

Why We Play

Exuberance is beauty.

—William Blake

There are a lot of things about playing music that bring each of us a great deal of joy, or otherwise we probably wouldn't still be doing it! After all, there are certainly plenty of barriers thrown in front of us that could encourage us to stop: the cost of instruments and equipment, the burden of schlepping a large instrument hither and yon, not to mention the curious (and sometimes condescending) look that people give us when we say "I play the tuba" or "I play the euphonium." But, by virtue of the fact that you have this journal in your hands at this very moment, there is obviously something that you love about playing your instrument. I like that about you.

Each one of us has our own story about how we came to play the tuba or euphonium and most of these stories are pretty interesting. My sadistic orthodontist in Frederick, Maryland led me to the tuba. Someone else probably had a desperate band director who led them to the tuba, maybe because they were big enough to carry the case. Someone else was probably drawn to the big lonely instrument that everyone else was ignoring, in the same way that that same person would be drawn to the runt when choosing a puppy from a litter. Someone else may have heard a euphonium played by a soloist and thought to themselves, "That is the loveliest sound I have ever heard," and the rest was a *fait accompli*. Each of us has a story to tell of how and why we got started, and in many ways that story shapes how we have developed as musicians.

What makes each one of us tick as a musician is as variable and distinctive as a fingerprint. I like to think that each one of us has our own distinctive musical DNA that informs us on how we sound, what we're good (or bad) at and what brings us joy when we play. Some of us may find the act of working through a technical problem that has plagued us for years incredibly satisfying while others of us might find it unbelievably frustrating. Some of us are absolutely sure that we know what our ideal sound is on the horn, while for others of us, the ideal sound rattling about in our minds is a work in progress. Some of us can improvise with the ease of a bird in flight, while others of us find the very idea of playing a jazz solo absolutely terrifying. We're all different... we each have something unique in our approach to music and we are richer as a community because of these differences. The minute that we surrender to the idea that these differences are flaws, we lose the humanity in what we do.

We live in a world where we listen to perfect recordings, strive for perfection in the practice room and on the stage, and hold our musical heroes to the elevated status of “perfect.” Our teachers tell us that any mistake in an audition will open the door of dismissal. And you know what? We believe it. We believe that the Holy Grail of perfect performances exists and that if we work hard enough, by God, we will reach that point. The quest for perfection is a double-edged sword: while the constant pursuit of this goal will surely lead to the improvement and refinement of our playing, it will also lead to our bitter frustration that we cannot attain the elusive goal of perfection. Been there, done that, got the t-shirt.

So, my message today is not “Reject the pursuit of perfection”, but rather “Do what you love to do, and do it the very best that you can. Do work of which you can be proud.” We started playing because we were intrigued, not because we saw the potential to become note-perfect automatons. Our obligation as performers is to say something interesting and to communicate this interesting idea to our audiences as clearly as we can. If you love what you do, this will be evident to your listeners. The love of the game should never be overshadowed by the quest for perfection.

I hope that you will have fun the next time you pick up the horn—I know that I will! It’s what keeps me coming back.