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PEDAGOGY COLUMN

From the Journal Archives: Reclaiming our Heritage

by James Self

Editor's Note: This article originally appeared in the *TUBA Journal*, Volume V Number 3 (Spring/Summer, 1978). The idea for re-publishing this article was brought to my attention by a good friend, Dale Holsu. Dale is a long time member of our organization, and he resides in Marietta, Ohio dependent and remains an active performer and scholar on our instrument. Dale often sends letters (typed on a typewriter, which I love!) containing feedback on various journals—he represents a demographic that I rely on heavily—the musician who is involved because they simply love it. Recently, he sent a letter suggesting that this article authored by Jim Self some 32 years ago would still benefit many of our younger players today. I agree, and it's a topic that I find myself increasingly addressing with new recruits as well current students with each academic session. I hope others benefit from reading (or re-reading) it, noting that Self's thoughts are significant *still* today. ~J. Smith

In the last few years, tuba players have experienced a most significant rise in musical consciousness. The major forces behind this change have been the crusading efforts of a few great artists (most notably Harvey Phillips), the decision by college music departments to hire tuba specialists and the worldwide organization created by *Tubists Universal Brotherhood Association* (T.U.B.A.) [Note: obviously, now known as the International Tuba Euphonium Association (ITEA)]. Collectively they have given us communication and unity of purpose. The tangible results are impressive: more and better job opportunities, more and better music, and the attention of composers, an incredible development in technical capabilities, improved instruments and equipment, increased public awareness—and the overabundance of qualified, **unemployed** tuba players.

How can we create work for tuba players? Those of us who teach or give clinics are most certainly frustrated by questions about jobs: what to do, where to go, how to prepare. We are often asked by other musicians (tubists included), "what will happen to all those tuba students?" I don't feel compelled to answer that question specifically because most will not find playing jobs. To me the creation of a more sophisticated audience, better teachers, and instilling the values of self-respect and individual improvement are worthy goals. But the "monster" we have created tells the tuba student that, to play music for a living he must be funneled through that narrow passage which makes him qualified to be one of 150 applicants for that one symphony position which pays a living wage. But there is another way—one that is valid, challenging and fun—a way that can complement our training of great symphony, solo, and chamber music tubists and one that deserves our attention as teachers.

I would like to see the tuba revived as the bass instrument in small commercial groups and to have it encouraged by teachers on *all* levels.

When looking at the broad spectrum of the music business one can quickly observe that the "commercial side" provides work to the vast majority of musicians and of that group only small portions are employed in recording and jazz. Recording jobs are scarce, insecure, and difficult to obtain. Jazz for the tuba player offers an intriguing new way for a few talented musicians. The MattesonPhillips *Tubajazz Consort* and Howard Johnson's *Gravity* are two multiple tuba jazzgroups on the scene. A few tuba soloists are into jazz and in the near future we will see innovative jazz tuba soloists who we can compare to a Freddie Hubbard or Albert Manglesdorf on their respective instruments. The largest number of working musicians, however, is employed in small dance bands and nightclubs, playing parties and shows of every description. Work of this kind occurred in every city—large and small. It is work that is almost unknown to tuba players.

This was not always the case. The tuba was *the* bass instrument (a member of the rhythm section) in popular music groups well into the 1930s. The bass lines were two-beat, and the tuba was able to project more than the string bass. Many of the tuba players of the period were great bass-line players. Then, as the walking four-four bass lines of the Swing Era became dominant the bass took prominence while the tuba, restricted by breathing requirements, was slowly forced out of the picture. Many of the tuba and bass players from the 1920s to the 1950s were doublers. The advent of rock music with its amplified bass guitar brought on the final demise of the tuba as a rhythm section instrument. The past two decades have seen only limited work for tubists in Dixieland, ragtime, and other period groups (with varied degrees of authenticity). A certain amount of this work will continue but nostalgia appeals to only a small audience.

For real work opportunities today and in the future the tuba must be used in bands playing contemporary music from jazzto rock to perhaps theater music with any combination of instruments and voices. One use of the tuba would be as a "horn" player in solo and section work (i.e., Dave Bargeron with *Blood, Sweat and Tears*), and the second use as the bass of the rhythm section. The former will provide interesting but limited work opportunities. Any saxophone or brass player will tell you who goes first when the money is tight. Good rhythm section players can always find work.

Having narrowed it down to the most likely source of new employment for tubists the problem remains one of implementation. It is one that will ultimately be solved by the individual musician. My own thoughts on the matter should help the aspiring young tubist, and I trust that others will contribute to an ongoing debate.

I will begin by stating categorically that I am not suggesting that the tuba should or could replace the bass in all cases. But the following hypothetical situation suggests to me that the tuba is a realistic alternative.

If there are ten groups with bass players working on Saturday night in a given city, two could be tuba jobs and another a tuba-bass double. (Please be assured that in any given city where ten bass players are working *at least* two of them are weak and need to be replaced.) The most obvious problem to overcome is learning to play by ear (faking, improvising). For tubists this seems to be a lost art. It must be revived—it is instructive and extremely satisfying. It is rare to find a tuba student who can play even simple melodies without music. Learning to memorize is invaluable and learning to play without music should be part of every musician's experience. It all begins with practical ear training—with the instrument. Most musicians learn to play this kind of music on the job, beginning at an early age. Their ears develop through trial and error and the rate of development is enhanced through study of theory, listening, and copying other musicians. To the young student I suggest he begin with an inexperienced group where he can rehearse and can make mistakes while he is growing. He must also be willing to play for free at first and willing to take chances by "sitting in" with other musicians. It should be noted that many of the greatest jazz musicians began playing in bars.

While it is important for a tuba to sound like a bass (and that should not be the purpose) there are many aspects of bass playing, which should be studied. The contemporary sound ideal in pop music is the electric bass. It would be imperative to study and analyze electric bass-lines. Learning to read chord symbols and to translate them into arpeggios, scales, and model lines would be important for the tubist. He should play along with records, copy bass lines,

and compare chord progressions.

For most tubists, speed will be a major obstacle when learning rock and Latin-type bass lines. To eliminate any doubts that a tuba can be played with such speed I suggest listening to some of the rock bass-line parts on records and television by Hollywood Studio tubist Tommy Johnson or to the amazing technical feats on Roger Bobo's records particularly the jazz-rock suite *Yellow Bird*. If it is possible today it will be routine in a few years. The speed necessary to play a circus galop is more than sufficient to play bass parts—just give the tuba part to *Barnum and Baileys' Favorite* to a bass player and watch him stumble. The secret is to apply that speed with a good clean attack to chord oriented bass lines. Developing a good double tongue, nose breathing, and possibly rotational breathing would be valuable aids.

Let's face it—most tuba parts are boring. We are almost never required to play as many notes as we find in our etude books. But in this kind of playing there will be no time to become bored. You must play all the time. With good breath support and by avoiding pressure and tension, a good tubist can play for many hours without tiring. Jazz trumpet and trombone players regularly play for many hours and endurance requirements are greater on those instruments.

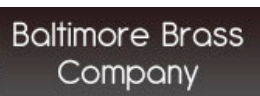
The bass line player in any group must satisfy the other musicians—particularly the others in the rhythm section. Rhythmically he must compliment the drummer by helping to create a good "feel." To overcome slow response the tuba player will have to play "on top of the beat." He must satisfy the piano or other chord player by playing "good sounding" notes that fit his harmonies and "voicings." These will become easy with practice. It must always be remembered that, like the bass, the tuba plays a supportive role and simple root-oriented bass lines are preferable. Complex lines should be avoided until the style is thoroughly mastered and then only on occasion. Playing bass-lines in a group will probably lead to some opportunities to play solos. Save the "hot licks" for the solos and play supportive bass lines.

Once the technical problems are mastered the tubist will experience a great sense of freedom. He will also discover that the tuba has many more sound possibilities than the electric bass. It has more sustain, shirred legato, wider range, and more expressive qualities. With electronics those possibilities are multiplied. Electronics may be the one new element needed to satisfy my skeptical readers that *playing* contemporary bass lines on tuba is a practical endeavor. The idea of using electronics on tuba has intrigued me for several years. Tommy Johnson developed many interesting sounds and we have both used it extensively in recording.

Simple amplification solves any volume problem. Once amplified any number of "toys (phase shifter, fuzz box, envelope follower, etc.)" can be used to alter the basic tuba sound. My most fascinating application of electronics to playing bass line tuba parts has been with an echo machine. With proper settings and playing rhythmically with my own echo I can create incredibly difficult bass lines. In a rhythm section it sounds like four Fender basses. The possibilities are endless. Brien Matson, a Los Angeles jazz trombonist, connects his instrument to a synthesizer with amazing results. I must caution those interested in electric tuba that electronics only assist and will not help a bad player—besides the equipment is very expensive.

I wish only to suggest a new way of thinking for tuba players, a way which offers (at the very least) a chance to improve their ears, to be creative, to broaden their understanding of music and their instrument—and maybe earns some income too. I make no value judgments about the music. In my own experiences I have found that improvising bass-lines in a group has improved my speed, accuracy, attacks, endurance, rhythm, and, above all, the sensitivity to respond immediately to other musicians. To improve these skills should be important to all musicians, including the symphony bound tubist. I feel it is entirely compatible for a young tuba student to practice solos, studies, and excerpts in the daytime and play jazz or pop music at night. We have another thing in our favor—the tuba has a very positive effect on people—they like to listen to it. Not since the time of Bach has the counter-melodic role of the bass line been so important to music. The tubist should consider it his heritage and take up the challenge.

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