

A Three Step “Wave” Process for Brass Players

Dan Gosling (aka The ChopSaver Guy)

Whether you are a student, a working professional or you play for fun on the weekends, how you manage your time is key. To remedy “random acts of practicing” I have developed a 3 step, 3 day routine.

This “routine” doesn’t have to be a set series of material, although in my case it is because it takes some of the over-thinking I used to do out of the equation. The goal is to KNOW you have covered everything you need (loud - soft, high – low, smooth – articulation) over the course of any given 48 hour period with no damage. My approach borrows heavily from sports training concepts. Athletes are still light years ahead of musicians in terms of knowing how to get their bodies to peak when they need it the most. Too often we just pound away. This approach was born out of a particularly intense period of preparation several years ago that included both studying with one of the great trumpet teachers of our time, Charles Geyer, (formerly of the Chicago Symphony and now Professor of Trumpet at Northwestern University) and performance coach Dr. Don Greene. The process transformed my playing and the concepts I was learning during that time have helped immeasurably in the years since, especially as I juggle my business with my playing.

I have three routines that I call “easy,” “medium,” and “challenging” (a better word than “hard”). You might just refer to them as 1, 2 and 3. The sequence starts with an “easy” session (1). I then wait at least 8 hours before I practice again. Then I do a “medium” (2) session. Next morning is a challenging (3) session and that evening is back to easy. The third day starts with a medium session, rest, then a challenging session. It may seem complicated in print but it is really quite simple when you look at the three day pattern this way.

Day 1	Day 2	Day 3	Day 4
Easy - 1	Challenging - 3	Medium -2	Same as Day 1
Rest - 8 hrs	Rest - 8 hrs	Rest - 8 hrs	
Medium - 2	Easy -1	Challenging - 3	

Now what one does in those sessions should be tailored to your ability and what your current goals are. For me, each session contains scales and flow studies with some articulations added throughout. This is followed by lip spurs and some other flexibility work. I try to get into all aspects trumpeting (high low, tonguing slurring, loud soft) rather quickly and the whole thing takes less than 15 minutes.

Realizing one player’s “easy” is another person’s “challenging”, the idea is to find a set of studies that works for you. What I suggest is you find a collection of things that you can play with no strain at all. Call that one your “medium” session. Then tailor an even less taxing version of the same or similar material (lower range and easier volume) and call that “easy”. And finally, add some range and volume, something that stretches you a bit (but not to the point of pain) and call that version “challenging”.

The beauty of this is over the course of a day and a half, I touch everything WITHOUT hurting myself. My stress and recovery are built in. Gradually over time, you will create a “wave” that spirals upward and keeps you in shape and builds strength and efficiency. Your stress and recovery are built in and planned for. Over time, what used to be a “2” or “3” in terms of difficulty will become your “1.”

Without going on too long here, let me just set up an example. If your top note on a good day is E above high C, let that be your “challenging” session limit and don’t feel the need to clobber it over and over. Just incorporate that top note into what you are doing in a natural way. With that in mind, you might make C# or D your top note during your medium session. And the easy session should be just that - decidedly easier with maybe your top note only being Bb. Or maybe those session limits are closer together. It doesn’t matter. What matters is this – 1 should feel very easy, 2 should feel like a nice work out, and 3 should feel like you pushed just a tad with no damage. Just an example - no hard and fast rules here. The only rule is stick with the sequence and no cheating! In other words, if you are enjoying an easy session and feel like cutting loose on something, I urge you not to and save it for the “challenging” session you know is coming up very soon.

While this may seem like something that has no application to being a working player, I assure you there are ways to incorporate these ideas into a “real” playing life. The next time you have something challenging on the horizon, plan your sessions (and your rest!) so you precede the gig with an easy session followed by rest (8 hours when possible). This approach has kept me in shape while running a complex business and avoids the stiffness that comes from the traditional “pound away” type of practice so many of us were brought up with. And it helps me answer the daily question “What (and how!) should I practice today?”