

Trumpet Tips: The Importance of Playing the Second Chair

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I was recently talking with Doug Lawrence, one of the great tenor players with the Basie Band, and he was recounting the story of when Marshal Royal, long-time lead alto, left the band to peruse other projects. Jerry Dodgion was brought in to replace Marshal, and as the story goes, everyone loved playing with him because of his instinctive musicality. When Marshal had finished his project, Jerry graciously stepped aside, saying words to similar to, "This is Marshal's chair, I was just keeping it warm." Doug considered Jerry to actually be one of the greatest lead altos players to not get enough credit. What he does get credit for is being a second alto that everyone wanted to play with because of his musicality and, when called upon, ability to listen to and support the lead. The same can be said of Louis Armstrong's early career with King Oliver's band. Louis would improvise harmony lines to King Oliver's melody. This led to an tremendous increase in the band's popularity.

One of my college trumpet professors, Kevin Hartman, put this a different way, saying "The contractor has his lead player. You need to learn to become the best second player. That's how you will get a gig." Every great lead player knows the value of an equally great second player. A second player can make playing incredibly easy, or the worst experience ever. So how do you become the best second trumpet ever?

Listening

Know the lead players tendencies in shaping a musical line. Know where they are going to breathe. Know where they are going to crescendo and decrescendo. Know where they are going to use what type of articulation. The list can go on, but what it boils down to is listening to whoever you are playing with and anticipate their every move.

Blending

If you are actively listening to who you are playing with, it will make it substantially easier to blend. Your sound must fit inside that of the lead player. You have to be like the most comfortable pillow for their sound to rest on. It is a bit of a thankless role from the audience perspective, but as I said before, a great lead player will recognize and appreciate a second player who made their life easier on the gig.

Tuning

You follow where they lead. A great lead player is very consistent with where they put notes. It may be different from where you do, but as the second player, it's your job to adapt. If they play sharp, so do you. This goes for articulation tendencies and where they play within the beat. You certainly do not want to sit on the backside of the beat when playing with someone who pushes the tempo.

There is an ego to being a great second trumpet. It is not about playing the high notes and getting the glory, but is still about being the best. One of the greatest compliments I receive is when someone leans over after the gig and says, "I really enjoy playing with you. You make things so easy." Because of the importance of the second trumpet, many lead players tell the contractor who they want as the second trumpet. College is the perfect time to learn this. Parts are shuffled in ensembles, giving you a chance to play different roles, so challenge yourself to be the best in whatever role you are in, lead or supporting.