
September 2019

The Fine Art of Trumpet Playing

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Recommended Citation

Stikeleather, Ryan (2019) "The Fine Art of Trumpet Playing," *The Idea of an Essay*: Vol. 6 , Article 8.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/idea_of_an_essay/vol6/iss1/8

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Ryan Stikeleather is a Molecular and Cellular Biology Pre-Med student from Cary, NC. He plays trumpet in the Cedarville Jazz Band and is an EMT at the Cedarville Township Fire Department. After graduation, Ryan hopes to attend medical school, possibly to become a primary care pediatrician.

The Fine Art of Trumpet Playing

Your emotions are awakened by a single note, its piercing sweetness cutting through your thoughts of a moment before. The note changes, and, filled with brassy brightness, it begins to tiptoe upward as you follow, hypnotized. You give in as waves of sound wash over your ears and inundate them with the swirling eddies of a trumpet cadenza, rippling through chord after chord so quickly you can barely keep up. Suddenly the music freezes, capturing your mind at the pinnacle of joyful exuberance on a high A for what seems to be an hour, until finally the pitch drops, the trumpeter takes a bow, and you breathe a sigh of relief as your thoughts are released from the grip of his powerful spell.

My mother plays the piano for church and for personal enjoyment. No matter the setting, her fingers glide over the keys as her body is engulfed in the full force of the piece. As a young child, I would hear her play often on the aging Yamaha in our living room, an instrument whose wooden paneling was covered in the trinkets of a long-time musician. Confident in the appeal of her craft, my mother hoped to impart her love of the piano to me.

Stern statuettes of Bach and Beethoven stared down at me as I sat

next to her on the bench, a tall, lanky eight-year-old lacking the confidence to match my height. I practiced under the gaze of the composers for several years, always suspecting that they, or more likely my mother, were waiting to judge me for each misplacement of my long, unwieldy fingers.

Anxious to escape the watchful eyes, I was excited by the prospect of joining my school band, where I could play whatever instrument I wanted. The raw freedom and pure power apparent in the commanding voice of the trumpet appealed to me, as I pictured myself mesmerizing crowds with flowing serenades and regal fanfares. When I first attempted to play my golden student model instrument, however, the sound was more akin to the cries of a sick animal or the creaking of a rusty gate than the gushing, effortless flow of melodies I had envisioned.

I continued to grow, always a head taller than the rest of my peers, and my abilities as a trumpeter seemed to increase proportionately. “Tighten the corners of your lips!” railed my teacher as my mouthpiece became an incensed hornet, buzzing as it prepared for a sting. In their quest to reach an impeccable shape for hitting the toughest pitches, my lips endured countless punishments from long band clinics and the scourge of braces, those tiny blockades to progress that barred my path for two long years. Through it all, the varied and potent legacy I was striving to contribute to beckoned me on toward loftier compositions and styles of music.

For thousands of years, trumpet players have made use of their skills in venues around the world, captivating their listeners from the time when the sun glinted from the horns of heralds up to

Wynton Marsalis's growling and swinging in New York City concert halls and clubs. The Hispanic man on the streets of Cancun snatches the attention of passers by with his scintillating trills and improvised melodies just as a member of a rock band in London garners raucous cheers with his swooping shout choruses. Whether singing from the bell of an elegant Stradivarius or a rundown Jupiter horn, the voice of a trumpet demands compliance and surrender from even the most stubborn of hearers.

Looking out over an expectant audience, I step towards the microphone, my right hand quivering as it holds my trumpet. The time has come for my solo, and my mind struggles to overcome the malignant throes of nervousness that threaten to conquer everything I have worked for. I raise my silver instrument to my well-trained lips, and immediately I feel the familiar coolness of the mouthpiece pressing against them, massaging away any thought of a mistake. Out rings my opening note, a perfect C with subtle vibrato, and my song engulfs the room in a seemingly unbreakable enchantment.