

Developing Musicality

“As a college student, what things would you recommend practicing more to develop overall musicality as a trumpet player?”

I don't think we need to use the words ‘trumpet player’ in that statement, in that question. And I don't think I need to use the word ‘trumpet’ in my answer. Musicality is musicality. The thing about musicality, is it comes back to “You are what you eat”. There's even something about this - I think it's that page in the Arban Book, right before the "Characteristic Studies" - about seeking out great examples of the music in order to refine your own musicianship. I don't remember exactly what the statement was, but it's something to that effect. And it's absolutely the way that I feel; my musicianship has improved because of a small number of things.

Number one, we'll start with: Listening. You can only be as expressive a musician as you have heard music expressed. Tchaikovsky “Pathétique” - Tchaikovsky 6... when you've had a moment like that - or Mahler 9 - and it just reduces you to tears; or listening to a Keith Jarrett solo piano concert. Once you've experienced musicality and expression like that, then that raises the bar; and now you have a different idea of what musicality is. When a solo has ripped your heart out and shows you your own heartache - well, shows you *their* heartache, and resonates with your heartache - then forever, hopefully you are no longer willing to accept pornography as lovemaking; or ego-driven ballad-playing for vulnerability. So it has to do with what you are listening to.

And that has to do also with having, maybe, a social group - other people who are just as serious about their craft as you are, who also have quite a lot of opinions; and who debate whether one musician is "awesome" or not, or what the best recording of that piece of music is, whatever it might be. It's a slippery-slope and it's a fine line between being critical to the point of it being hurtful for you; debilitating because you always have to subject yourself to the same type of scrutiny and criticism that you apply to everyone else, so be careful. Be careful with the standard that you set for everyone else, because you've gotta live by it.

Which has been the bane of my existence at times. But anyway, once you have developed your awareness through listening and through positive critique with trusted musicians and friends; then you'll at least understand more what the goal is, where the bar is.

And then there's being in a vibe; being in an environment with people where you can actually practice putting that musicality into effect; putting it to use. It takes a while, I think, to develop a concept of what is fine-art musicality; and it takes a while beyond *that* to actually get it to come out of your own horn, or get it to come out of your mouth. That's kind of like a two-sided coin, there's developing your awareness, and developing your ability to emote.

Quick story: my musicality got a major upgrade many years ago. I was on tour with "Blast!", and I was trying to upkeep a long-distance relationship, with a girl who I was crazy about. She was flying in every other week or something, and we were really trying to make this work. And all of the sudden, out of nowhere, one night she just didn't return my message; next morning- didn't return my message. Long-story short, after a few days it became clear that "Okay, I guess I've been dumped and excommunicated" all in one go, without any warning, without any closure, which drove me fucking wild. I didn't know what to do with myself.

So, we were in "Blast!"; we were playing in Philadelphia - downtown Philly, playing at the big performing arts centre whatever it was there. And downtown Philly, at least at that point, where we were wasn't residential. There were blocks, of whatever-- So ten o'clock at night comes, I'm done with "Blast!"; and I just went out on the street, and I just played my heart out, for hours, outdoors, no mute, in the middle of the fricking city. Crazy. Sometimes I just opened my eyes and there'd be like four homeless dudes all around me, just jaw-dropped like "What the --?". I'd open my eyes up and see that there's an audience. I don't even remember what I played then; I don't know what was coming out of my horn; but it was like a serious disconnect.

Whatever it was, it was really helpful; because from that point on, my ability to play ballads - a truthful, honest, vulnerable, expression - became much more possible. Because I had finally experienced a level of pain, rejection and emotional wreckage, that finally gave me an opportunity where my ego didn't even know what to do with itself. All I knew is just that the playing became a mode of catharsis, that just transcended making my ego feel better. I don't know what, it was just a whole other level of honesty. I wasn't just playing tunes or whatever; it was like stream-of-consciousness, like a Keith Jared solo concert, but monophonic. And that forever changed the level of vulnerability that I felt I could access. In a way, it got my ego out of the way.

And then, four years after that, 2006, my mom died. On the opening night of a 16-week tour of Japan, with "Blast!". And that was the worst fucking period of my life. All I wanted to do was crawl into a hole, and not be there, and not have to get onto the stage 8 times a week. I was no fun to be around, I just couldn't. Yet there I was; I had to be on stage, 8 times a week, playing a bizarre number of ballads, for this particular "Blast!" sequel - it had a lot of ballads, and they were all my solos. So there were a lot of lyrical moments for me to play.

And those were the moments, where - I didn't have a band I could play with, and improvise with, so I had those lyrical moments; I had opportunities to turn not very deep music into something meaningful. I used those songs as the way to express that which I could not express with words. And reached a new level of artistry in that period as well, in terms of honesty and flow. And it came from a period when I had no ability to be happy; no ability to be satisfied; no comfort - very little comfort except for some close friends and fleeting moments, when they were able to just charge me up a little bit. I had no source of gratification. But I had a beautiful ensemble of wonderful musicians around me, and I worked with what I had.

So that just showed to me, that it doesn't even matter - again coming back to what Ben said, was paraphrasing Krishna Das, it's not about the music, it's about the vibe. And in that case, I

worked with the music I had, and I brought the vibe. There was no escaping the vibe, that's the thing.

So, this is a long story, this is turning into quite a rant; but it's one of my favorite questions of the day, when you asked “How do you practice developing overall musicality as a trumpet player?”

Somebody else might say, “Work on your dynamic contrast; work on the weight, the placement of your notes; the nuance of your articulation”, whatever. I mean, if we're talking musicality, what we're talking about is *you*. How do you develop a better, more emotionally aware, emotionally vulnerable, *YOU*? And how do you get that version of yourself - that more expressive version of yourself - to come through the horn?

And if we were to talk about technical things, and how one appears more musical than the other in a certain context, that's missing the point. Those things I think will sort themselves out if you are true to the emotional nature of the music. You choose your music - hopefully you get to choose your music - but if you're forced to play particular pieces of music, either way, you have to resonate with the emotional environment that is that piece of music. How can you connect that music and the story that it tells? How can you connect that to your own emotional landscape? And how do you make it real? And how do you turn that reality into a musical performance? Well, I mean if you're being real; it was probably a musical performance, it was probably an inevitable thing that you would be playing in a way that people would describe as *musical*; if you were really feeling it; if you were really telling that story.

So, I guess long-story short; you have to connect your suffering, and connect your joy, connect your hopes and dreams and connect your failures and your nightmares. Connect all that stuff to your music. Connect it to your playing. And that's that! And spend a lot of time listening to lots of music, follow the path and follow wherever that path of your preferences

leads you; and listen to those musicians that resonate with you; but also be sure that musicality is the thing that you look for; maybe above all other things. I'm not as interested in the perfection of someone's technical performance, as I am the perfection of their ability to be who they are; to truly speak their truth through the music. That's what matters.

So, as far as tips that you can practice for developing greater musicality? Be willing to connect your actual experience to your playing. What's going on right now? We're in the middle of the fricking zombie apocalypse, and people's hopes and dreams are being squashed left and right; yours and mine both. And maybe we do a good job of having a 'stiff upper lip' and carrying on and adapting; and doing what we can given the current circumstances; doing the best we can - sure you gotta do that. But don't bullshit yourself, or anybody else, about the fact that you are hurting. And if you're willing to look at that for real, if you're willing to seriously not bullshit yourself, then well, you probably won't be bullshitting in the music either. You know what I mean? Really, really connect who you actually are and how you're actually feeling to the music that you're playing.

One thing that might help, is that if you're feeling really depressed, then actually go ahead and dive into the music that allows you to explore that. Be honest, if it's gonna be a day of ballads, let it be a day of ballads. If you're just overjoyed that you just got these new kittens, "Oh my God!", if you're just bubbling up and over with joy, then that's a good day to work on joyful music, even if it wasn't on your to-do list. Whatever it is that you are working on, try to connect that with your real emotional experience. The truer you are to that, the more effective you'll be at being honest, and being an expressive "musical" musician.