

The Sound Floats on the Breath

You'll hear this concept referenced by students of William Adam. As I'm careful to point out, what follows is only my take on this. I think a whole lot of what he taught was in common to most of us, but certainly he tailored many things to the individual. So I'll leave it to my 1st generation colleagues to offer their take on what he meant by this.

I also must give major credit to Jim Reed, who is an absolute wizard of a trumpet teacher, living in suburban Columbus, OH. I saw Mr. Adam for weekly lessons just like everyone else, and 4 hours per week in brass choir, and another 2 hours per week in his Monday night Master Class, but of course the lion's share of trumpet time was in the practice room. Most often I practiced with Jim Reed, Jim O'Banion, Bob Slack, Bob Burns, and Greg Wing. And I thank the good Lord for those thousands of hours with such great players. But when I go to the notion of "floating the sound on the breath," that's all Jim Reed. He made it real to me.

I have discussed elsewhere what it means to have the sound come from the top of the breath. I mention this here, because that idea goes hand in glove with the concept of floating the sound on the breath; you can't have one without the other. And of course none of it happens without a dominant and vivid thought of your ideal sound in that musical context.

Sometimes it is helpful to describe abstract concepts in terms of their opposites. A sound that does not "float" will be based on grunt, isometric tension, locked-up air, a weight-lifter approach to blowing the horn, that sort of thing. Go in the opposite direction from those traits. For the sound to float, the breath has to be in constant, smooth, and outward motion. Occasionally moving, or with a hitchy delivery, or "sort of" outward will not do. This is an acquired skill and is not likely to be easy to do at first. It is also likely to be awkward if you are not used to that full breath and the constant motion of the breath, outward. But you must persevere until it becomes intuitive. As I always say, mastery comes in simplicity. Apply this with great discipline.

Imagine the sound as a thing, it has mass, it has presence, and it floats on that cushion of breath, like a boat on the water, or an airplane in flight. When we achieve "float" you cannot simultaneously have breath/tone that is locked up in isometric tension. You cannot have a muscled sound. Your endurance, response, resonance, opulence, flexibility, will all be enhanced so long as the tone floats.

The moment the tone does not float on the breath is the moment that things lock up, tone becomes dull or brittle, and all attributes of good playing begin to fail: response, resonance, opulence, flexibility, dynamic control, the ability to negotiate large intervals, et al.

When I was a kid, we'd go to Sears... They had a display of vacuum cleaners, with a vacuum cleaner set on "exhaust," with the tube set up so that it was exactly vertical, and a beach ball was suspended on the air column coming out of the vacuum cleaner hose. That is as good a graphic representation of sound floating on the breath that I know of.

When Jim Reed plays a lyrical phrase, all of the sounds float. High notes, low notes, soft or loud, large or small intervals, all sounds are floated on that cushion of air.

At that point, the imagination is all you need to dial up whichever volume or color the music calls for. The delivery of the sound is unchanged; only the palette of the imagination changes.

It is my belief that if our imagination of the sound guides the process, and that that special sound comes off the top of the inhale, and floats on the breath, all as one thought, we are going to enjoy greater success playing the trumpet.