

## **“IN DEFENSE OF THE POLKA”**

Brass Tone Production During the Intermediate Years

By **CLIFFORD P. LILLYA**

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For junior high school music students, autumn is a time of looking forward! It is a season for anticipating future musical accomplishments, and for planning a practice routine and repertory. When considering repertory the student should consult his teacher. If he has the solo festival in mind, he will often imprudently select a solo that is too difficult. He may begin to practice months before the event in the mistaken idea that a sustained assault directly on the obstacles contained in the piece will result in a good performance and in over-all improvement.

The teacher can save the student discouragement by pointing out the fallacy in such procedure. A more workable alternative might be a series of solo projects, each a bit more difficult than the preceding one. Assignments should also include peripheral material promoting competence in basic performance skills. And uppermost in the teacher's mind should always be the establishing and fostering of that most fundamental of all instrumental skills, tone production.

For it is in grades seven through nine that attitudes and habits are often formed which will determine whether tone production will be a pleasure or a problem when the student is a senior in high school! Have you ever heard a college freshman say that he cannot play as well as he could when he was in junior high school? This remark, often made facetiously, is unfortunately sometimes quite true. High tones which the student played in solos during his eighth and ninth grade years, later mysteriously refused to sound. Lowered morale and diminished enthusiasm then further impaired his playing, and a vicious circle was established. Causes and corrections of a situation like this are seldom simple or immediate. The old saw about “an ounce of prevention” was never more apropos!

The teacher is in a most sensitive and responsible position for preventing such regrettable happenings. A poorly guided student will often willingly force upon his embouchure the most Spartan demands if motivation is strong, and if he believes that he is moving toward a fulfillment of his ambitions. The teacher must find a way of inciting students to engage in constructive tasks that lie within reach of their capabilities. He must prevent them from biting off more than they can profitably chew, but never down-grade his students.

It is not always easy to find brass solo pieces with desirable musical ingredients which will provide a beneficial outlet for adolescent zeal. In the past, many cornet and trumpet students grew to maturity almost entirely on little solo pieces called polkas. These compositions were a junior version of the virtuoso

pieces played by the professional cornet soloists of a generation ago. The successful student normally passed quite smoothly from one level to another. Whatever else may be said of this narrow continuous ladder of material, it was convenient and (in terms of its own goals) it was effective.

Within the past few years, however, the profession has seen (and rightly so) a strong surge of opinion in favor of better music for brass students. Few people would deny that most advanced cornet and trumpet students today play more and better literature than they did a few years ago. But I have some reservations about the impact of this movement upon the intermediate level. A tendency seems to have developed to try to by-pass the area formerly covered by the now unfashionable polka. It is not uncommon to find young students recently finished with an elementary method book, vainly trying to cope with a solo that would tax the endurance and technique of a college player. Teachers should not thus accelerate students, for while it is true that the polka provided little intellectual nourishment, it did give the immature embouchure what it needed. To wit:

1. Good balance between legato and staccato styles
2. Convenient distribution of long and short notes
3. Short musical sections, interspersed with frequent piano interludes.
4. Conservative range.

The solo piece situation for the average junior high school brass player presents something of a dilemma, but it is not without solution. The gradually vanishing polka is leaving a partial vacuum, but the interested teacher can find suitable solo music if he persists. Nor is it unrewarding to re-evaluate some of the older material which has lain dormant for some time. Some of these little pieces were ingeniously devised. Many of them can still be used effectively in building good tone production. But the teacher must recognize when the student has outgrown them! It is wasteful to have a gifted student working on music that is beneath his capacity.

Teaching goals are not easily achieved. Music teachers dealing with junior high school students need a rare combination of enthusiasm, understanding and restraint. There are times when a teacher's personal ambitions must defer to the needs of his pupils. No teacher would knowingly sacrifice a student's tone production to some present expediency, but sometimes it happens inadvertently. We like to point with pride to the accomplishments of the music education profession, but I wonder if in the area under discussion, we do not all have a responsibility and a stake in doing better. The intermediate level brass player deserves every possible chance of realizing whatever potential he may possess!