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# Orchestral Brass Players: A Response

by Gene Pokorny

## Dear TUBA. Journal:

Congratulations on a well-written article by Doug Yeo, and special commendations to editor John Taylor and anybody else who was responsible for getting that ITA [International Trombone Association] article in TUBA Journal. That article has been needed for some time. Those of us who are lucky enough to be playing music professionally in symphony orchestras can become lax in some of the most basic tenets of team playing. That lack of attentiveness to teamwork is unfair to the composer as well as to our colleagues, the people who listen to us and those players who learn from our example. Doug Yeo issued the challenge, and he is right; sometimes the emperor is *not* wearing any clothes.

I have very few conflicts with his article. The biggest one is only a matter of perspective. Foolish comments and foolish playing are not completely indicative of inexperience. On the contrary, some of the dumbest actions and words I have witnessed on stage have come from some very experienced players, many of them fine solo performers. Their listening and teamwork muscles are all but dead unless a conductor sits on them. What is then disturbing is when these players start playing *with* the group, demonstrating that they simply chose not to earlier.

Individuality is a very important quality as a musician. There are definitely places for it on stage. In our ensembles though, whether it is a tuba quartet, brass quintet or 106-piece symphony orchestra, those moments are rare compared to when we play together with others.

*I Did It My Way* may have worked for Frank Sinatra as a soloist, but if Sinatra used that idea for attaining tenure as a player in a symphony orchestra he probably would not have lasted through the probation period. If for some reason he

did, it would be an unwise decision by a conductor who doesn't have the courage to tell an otherwise good performer that doing it your way is ineffective if it doesn't match what everybody else is doing on the team.

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**It is easy to be empathetic and understanding with Yeo's article. My first reaction was to think of all the *other* people who should read the article: *I sure wish (blank) would read this article. He is the one who could use it. Well, the fact is that we could all be reminded of some of the points in the article.***

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Teamwork is the highest attainment in orchestral performance. Unfortunately, many musicians—professional as well as non-professional—believe the highest result targeted should be to play one's own part independently well. As noble a pursuit as that is, however, it is only the *prerequisite* in getting into the next level of performance. Interdependence, synergy, the "we" paradigm, (i.e., teamwork), is not only a higher level of performance, but it is a much higher level of *maturity*. Winning an audition tests a person's independent skills as a performer. Attaining tenure in that newly-won

position additionally tests that person's team-playing abilities.

Judging how well we are doing as a team can be evasive, especially the closer one is to the machinery of putting the ensemble together. I received a pretty hefty rebuke from a friend of mine who was in the audience after a performance of Mahler's Sixth Symphony some years ago. Essentially, he said it was good but all much, much too loud. I thought I was doing my part to effectively balance the orchestral texture. However, where it counts—in the audience—it was not. His comments reminded me that those who are playing are *least* able to judge what it really sounds like 10, 20, 50 meters out, i.e., where the paying public is. Respected ears and a tape machine are valuable resources in approaching objectivity here.

When I was in high school in the early 1970s, I was taught a very important concept of balance from Benton Minor in California. The pyramid concept basically says that the highest voices in any ensemble should be supported slightly stronger and at least as reliably—i.e., in tune, rhythmically accurate, etc.—by the immediate voices below. Those voices should be supported slightly stronger and more reliably yet by the voices below them, etc., until you reach the bottom voices, which are the strongest and most reliable. This does not mean that the tuba players should be playing loud all the time. What it does mean is that tuba players should be most responsible for dynamic contrasts and reliable intonation. This particular concept is not unknown in the band world (W. Francis McBeth) or in the orchestral world (the late George Szell).

Part of the problem with balance is when the voices at the very top of this "food chain" are playing too loud. Although it is easy to play in a unified way since everybody can hear the



It may be inexperience that dictates some players will not be a part of the team on stage, but in many cases it is *choice*. There are many venerable professionals out there who know how to be ensemble players but, for whatever reasons, choose to not be part of the group. Some of it is carelessness, but some of it is choosing to "get back" at a conductor, make a point to a player on stage, impress some friend in the audience, etc. Whatever the reason, the choice of not playing together with everybody else on stage is a mistake in which everybody pays for somebody else's lack of maturity.

Any low brass, low woodwind or low string player who tries to keep up with this "feeding frenzy" adds to the insanity. Yes, there will be people out there who think it is really great, exciting as all get-out, etc., and there are the perpetrators after the concert who enjoy hearing that *every* one of their notes was heard in the hall. And who doesn't enjoy an exciting performance? The question is, "Was it loud and exciting?" or "Was it exciting because it was loud?" or "Was it just loud?"

Sometimes a rare moment occurs. A couple of times a year, if we are lucky as performers and listeners, a truly synergistic performance occurs where everyone is willingly leaning in the same musical direction while listening. That is when the magic takes over; that's when it makes it all worthwhile...to be a part of something exponentially bigger than the simple sum of the parts. The higher calling of great ensemble playing makes the self-aggrandizing, depraved necessity of ego massage through mindlessly blowing one's guts out in a brass instrument as fulfilling as cotton candy is to a steak dinner.

Unless smart players are courageous enough (or stupid enough, depending on your perspective) to encounter those who choose not to control themselves, the responsibility rests with the conductor, as Yeo points out. Unfortunately, many conductors are so intimidated and grateful when they come in to conduct some of the top orchestras, they are reluctant to actually stop the music in order to correct and control balance, pitch, inaccurate

rhythms, etc. Those few conductors who actually offer valuable comments and try to tighten up some of the loose ends may bruise the egos of some of the "sacred cows" (which every ensemble seems to have). Coincidentally, these purposeful conductors may not be asked back again.

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One last observation: Several years ago, while the Chicago Symphony was on tour in Japan, I was asked to perform some solo recitals. As difficult technically as those recitals were, the real challenges occurred the following evening when I had to be back on stage with my 105 colleagues in the orchestra, and had to "switch gears" getting back into "team mode." I knew one night would be different from the next, but it took *much* more concentration to be a "cog in the wheel" with the orchestra than it did to be the "nut behind the wheel" on the recital stage.

Again, bravo to Doug Yeo for a great wake-up call! ■

"Tyrannosaurus Treble Tyrants" on the top, the pyramid concept of balance is in shambles: The woodwinds are overblowing their instruments into non-Western scales, the string section takes on the significance of tape hiss in the total mix, and the brass section sounds like a three-alarm fire in the elephant house at the zoo.

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