

# Trumpet repertoire in the early stages

## Edward Maxwell

### Introduction

I've attended many training sessions and professional development courses where I've been given a lot of contradictory advice about teaching beginners. Should we be making sure they establish strong technical foundations, or should they be given free rein to play in any way they like? Should we be teaching them to read music straight away, or just teaching them tunes that they know by rote? Should we get them on the exam conveyor belt as soon as possible? Should we produce lesson plans in advance, or should we make the lessons up as we go along? In this resource, I'll explore how choosing varied repertoire is crucial in maintaining interest and providing an appropriate pathway for students. A future resource will look at how to navigate a course of progression once you've settled on the books you're using.

Although this resource is written from a trumpet teacher's perspective, much of the general thinking about technique and repertoire development applies to other instruments – indeed, many of the books I mention have versions that adapt the same material for different instruments.

Full disclosure: some of the books I mention have been written by me. I'm not seeking to promote them above the many other excellent books available, but I'm highlighting them for educational reasons: I wrote them primarily because I wanted extra resources to suit my own style of teaching that I couldn't find elsewhere. I would strongly recommend you to do the same, and if you've compiled sufficient material to make a book, do send it off to publishers or try self-publishing – it's always good to share new materials and ideas.

### Tutor books

Trumpet teachers normally start students off with a 'tutor book' that guides them through the early stages, using a mixture of well-known and specially composed tunes, along with technical and reading exercises and other activities.

Are you familiar with all the various books on the market, or do you always use the same one? Do you use the book that your teacher used when you were learning yourself, or have you explored other options? Below is a small selection of tutor books, but there are many many more available:

- ▶ *A Tune a Day* (Boston Music Company)
- ▶ *A New Tune a Day* (Boston Music Company)
- ▶ *Team Brass* (Faber)
- ▶ *Trumpet Basics* (Faber)
- ▶ *Boosey Brass Method* (Boosey & Hawkes)
- ▶ *Learn As You Play* (Boosey & Hawkes)
- ▶ *Abacadabra Trumpet* (A & C Black)
- ▶ *Look, Listen and Learn* (De Haske)
- ▶ *Do It! Play Trumpet* (GIA Publications)
- ▶ *The Jazz Method for Trumpet* (Schott)

All of these tutor books have strong points, and it would be no bad thing to familiarise yourself with as many as possible, to give you inspiration for your teaching.

It's a good idea to give a couple of lessons before choosing a book, so you can tailor your choice to the individual's potential, capabilities and musical interests. The most important factor is that the book caters for the initial range of the player.

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### Starting note

Most students' first note will be a low C or G (second line up). Although it's desirable to start on the G, many beginners simply don't have sufficient strength in their embouchure to play this note. For some books – for example *Learn As You Play* and *Trumpet Basics* – the ability to play a G is a prerequisite from the start. It may be demoralising for a student to be unable to play a single tune, and you don't want to spend weeks just trying to be able to play the first note of the book – it's much better to work within your student's initial capabilities. Some books, such as *Team Brass*, offer the flexibility of different starting points. If starting on C, for example, there's a page of exercises using just Cs, a page using Cs and Ds and a page using Cs, Ds and Es. This enables a student to gradually work up to G. But there's also the option of starting on the G.

If your student is fortunate enough to be naturally able to play the higher C (fourth space up), exploit this rare gift by transposing tunes and exercises higher, rather than forcing the student to play lower, and thus potentially losing the exciting ability to play effortlessly in the high register.

### Rate of progression

Ideally, you should choose a book that allows new exercises to be given each week, to give even the slowest of students the feeling that they're making progress. I've taken on students from other teachers who have been stuck on the same page for a year or more. Even if exercises are very repetitive, it's always encouraging for students to be turning pages and working through a book – and, as we all know, repetition is essential to build strong foundations. *Abracadabra Trumpet* progresses at quite a fast speed, while *Team Brass* allows for much more early consolidation.

### Age range

An important factor to consider is how well laid out the book is, and at what age it appears to be targeted. Some books are designed and illustrated for younger children, and although some adult learners might find this amusing and charming, teenagers may find them babyish and uncool. Some books have small print and are cluttered with lots of text, which can be overwhelming to young learners, but informative for adult learners. The *Boosey Brass Method*, for example, is very dense and prescriptive, with some of the text aimed more at the teacher than the student. While this may put off a small child, it can enable an adult to teach themselves to a large extent. *The Jazz Method for Trumpet* is another good choice for adults.

### The downside of tutor books

While most students will flourish with an appropriately selected tutor book, there is a downside: any tutor book inevitably has to take a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. The book tells you that at a particular point in the student's journey, they're going to learn a new note, a new rhythm or a new technique. The teacher just has to go along with this prescribed approach, and it can make it more difficult to tailor learning to the individual student.

When the book introduces a new concept, such as quavers, it may only give a couple of exercises. These can often be memorised by the student, especially if you demonstrate them first, meaning that they're not always fully understood. You may need to supplement these with additional exercises. When a child learns to master a particular maths problem, they're usually given many pages of sums, all slightly different, to ensure it's thoroughly understood. In the same way, it's good to write out lots of quaver exercises (for example), all in slightly different patterns, to consolidate what they've learnt.

A more confident teacher may dispense with a tutor book entirely, preferring the flexibility of a completely 'pick and mix' approach, where they can develop range, technique, reading skills and musical understanding at the pace of the student, without a book dictating how and when they tackle a particular challenge.

If you want to adopt this approach, you will need plenty of appropriate material. Write bespoke exercises for individual students alongside books of tunes. They don't have to be mini-masterpieces, just short, simple and effective at consolidating a particular area.

### Group teaching

Many of the tutor books listed above contain simple rounds and ensemble pieces for group teaching. If you're teaching mixed brass instruments, *Team Brass* has compatible material across the brass family.

There are also 'band' books designed for the American school system, where students often learn from scratch within a band. The following titles have a whole set of band books available:

- ▶ *Standard of Excellence* and *Tradition of Excellence* (Neil Kjos Music Company)
- ▶ *Essential Elements Band* (Hal Leonard)
- ▶ *Band Today* (Alfred)

Mixed-ability groups can be hard to teach, as students inevitably progress at different rates. You might find there's a tendency to give the slower students a disproportionate amount of attention to help them keep up, thus essentially penalising those with more aptitude. On the other hand, you might end up focusing on the more talented students and 'write off' the struggling ones.

Time management is very important – you will need to strike a balance between offering individual advice to students and doing group activities. Try to give students an equal amount of individual attention and hope that those with less ability do not get lost or feel out of their depth in the group activities.

Although there's a lot of group material available to purchase, I find it best to write my own arrangements, so that I can tailor the parts to the individuals in the group. Struggling students can be given extra-easy music so they don't get frustrated by things that are too hard for them, but the star students can have more challenging parts, so they don't get bored. Stress the importance, however, of everyone working together in a team – everyone should be equally valued.

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### Checklist for early development

Students progress at vastly different rates, but after a term or two, the following should be secure:

- ▶ Produce a clear tone across the range of an octave.
- ▶ Articulate notes cleanly and fluently with the tongue.
- ▶ Slur smoothly, including valve and lip slurs.
- ▶ Identify the names of the notes on the staff.
- ▶ Read and understand rhythms: semibreves, minims, crotchets, quavers and dotted rhythms.

## Exploring repertoire

When all the above has been mastered, you will probably start thinking of preparing for Grade 1. At this point, teachers often focus exclusively on exam pieces: they may look through their preferred exam syllabus and see which book covers the most options. Until the recent revision of the ABRSM syllabus, you could progress to beyond Grade 3 using just one book, *Shining Brass* (ABRSM). Although this book contains attractive pieces, it's crucial to explore a much wider variety of repertoire, regardless of whether or not it appears on a syllabus.

Rather than allowing the exam board to dictate your choice of repertoire, choose what's most suitable for individual students and find an exam board that most closely aligns to this. If you like pieces that do not appear on the syllabuses of ABRSM or Trinity, you can always choose to use MTB, which allows a free choice of repertoire, which can be pre-approved by the board.

Students should have access to all of the categories of repertoire listed below, which I will briefly discuss.

## Well-known pieces

There are plenty of albums of easy, well-known pieces, such as *The Magic Trumpet* (Boosey & Hawkes), *Bravo! Trumpet* (Boosey & Hawkes) and *First Book of Trumpet Solos* (Faber).

The *Winners* series, published by Brass Wind, offers a wealth of pieces in a huge variety of styles. The books in the series are:

- ▶ *Scaley Winners*
- ▶ *Win! Win!*
- ▶ *Winners Galore*
- ▶ *Easy Winners*
- ▶ *Winner Scores All*
- ▶ *Great Winners*
- ▶ *Winning Matrix*

Look for books that may appeal to a particular student's interests. If they like films, there are plentiful books of film music, either devoted to one film (such as *Pirates of the Caribbean* or *The Greatest Showman*) or compilations (such as *Favourite Disney Songs* from Hal Leonard). Do check on the standard, however. Most of these books are not suitable for beginners – for example, *Easy Disney Favourites* (Hal Leonard) is labelled as 'medium' difficulty in the book's description. Well-meaning parents often buy books that turn out to be far too difficult. A firm favourite with my students is *Ultimate Movie Solos* (Alfred), but the standard is around Grade 4 to 6, so, again, not suitable for beginners.

For pop fans, there's a wealth of material, ranging from books to individual pieces which you can download from sites such as TomPlay or MuseScore. For football fans, there is my own book, *Football Crazy* (Spartan Press).

## Unfamiliar pieces

Students who only play pieces they know are unlikely to develop sufficient precision in their reading skills. They don't need to read accurately if they already know the tunes – they can play partially by ear. Books such as *Shining Brass*, *Party Time!* (both ABRSM) and *The Really Easy Trumpet Book* (Faber) contain simple and attractive pieces that are specially composed for the books.

## Jazz books

A couple of my favourite books are *Easy Jazzy 'Tudes* by Mark Nightingale (Warwick Music) and *Smooth Groove* by Don Blakeson (Brass Wind). Both contain around 30 pieces, from Grade 1 to around Grade 5 standard, and cover a range of jazz, rock, gospel and Latin styles, with fun backing tracks. My students learn *all* the pieces in these books, not just those on the exam syllabuses. Look out also for books by Christopher Norton, Pamela Wedgwood and James Rae.

## 'World' music

*Dance to the Beat of the World* by Jock MacKenzie (Con Moto) is an excellent book of simple pieces, written in genres from around the world. In particular, it's a great way to teach different rhythms, with plenty of syncopation and dotted rhythms. For slightly more advanced pieces (Grade 2 to 5 standard), try *Trumpet Globetrotters* by Shanti Paul Jayasinha (Oxford).

### Study books

A study is usually composed primarily to focus on a particular aspect of technique or musicality, for example fast tonguing or syncopated rhythms. Incorporating a difficult technical challenge into an attractive piece can be more palatable than playing a boring exercise devoid of musical content. Studies usually have titles that suggest their character, and are often designed to be ‘performance’ pieces.

The following study books are good for beginners:

- ▶ *Skilful Solos* by Philip Sparke (Anglo Music)
- ▶ *Polished Brass* by Lizzie Davies (Brass Wind)
- ▶ *Simple Studies for Beginner Brass* by John Miller (Faber)

*Journeys* by Mark Elvin (Mucky Herbert Music) is a set of characterful studies that progress from Grade 1 to Grade 8 standard.

For very simple, super-short studies (mostly around just four bars long) aimed at complete beginners up to Grade 1 standard, try *A Dozen A Day Trumpet* (Willis Music Company), which comes with fun backing tracks (I composed the exercises for this book).

### Exercises

Not everything we do is going to be an exciting journey of discovery. Although we want to stimulate our students with imaginative pieces, we shouldn’t shy away from setting boring and repetitive exercises. Even boring exercises, however, should be played with a sense of musical shape, flow and, of course, a secure pulse.

As we all know, repetition is crucial in laying secure foundations for our playing – technically and musically. Having a regular and repetitive warm-up, for example, is very important for establishing and maintaining the basics of sound production, tonguing and slurring. Some students enjoy the familiarity of repetitive and often mindless exercises, but others get bored very quickly. It may be that students do not have the self-discipline to play a thorough routine of exercises at home, but even if you only do it once a week in the lesson, that’s better than nothing.

My own book, *Arban Lite* (Spartan Press) is comprised of two volumes of repetitive (and, dare I say, boring) exercises modelled on the concept of the Arban Cornet Method, where there is an exercise to help with any challenge you might come across in a piece. *Sound at Sight* (Trinity) contains lots of useful material designed for developing sightreading skills, as does Paul Harris’s *Improve Your Sight-Reading!* (Faber), which contains a mixture of short exercises and pieces.

## A musical buffet

Having access to material from all the above categories gives you the ingredients to create a musical buffet for your students. You can explore exotic new tastes alongside old favourites. A varied diet of bite-size chunks is preferable to a large portion of the same dish: those teachers who just focus on exam pieces for months on end, to the exclusion of all other repertoire, are effectively serving up the same stale meal over and over again. As the saying goes, variety is the spice of life, and this certainly applies to music. How can students develop their tastes in music without exposure to a wide range of genres?

It's important to strike a balance between pieces and technical exercises, classical and jazz, the familiar and unfamiliar. As previously stated, playing well-known pieces can be fun, but if you already know how they go, you can play them mostly by ear, without having to read the music accurately. By contrast, a study will be unfamiliar, so will require more precise reading skills, and exercises will help to develop technique. A teacher needs to challenge, but reassure: encourage students out of their comfort zones, yet allow them to return when things get uncomfortable.

Exam repertoire (if your student wishes to go down the exam route) can be included in our buffet, but we should be exploring much more besides. Along the way, we need to be building up a varied repertoire and 'party pieces'. Do your students have pieces up their sleeves in case they're asked to play in a school concert or assembly at short notice? Have they tried all the pieces in a book, not just the ones on the exam syllabus?

## Backings and accompaniments

A good backing track or duet part can make the simplest tune sound good, and it also helps to instil a strong sense of pulse. Many books come with backing CDs, but unfortunately the CD is increasingly becoming an obsolete format. Very few of my students have CD players, and those that do are often reluctant to use them. The vast majority of CDs remain sealed in their packets, glued inside the back cover of their books. Publishers are increasingly offering online backings, which I encourage students to use. However, they are often too lazy or apathetic to bother to download them, so I make sure I have copies which I can use in lessons and share with students online. I subscribe to My Music Staff ([www.mymusicstaff.com](http://www.mymusicstaff.com)), which allows me to create a library of online resources, such as backing tracks, which students can log in and access. The ability to change the speed of a backing is very useful, and there are apps available to do this, such as the ABRSM's Speedhifter (<https://gb.abrsm.org/en/exam-support/apps-and-practice-tools/speedshifter/>).

Play piano accompaniments if you can, or compose or improvise duet parts. Music is always more fun when playing with others, and students invariably play more fluently. Having another player gives musical momentum, which helps to push them through moments of uncertainty, when they might otherwise break down. Occasionally students complain that having a backing is off-putting, but when used regularly, they will soon recognise how beneficial it is.

## Discovering new books

As a teacher, you should familiarise yourself with as many books as possible. Books selected for exam syllabuses are a good starting point, but there are lots of high-quality materials beyond these. It's easy to get into a routine where you use the same very limited number of materials, so keep mixing it up. If you're teaching in a school, try using different books with different students: they might be interested and inspired by their friends playing different pieces and collectively build up a broader repertoire. Discuss good books with colleagues, read reviews and look online. Sometimes charity shops have boxes of old music books that are very cheap, and there are online market places where you can buy bundles of second-hand books. Above all, browse in music shops. Many music shops will give discounts if you are a member of the Musicians' Union or ISM. I once asked in a music shop: 'What do I need to do to get a discount?' 'Ask for it!' was the reply.

### Cost of music

Music books can be expensive, but then so is the cost of lessons, and the hire or purchase of an instrument. When you consider the overall cost of music lessons, sheet music is a relatively small proportion. Trying to save students money by using only one book is false economy – the likelihood is that with fewer resources at your disposal, progress will be slower. If parents are struggling for money, see if you can get hold of second-hand books, find free resources online, or write your own material. While you can recycle books that students think they've grown out of, it's preferable for them to keep them, so they can build up a library and revisit old pieces. Books of 'easy' pieces are also useful resources for sightreading and transposition.

**Remember that photocopying music is illegal – it deprives composers, publishers and retailers of their income.** Claiming poverty is no excuse – photocopying is still theft.

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### Summary

- ▶ If you use a tutor book, make sure it's suitable for your student – important factors to consider are the starting note, rate of progression and age suitability.
- ▶ Choosing not to use a tutor book can allow you to tailor your repertoire and exercises to suit individual students.
- ▶ Write your own pieces and exercises.
- ▶ Strike a balance between repetitive technical exercises and stimulating pieces.
- ▶ Introduce a wide selection of genres, allowing students to develop their own musical tastes.
- ▶ Have a fast turnover of repertoire, with a balance between difficult pieces (to challenge) and easy pieces (to consolidate). If a student is making slow progress on a piece, give them something different. A piece should not take more than a few weeks to learn. If it does, it's probably too hard for them.
- ▶ Build up a reservoir of repertoire, rather than adopting a linear approach whereby you learn one piece and forget a previous one.
- ▶ Always have performance-ready pieces up your sleeve. They don't need to be hard to sound good. Indeed, an easy piece played beautifully is invariably more impressive than a slightly sketchy performance of something difficult.
- ▶ Choose repertoire beyond an exam syllabus, and use an exam board that's most suited to the student, rather than trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.
- ▶ Encourage students to listen to music to develop a broad knowledge and appreciation of music.