

CHAPTER 2: Let's Appease the Left Brain NOW

***The Introduction and first 2 Chapters of this book, entitled "[Metaphor Your Music](#)", are available for free download at the trombonelessons.com podcast. The Introduction is Episode #172, Chapter 1 is Episode #173. I am very thankful to those that have shared these with friends, teachers, and students. The book will contain many more chapters and it is presently seeking a willing publisher. I will alert you when it becomes available. I am always willing to answer questions, and I'm easily reached at this address (or on Facebook!)

tom@trombonelessons.com

Peace and Trombone Love.

-Dr.Tom

The student from our story will appear again later in this book. Things didn't go as one might expect for him....without a doubt they're going better. The technique we employed to bring those excerpts to life was relatively simple. Simple techniques are good, I have learned. We approached the music as an actor might approach a script. I admire Johnny Depp immensely as an actor. He sells me every time. He tells great stories and he uses his entire being to do it. The dramatic arts, though, are not as metaphoric as Music. All forms of art are metaphoric, almost by definition, but none is more so than our beloved Music. Mr. Depp has concrete elements to use to his advantage that music does not provide. I'm thinking now about camera angles, lighting, costumes, make-up, facial expressions, etc. He has all of that, plus the sound of his voice. When it comes to strictly making music, we have only sound. But, we can think like him! Treat the music before you as a script. A story is within, just itching to get out. Study it, research it, if possible listen to it, learn it, and then start living it. Get all the way down inside those notes and see if you can't catch a glimpse of the composer's intent.

Can you discern a "plot"? What's the story? Often, a musical work will have a 'program' that gives big clues (i.e. Stojowski's 'Fantasy'). Indeed, fierce debates have been had about "pure" versus programmatic music. I got hung up in that argument for a moment, but then I realized that music without metaphor doesn't interest me. If the metaphor is provided by the composer, great. If the composer leaves the program to the performer, fine. Either way, a good performance is going to enter my ears and fall upon my imagination in a way that will be intensely personal and unique. Often, great music will describe for me things that the composer may not have intended, program or not. Metaphor is powerful stuff.

Go into the music and search for metaphor. Some examples might be: what could this phrase possibly 'mean'? What's the perfect tone color for this note at this moment? What kinds of things can be expressed with tone color? Is there an attitude with which I could play this phrase? Utilizing all my technical skills, my knowledge of styles, my love of the trombone, can I bring this music to life? And what does it mean to bring music to life?

If music is going to have life, it will need to be experienced by both the performer and the listener. Assuming everybody involved is a human being, they have 5 channels of input when it comes to “experiencing” the world around them. Five senses, triggered by vibrations and translated into electrical impulses within the brain, that give us the experience of experience. Not all five are required, as many fine artists have demonstrated, but a richly sensual experience will try to tickle as many as possible, right? Think of a very fancy dinner experience. It’s got it all: texture, sight, smell, sound, oh and the taste! It might be very easy to assume that a good dinner would appeal solely to taste. Period. I suppose a good dinner does, in fact. A *great* dinner, though, has it all! In the same way, music can branch out beyond simply hearing it. It can be a feast for the ears.

It might seem very strange and awkward to assign other senses to music. Trust me, though, it started the moment you first heard the term “tone color”. What’s that, if not a metaphor? Or, “her sound is so dark”. Or, “I hate my sound. It’s so bright and thin. I need more weight out the bell.” Bright and thin, you say? Weight? Excuse me? Those are visual and tactile references. So, we do it all the time, let’s be real. I’m suggesting you try doing it a whole lot more!

Assume the role of director/producer/writer/costume designer/lighting director/sound engineer/key grip (gotta have one of those, apparently)/prop designer/etc. Grab the script, in this case your music, and set about designing in your mind a fabulous and *sensual* production....a real experience for the audience, if you will. Certain notes will necessarily stink, maybe like onions. Certain phrases, with their silky smoothness, will need to be contrasted by the nasty grittiness of the next. Butterscotch pudding, as it turns out, is the perfect sound for Sibelius. Oh, you disagree? Play me a better flavor, then. Yum.

This simple technique of being a “dramatic coordinator” and tickling different centers of the brain has borne some fantastic fruit for me, and my students. It’s hard not to realize immediately that it is fun, first off. I’ve worked with some people for whom fun seemed such an ancient musical memory, that tears have come to their eyes when they “let rip a cannon blast that smelled like rotten eggs and splattered the ogre at which it was aimed”. I always try to keep a microphone going (for feedback at a later moment, a different NOW), and in these instances it’s always intensely revealing to listen back to the “before metaphor” and “after metaphor” renderings.

In some sense, I guess, the cat’s out of the bag, but you can try this for yourself. Are you presently working on a solo or excerpt? Record it. Right now, just as you have been playing it. Then, sit down with it, study it, apply the technique of “dramatic coordinator”. Define the characters and what they will be wearing. Like a good novelist, clarify in your mind the setting, time, and place. Spend a day with it, at least, not playing it, but learning it. In the long term, one day is a very short amount of time. Students that have used sketchbooks, computer graphic programs, colored pencils, and the like have benefited greatly. Maybe you’ve seen a film that seems relevant, or a work of art, or a video game scene? When the drama seems clear to you, in every “sense”, try recording it again. I am willing to bet that the sound is much more interesting and engaging this time, no? Behold the beauty and power of metaphor. In it lies the essence of self-expression, which initially brought you to the trombone, and which will continually nurture your spirit.

Another mysterious truth has arisen before my ears while working with students in this manner: their technique on the instrument, when making metaphors come alive, is extended. They tongue faster and lighter. The sound is bigger, and surely contains more purposeful intent. Phrases have more meaningful lines about them. Dynamics become a more vibrant means of expression. The legato is often smoother....instantly. Many, many aspects of their playing are improved quite suddenly. The more time we spend really clarifying the story in our minds, the more quickly technique improves; almost without fail in every instance. I encourage you to try it for yourself (and your students). Again, a microphone can be your best friend. It will always be your most truthful friend, that's for sure.

Pedagogically, this presents an interesting question: should we teach technique? Will technique evolve on its own, so long as the metaphor is present in our music? Or, as many students are apt to ask with great hopefulness, are scales a thing of the past? While it might prove interesting to start a student from scratch on a purely metaphoric curriculum, I think evidence shows that such methods fall short. I also have come to know that teachers that prescribe purely methods of technique have achieved good results in many cases. Unfortunately, though, I have witnessed situations in which the obsession of technique completely obscures the music. For instance, I could easily spend 4 lessons talking about the mechanics of the tongue when applied to an excerpt such as Rossini's "La Gazza Ladra". Technically speaking, the mechanics are very complex. Then, we would need to address the idea of air stream for a few weeks. The last 3 lessons might find us talking about hand position and slide technique. All of these matters, and more, I have seen fix themselves instantly in the presence of the perfect metaphor. Imagine a perfectly struck balance between right-brain (metaphor) and left-brain (technique-oriented, logical processing). That, it seems to me, is the ideal goal of a teacher of music. Consider the case for scales....

Scales, as we have all been taught, are the building blocks of the vast majority of the music we will perform. They define tonality, for one. Being able to execute scalar passages with accuracy and proper intervallic spacing is crucial to good music making. So, it follows that we must work scales. Must we do them in such structured, mechanical, some might say boring, ways? Absolutely not. In fact, there seems to be little benefit in doing so. I've seen students work scales for years (years!) and not truly learn them. Forwards, backwards, in thirds, fourths, in harmonic progression. All too often, when practicing scales, the creative metaphors run dry. The imagination is completely disengaged. The moment the imagination disengages, we cease to be making Music.

If that describes your situation, stop practicing scales. You are only partially engaged, and my advice at that point is always to "step away". Think for a moment about what you could possibly be expressing through these "scales". (Selah.) Strive to develop the talent to portray in any "key" a story with these scales; a long and treacherous ascent to the heavens, perhaps. Once you've ascended the mist-shrouded mountain, pause and look around. Vibrate with power, confidence, and beauty on the pinnacle note. Then, begin a rapid descent as if being sucked down into the abyss by a gravitational force that will not be denied. Consider this: if a scale is to appear in a piece of music, a similar metaphor might very well have been in the composers mind. What I'm saying is this: don't practice scales. Practice metaphors. This goes for tonguing "exercises", long tones,

lip slurs. Here's a reminder for you, and something to remember: every aspect of your daily routine should be neither. Please let me explain what I mean by that...

A daily routine ought not to be daily. The body needs rest, as does the mind. Six days of good metaphor-making each week goes much further than 7 days of "practice". A daily routine ought not to be routine. Nothing is routine when you are fully present in the moment. (Selah.)

If you can develop the ability to project metaphor with every note that you play, starting with the very first note of the day, you will quickly come to see nothing as routine in the realm of music. It is only your imagination, or rather lack of it, which will lead you toward the mundane. Further, and this is quite essential, if you are playing without a metaphor in mind, *you are not making music*. So, that seems to beg the question: what exactly are you practicing in this way and why would you expect people to enjoy it? Or, ultimately, to pay money for the experience of hearing it?

Can I just tell you how many young musicians, fresh out of school, are lining up at every audition, completely devoid of metaphor in their music? Would you believe me if I told you how many players I've heard drilling themselves into a hole in the practice room? ("I practiced for 43 hours today, Dr. Tom!" Ugh). Can I spare you the agony of explaining what it's like to try to make music happen with these people in any sort of ensemble setting? It is readily apparent in every situation how engaged ones imagination is. Also apparent are pesky truths such as: how well they listen for blend, how adeptly they can maneuver their tone colors, how they can shape notes to match their environment, how capable they are of switching styles on the fly (in the NOW), and how deeply they can feel (not see!) a groove.

These elements are beyond technique, very often, and they are the unspoken, sometimes indescribable attributes that separate the good from the great. They are the same attributes that laypeople can hear. They are the attributes that are only slightly improved by using tuners and metronomes. They are subtle. They are real because they are experienced by the senses. They are the dramatic elements of your musical story. They are Metaphor.

If you're going to "practice" something, let it be this. Apply rich, colorful, stinky, sticky metaphors to every "exercise" in your warm-up. You will be switched ON from the moment the horn comes out of the case and you will start to experience music differently. You might also become more aware of those around you that function in this creative realm. (If there's one thing I have learned in this business, it is that "cats" don't talk much, very often. They let their music speak for itself.) Many musical features, which heretofore had gone unnoticed and *unsensed*, will spring to life in your imagination.

The "dramatic coordinator" technique is great. I love it and I use it and I teach it. It not only awakens a joyful spirit within us, it also changes the focus of our awareness and seems to abolish performance anxiety as a bonus side effect. Good stuff! As I am prone to tell my students, if it works NOW, it also works NOW, and you can count on it to be there NOW for you, too. Performance anxiety, along with every other kind of anxiety in our lives, is directly the result of our awareness "leaving the moment". Of that I am completely convinced. I went through a period in my adult professional life when I thought performance anxiety was going to end it all. It was unbearable and I know some of you might be dealing with it presently. Metaphor heals. If quality music making

requires us to be fully present in the moment, and peace of mind reflects our ability to stay in the moment.....there's another piece of ammo in my argument supporting Music Performance Degrees at the highest levels. Please believe me: if you get nervous in performance, focus on metaphor, on stage and off. In time, nervousness becomes a very healthy experience of your body and mind saying: "I am fully alive and present. I am wide open to experience! I am excited to share my story, with all its human traits. I don't take myself too seriously, and I make all my music sincerely." At that point, you are very good to go. Get out there and have a blast. Thanks for sharing with us, truly.

There is a second technique, in addition to the "dramatic coordinator", that helps me, and my students, get the metaphors flowing. It is the practice of imitation.

I distinctly recall listening so intently to the articulations of J.J. Johnson that I began to see those beautiful pearls floating before my mind's eye. They were electric blue, like the horizon just before twilight. They smelled like honeysuckle, too. Texture? Silk, of course. (I'm hearing Old Devil Moon in my head right now. Please....may I have a moment? Thanks. Ahhhh. OK, moving on NOW). Only after this depth of experience did the proper airflow, slide speed, and tongue position occur to my body in such a way that I could almost match him. All of these physical observations occurred to me after the fact. Imitation, especially after thoughtful meditation, is a very healthy endeavor for the musician.

I bought a CD years ago with Joe Alessi playing Eric Ewazen's "Sonata for Trombone and Piano". I loved the piece and I loved Mr. Alessi's sound. Still do, always will! I decided to learn the music by rote before ordering my own copy. Joe played a phrase, I hit Pause, figured it out, and played it back. On to the next phrase....and so it went. It didn't take as long as you might suspect, a testimony to Mr. Ewazen's uncanny ability to stick a melody in your ear, I suppose. Plus, I enjoyed the process immensely. I can't recommend it highly enough. Pick a great recording of a solo that really speaks to you and give it a go! In some ways, it will be a familiar exercise to those of you doing jazz transcriptions. In many ways, though, learning a Concerto or Sonata is decidedly and deliciously different.

I had to really listen. I had to proceed very slowly. I found a kinesthetic voice within me that had previously been very shy. I tried hard to imagine what Joe was feeling like and looking like as I listened attentively. Sometimes, I wouldn't play but I would hold the trombone as if I was, and I would imagine my sound and Joe's as being one and the same sound. I'd focus in this way through the entire piece, breathing along with him. Then, I'd try playing it. It wasn't quite Joe's sound, I assure you, but it was a bigger, easier, more resonant quality of sound than I had been making. The microphone proved it. I was tonguing more gently, more forward in my mouth with better speed on my air. I could plainly hear it. My *sostenuto* had a different character about it. It was better! It had more control and the body of the notes had more color and tonal interest. More life in the sound! Dramatically improved, I would have to say. Thanks, Joe!

What was going on? If you've been reared musically in a jazz tradition, or a folk tradition, or perhaps a church tradition, this is nothing new, right? Music has been around longer than musical notation. It is an aural tradition, is it not? Yeah, well, I had no ears for it, apparently. Or so I thought and so I moaned and so I lamented...until I woke up. We all have ears for it. I never thought I did, but I learned something by imitating Joe. When the music finally did arrive, I threw it up on the stand and played through it. It

wasn't the same sound. The freedom was lacking in my sound. It was less and less Joe-like as I progressed through the movements. It wasn't even me-like, which is decidedly more to the point! I had just recorded this thing yesterday and it was sounding pretty glorious. What gives? Notation gives, that's what. My eyes were now consumed by a graphic code on paper. This activated another portion of my brain, which drew power from the only portion that was active yesterday- my metaphor machine; my full-on, fully engaged, Create(ive), story-telling faculties. We all have them. It also engaged the faculty within me that judges critically: don't make a reading error! Obviously, that inner voice was way out to lunch yesterday....where he should remain.

Yesterday, when I played, it felt like improvising. Today, it felt like accounting.

I mention this for a few reasons. First, if you don't consider yourself an improviser, then you should love yourself enough to do whatever it takes to get to the point where you can say out loud: "I improvise". This is a topic for another book entirely, but let me try to boil it down from my experience. Until I delved hard and deep into improvisation, I was only partially understanding my orchestral excerpts. I'll just leave it at that, and perhaps we can explore that further on down the road, OK? Trust me, though, please. Lock yourself in a soundproof room if you're embarrassed, but start down that glorious, potentially life-changing road of improvisation. Baby steps and in your own style.....that's just fine. If you have no idea as to where you might start, try this: sing a song in your head, then play it on your instrument. It is as easy and as marvelous as that. Just like in your other music, the metaphor must always be present. Else, why are you wasting everybody's time, most especially your own, right? Say something.

The second reason I wanted to share my experience with the Ewazen is this: it proved to me (with tremendous impact) that if you put a solid enough model in your mind, then your body will rise to the task. It will rise to the task with very, very little conscious direction. My technique was extended by imitating Joe, there's no doubt about it. I learned stuff about articulations, pitch centers, phrase contours.....because I heard it in his story. The physiology of it all (HOW it was actually being done by my body) occurred to me after the fact; after I had already made it happen. Not before. Selah.

A third lesson learned from the experience was this: when I could concentrate solely on my story, all was well. When I had to give a portion of my awareness over to symbolic translation, not so much. The lesson, for me: know the music. Know. The. Music. What do I mean by that? How well should you know it before you feel comfortable? Only you can answer that for yourself. When the story held within those notes makes itself very clear to you, very vivid and meaningful to you, and you have intention in every sound, and that intention is within your control, and the notes on the page are a "point of departure" for you.....that's a good start, right?

To summarize, then, we are always aspiring to be fully present in the moment, we are always striving to create interesting and compelling metaphors with our music, and we now have two very concrete methods for doing so: playing the role of "dramatic coordinator", and imitation. Good stuff. Thanks for sticking with me this far....I suppose now I'd like to talk about style. It's an elusive subject, but let me tell you why I think it's so important. Having the capability and the opportunity to present your music with style will be crucial to your mental and musical health.