapid Comfort” is a mix of liquid cream and silicone, and while I have not always recommended cream-based lubricants for young students because of the difficulty of application, the application of this particular product is quite simple, and it is superior to any of the oil-based products available. Cleaning before every application is necessary because “Rapid Comfort” does not evaporate or run out but rather collects in the bottom part of the slide, eventually causing sluggishness rather than rapid movement if the residue from multiple applications is left to collect in the slide over time.

Of course, no amount of cleaning and lubrication will completely make up for a slide that is in need of repair. The tolerance for error on a trombone slide is measured in thousandths of an inch, so even the smallest dent, bend, or other imperfection will cause friction and slowness. Dents and dings are, unfortunately, inevitable, particularly with younger students. These should be repaired as quickly as possible.

Assuming the slide is clean, well-lubricated, and in good working order, the next thing is to make sure that the student is using a proper right hand position. While there are a variety of hand positions used and advocated by professional players and teachers, whatever hand position is used should allow the player to use all the joints of the fingers, wrist, elbow, and shoulder in order to move the slide, making the finer adjustments with the smaller joints, and larger adjustments with the larger ones. This helps to prevent “jerky” motions that often take place when the elbow and shoulder dominate the student’s action in using the slide, and also enables better tuning. Of course, if the slide is somehow compromised and not moving freely, then the student will have to use greater force in order to move the slide, and will usually start to use the elbow and shoulder primarily in slide movement. This hampers both speed and accuracy, and renders legato playing entirely impossible, since the “jerking” of the slide causes a sort of “articulation” to take place, one that is harsh, unpleasant, and anything but smooth.

With the slide in good repair and well-lubricated, and the student using a good hand position, he or she can learn to move the slide quickly and accurately. It is vitally important that the student not try to hold on to the slide too tightly, as doing so makes it nearly impossible to move quickly without compromising smoothness and intonation, and sometimes this results in damage to the slide from too much force being applied. Rather, when moving the slide, an almost “throwing and catching” technique should be used, where the hand stays slightly ahead of the slide when moving. This is very slight—strictly speaking, the hand will always remain in contact with the slide, but the grip is loose enough that there is some “play” between the slide brace and the fingers. In so doing, the player is able to make quick motions without applying too much force to the slide itself, and since inertia rather than muscle force stops the slide when it stops, stopping the slide does not cause a violent disruption to the sound.

The slide must always move quickly, but especially so during legato playing. Remember: if there is air going through the instrument while the slide is in motion there will be a smear. Thus, the player only has the length of time when the tongue strikes to move the slide!

Once all of the above concepts are correct, the student can begin actually learning to play legato. Strangely enough, one of the easiest ways to begin working on

legato is to have the student smear through a legato passage. If the student is using a correct, smooth airstream, then the smear will be just that, a smear. If he or she is somehow breath-impulsing the beginnings of notes, or allowing the ends of notes to decay, this will be readily apparent when smearing. Have the student practice smearing legato passages until they are “disgustingly” smooth. Then, move on to working on the articulation itself.

After having the student smear through a passage, have him or her play the same passage with a light staccato articulation. Perhaps this seems even more counterintuitive than smearing. However, a good staccato requires, like much legato playing, a somewhat lighter than normal articulation. Thus, playing with a good, light staccato can actually be useful in preparation for playing legato.

Lastly, have the student combine all the above concepts, using “smearing air” combined with a light tongue motion not terribly unlike that one used when playing staccato. If the hand position is good and the slide fast, in good repair, and coordinated with the tongue, all of this should result in a good legato articulation. Much practice is, of course, required to master this—it is easier to state verbally than to execute!

THE “NATURAL SLUR”

Thus far I have focused entirely on legato tonguing, and should make at least some mention of the so-called “natural slur,” which is how trombonists refer to those notes which can actually be slurred without introducing the tongue or causing a smear. First of all, hopefully the daily warmup in each band class includes some lip slurs for helping to strengthen and develop the brass players’ embouchures. Brass players should also be encouraged to perform such exercises in their individual practice.

Beyond such exercises, it is not really necessary to introduce the concept of “natural slurs” early in the student’s development. Have students simply use their legato tonguing technique whenever written music calls for a slur. This helps to avoid confusion and unintended smearing. As students become more proficient, the use of natural slurs should be introduced. Some will “pick this up” on their own or through taking private lessons, but most will need to be told how this works. To put it simply, whenever the player moves from one “harmonic” or “partial” to another a natural slur is

possible, since the “break” when crossing partials eliminates the smear. The player should come to understand that these possibilities exist and how to use them judiciously.

However, the existence of available natural slurs does not mean that they must be used all the time. For one thing, some students become confused regarding where it is possible to slur and where it is not, the end result being unwanted smears. Also, if a legato passage can be executed using natural slurs for some notes but legato tonguing is required for others, it is often best to use legato tonguing for the entire passage so that the articulation is consistent.

While there is very little difference in sound between a well-executed legato tongue and a well-executed natural slur, when played one right after the other the difference becomes more noticeable. In my own playing I use all legato tonguing 60-80 percent of the time, depending on the piece, and find that, as long as I am using my air correctly, this gives the most pleasing result.

CONCLUSION

The execution of legato articulation on the trombone is difficult, and even with the best instruction a great deal of hard work in the practice room is necessary in order to master it. Without a correct concept of the sound and execution of legato, however, students’ efforts will meet largely with frustration. Hopefully these thoughts will help both teachers and students to better understand and develop this important skill.

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