

The Psychology of “High” Notes

By Pat Stuckemeyer

Too often we as brass players see high notes as a means not to perform a solo. Solo “X” has all these high notes, while solo “Y” doesn’t have anything higher than whatever. This is what we can refer to as “elimination by limitation,” and is a **big problem** for brass players of any age.

Let’s first examine the body’s reaction to high and notes. When you see high notes on a page, you can assume that one (or perhaps all) of the following will happen:

- o You will tense up.
- o You often will worry about the passage long before you get there, therefore making more mistakes.
- o You will begin to destroy all of the fundamentals that you developed on your horn.
- o Some of your mental control over your instrument will fail, therefore making you more susceptible to errors.

Now that we have diagnosed what is going through your head when you see high notes, let’s list the things that are **essential** for success in the upper registers of brass instruments:

- o Clean articulation, with the tongue not too low in the oral cavity.
- o Breathe support with good quality air.
- o Thinking some sort of an (ah) syllable in the upper register, and an (oo) syllable in the extreme upper register.
- o Every muscle in your chest and shoulder is relaxed, and every muscle in your back and diaphragm is supporting your air flow.
- o That one would think an even and dark tone that you would use for the comfortable middle register.

Over the years, I have struggled with the science of getting my body to do all of these things in synch with getting my mind to forget the fact that

these notes are in fact, very high. You must first master the requirements for high note preparation and then execution, while then incorporating the use of psychology to keep the mind at bay.

One of the many ideas that were presented was to use the concept of **wide notes**. Using this technique, you first classify the notes differently, therefore making the mental block easier to engage. When you consider a **wide note**, you will ultimately think of the following:

- o Notes that are broader in sound and depth, therefore increasing the breadth of the note and the darkness of the tone.
- o When developing a wide note, envision a wide frame, therefore flexing the back muscles and dropping the tension out of the shoulders.
- o Your abdomen will relax while thinking about this while your shoulders drop. When this happens, there is no tension in the upper body, and all of the muscles supporting the upper body are prepared.
- o Clean syllables in this mindset are easier because the tongue placement will be more natural since you are no longer tense.

I have had many positive reactions to this method not only from my students, but also in my own playing as well. As a brass player, we extend our usable range as we develop a good high range. Extending our range not only increases the body of work that we can perform, but also will increase our overall "package" that we present as a performer.

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