

# Masterclass

## HOW TO PLAY GREAT SECOND TRUMPET

Bill Bing—Trumpet

For quite a few years I've been thinking about something that a lot of players never consider: how to be a good second trumpet player.



Since coming to Los Angeles in the early '70s to freelance I've sat in nearly every chair. But lately I've found myself most comfortable playing second

trumpet. Why? Good question.

I believe it has something to do with my chops and my personality. I'm not a great lead player. And though I've played principal, I really don't have the chops to play first trumpet with the kind of sound and consistency that a great first trumpet should. Also, I seem to be more comfortable out of the limelight. Often I'll ask the contractor, "Who else is playing?" Then I'll tell him that I think the best section set up would have me second with the other person first. If they really want me to play first, and some leaders and contractors do, then I'll be happy to do so.

The important thing to remember when playing second though, is: *play second, not first.* You are not the top banana. The top banana sets the style, the dynamics, the phrasing, most everything, then you adjust. That's part of your job.

Be receptive to criticism. The first player has to criticize to make things right. Maybe you like the way things are sounding. But if number one has a different opinion, accept the criticism, gratefully and gracefully. That doesn't mean you have to be a robot and sit there with no mind of your own. A good first player should be sensitive to your ideas as well.

As far as balance is concerned, some first players like a louder second player, others like a softer one. To each his

own. When playing with a new first player I will start off by trying to get a good blend, not sticking out too much, not holding back too much. I'll try to match the volume of the first player.

When I first started playing second to Roy Poper, this year's principal for the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, he wanted me to play louder than I was used to. It took me a while to get the concept of what Roy was trying to do, but he was patient, and when I did get it, it really sounded good. I got to

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where I liked it better than the concept I had come in with.

On intonation: When playing second, I feel it is my job to seek out the pitch and lay it down for the first player. I listen all around me and generally try to find where the pitch level might be. It could be coming from the trombones or from the double basses or the timpani. I lock onto that and hopefully the first player will feel comfortable. If you're not sure, ask.

And as for phrasing, be like a shadow in the stylistic sense. Go with the first player. Be proud of your ability to sense instinctively what the first player might be doing with a phrase. The toughest thing about playing second, of course, is the whole ego thing. Everybody's got an ego, and to be a good performer it's got to be pretty well developed—in certain areas. I know I'm a good player, but that doesn't mean I'm the best.

There're lots of guys who play better than I do, but there are certain things

that I do as well as anybody. Now you can begin to see this conflict: I play well, but not as good as some, but certain things I can do as well as anybody. And you thought the first player had problems? So how do you deal with this?

*Attach your ego to the group!* Why do you want to play well? So the group will sound good. The audience will enjoy the performance, and we will have done justice to the composer's work. That's not just a second thing, any good group or performer should have that feeling. We are most happy when everybody plays well.

Don't get caught up in the second-is-not-as-good-as-the-first-so-I-don't-want-to-play-second syndrome. A lot of young players feel this way. I conduct a band at the California Institute of Technology, and I will often have some of the players who are not as strong move up and play first on the easier pieces. This gives all the players an appreciation for the other person's job.

To be a great second player is just as great a musical challenge as it is to be a great first player. It just has its own set of problems.

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Bill Bing is author of *The Bing Book: A Collection of 15 Routines in Double and Triple Tonguing Studies*. He received a Bachelor of Music Education from the University of Michigan, a Master of Music and Performance from USC. Aside from freelancing throughout the Los Angeles area, Bing plays second trumpet for the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra and is a member of the Los Angeles Music Center Opera Orchestra.

He plays Yamaha trumpets and flugelhorns with a Yamaha 17D4 mouthpiece (Malone backbore), and Bach trumpets with a Reeves S25 mouthpiece (3R Rim).