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THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAYING SECOND

BY KYLE MILLSAP

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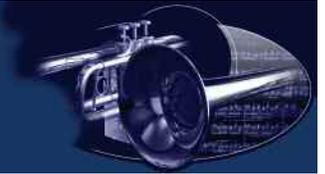
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THE IMPORTANCE OF PLAYING SECOND

BY KYLE MILLSAP

Many young trumpeters aspire to be the principal in an orchestra, play lead in a big band, sit principal solo cornet in a brass band, or play in a myriad of other primary positions. When asked about their dream job, seldom does a student auditioning for college answer that they want to be the best section player out there. Yet, some of the finest musicians spend their careers out of the principal hot seat. Playing the second chair is, in many ways, equally as demanding and musically challenging as the lead position. True artistry can shine when a player can set personal ego aside and acknowledge the possibility of being the best section member possible.

Early in his career, Louis Armstrong played second cornet with Joe “King” Oliver’s band. Despite being a tremendously gifted performer, Armstrong enjoyed the music he was making with Oliver’s band in New Orleans and eventually traveled north to Chicago to rejoin the band. While Armstrong quickly moved on to success as a soloist, he cut his teeth as a second player, demonstrating a masterful ability to improvise harmony lines over King Oliver’s melodies. This was one of the reasons that Oliver had asked Armstrong to move to Chicago with him, leading to a dramatic increase in the band’s popularity.

In college, I was told an important fact for most musicians—“The contractor has his lead player. Learn to become the best second player; that’s how you’ll get a gig.” Every great first player knows the value of an equally great second player. A second player can make playing incredibly easy or the worst experience ever for the principal player. Many lead players will ask for a specific second player to be hired. Once a performer’s value as a second player is seen, if the lead player is not available for a gig, the second player may have the opportunity to step up and play first. So, how does someone become a great second trumpet player? Listed below are a few suggestions.

Listening

Know the principal player’s tendencies in shaping a musical line and where they are going to breathe. Know where they are going to crescendo and decrescendo and where they are going to use a certain style of articulation. Listen to the principal player and try to anticipate his or her musical decisions.

Blending

If a performer is actively listening to those with whom they are playing, it will make it substantially easier to blend. All sounds must fit inside that of the principal player. The sound from a second player has to be the most comfortable pillow on which the principal’s sound can rest. It can be a thankless role, but a great lead player will quickly recognize and appreciate a second player who makes life easier on the gig.

Tuning

The section follows where the principal leads. A great first player is very consistent with where they place notes. It may be different from what a player is accustomed to, but it is the second player’s job to adapt. If the lead player plays sharp, everyone in the section must play sharp. This goes for articulation tendencies and note placement within the beat as well. Sitting on the backside of the beat when playing with someone who pushes the tempo usually results in a disastrous outcome.

Being a great second trumpet should be a source of pride. It is not about playing the high notes and gaining the glory, but it is still about being the best. Formative years are the perfect time to learn this. Parts are often shuffled in ensembles, giving everyone a chance to play different roles. One of the greatest compliments a second player can receive is when someone leans over after the gig and says, “I really enjoy playing with you. You make things so easy.” Enthusiastically accept the challenge to be the best in whatever role is needed.

About the author: Kyle Millsap is assistant professor of trumpet and jazz at Texas A&M University-Kingsville. His students perform successfully in a variety of professional and university ensembles and are frequently reminded of the need to follow the leader.



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