The Pedagogical Influence and Contributions of John Thomas "Tommy" Johnson (1935-2006)

Zachary Arthur Corpus

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THE PEDAGOGICAL INFLUENCE AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF JOHN THOMAS “TOMMY” JOHNSON (1935-2006)

by

Zachary Arthur Corpus

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Musical Arts

Major: Music

The University of Memphis
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To Mom and Dad, who have always supported me and instilled in me a passion to follow what makes me happy.
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ABSTRACT


Tubist John Thomas Johnson had a varied career, teaching middle band and orchestra, performing freelance across the southern California area, and teaching at several Los Angeles colleges and universities, including both the University of Southern California and University of California – Los Angeles. His students held many of the most prestigious orchestral positions in the United States, including the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, and the New York Philharmonic. Johnson is widely considered to be the most heard tubist ever, recording well over 2,000 films, soundtracks, commercial jingles, and television shows. Despite this notoriety, little scholarship has investigated the pedagogical tools, techniques, and influences that made him successful. This dissertation will explore several of the ways Johnson found success as a teacher and how he applied the concepts of his pedagogy to such a wide variety of students and needs.
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INTRODUCTION

John Thomas Johnson (January 7, 1935-October 16, 2006), referred to by his friends, family, and colleagues at “Tommy,” was one of the preeminent tuba performers and pedagogues of the mid-twentieth century. Johnson remains one of the most heard tubists in history, performing on more than two thousand film, commercial, and game soundtracks.¹ He recorded for film and popular composers such as John Williams, Hans Zimmer, James Horner, Bruce Broughton, Nino Rota, and “Weird Al” Yankovic. His students have held the principal tuba positions in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, the New York Philharmonic, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Detroit Symphony Orchestra, and the Adelaide (AU) Symphony Orchestra. They have taught at universities, conservatories, and secondary schools worldwide. His multi-faceted life of playing and teaching led him into work with the Kjos Music Company creating a beginning band method, the Lessons with the Artist Series.² This series is a lasting reminder of his beliefs concerning pedagogy and the relationship between solid fundamentals and a student’s ability to perform a piece in any style at any time.

This examination of Johnson’s teaching explores the techniques and philosophies of teaching that led to his extraordinary success. Few tubists have had the impact Johnson has, having been hailed as “the most heard tuba on the planet.”³ The pedagogical methods he employed and developed for use with the tuba through his freelance performance career, his work teaching middle school band at Sepulveda Junior High School (CA), and his applied


instruction at several universities, including the University of Southern California, University of California – Los Angeles, and California State University – Long Beach, have been used with many of the foremost performers and teachers of the current generation.\textsuperscript{4}

Unfortunately, despite his prolific output, Johnson was never as outspoken as his peers. Harvey Phillips, Professor of Tuba at Indiana University, was the champion of publicizing and mainstreaming the tuba. He commissioned hundreds of works, established TUBACHRISTMAS, and encouraged major institutions of higher education to add a full-time tuba position to their faculty roster. Johnson’s friend and southern California colleague Roger Bobo performed with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and appeared multiple times on the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson. Arnold Jacobs, Principal Tuba of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, taught hundreds of musicians and developed a reputation as one of the foremost pedagogues of the tuba family of instruments. Despite these musicians’ contributions to the field of tuba and euphonium and the recognizability of their names, more people (albeit unknowingly) have heard Tommy Johnson play. Musicians continue to hear him and benefit from Johnson’s teaching to this day, eighteen years after his death. Some of Johnson’s students believe this lack of public output is due largely to Johnson’s participation in the Los Angeles freelance recording industry.\textsuperscript{5} It has been known that being part of the studio recording culture requires constant attention and an inability to leave the geographical area for fear that the gigs will be passed to another player. As a result, Johnson never had the opportunity to travel the nation or globe and advocate for the tuba or his own career. However, by committing himself to his art and the spread of musical knowledge to those who came to learn from him, Johnson holds a seat at the table inhabited by these well-known

\textsuperscript{4} Tommy Johnson. Interview with Stephen Oberheu. Personal Interview. Los Angeles, December 16, 2004

\textsuperscript{5} Larry Zalkind (Professor of Trombone, Eastman School of Music), in zoom discussion with the author, January 20, 2024.
pedagogues and performers. In an interview for the Oral History Project of the International Tuba Euphonium Association, Dr. Jim Self equates Tommy Johnson to the west coast version of Harvey Phillips as one of the transitionary figures from the instrument’s soloistic beginnings with William Bell. Self says of Johnson and Phillips, “They were virtuosos and soloists, they could play melodies, beautifully. It was so rare before that. Bill Bell is about the only prominent person before that, and his career was not as a soloist like Harvey’s was, or Roger Bobo’s became. The technical thing has just changed enormously, and a lot of it is from good teaching.”

Tommy Johnson’s life and career helped to usher in, as Self says, a “golden age of tuba playing.” Despite a lesser-known role in the greater canon of tuba history compared to his contemporaries, Johnson’s achievements, and his students’ successes, underscore his effectiveness as a teacher and one of the foremost pedagogues and performers of the twentieth century. Understanding his beliefs, techniques, and approaches to teaching provides a historical connection to the early pioneers of low brass pedagogy and an effective application of early thinking on brass to the tuba family of instruments. In an appropriately cross-disciplinary fashion, Johnson applied thinking and teaching in non-tuba centric areas of musical achievement to his own instrument, that was in the relative infancy of its discovery and ultimate usage. He became a pioneer in his own right, as his teachers had been, for an instrument little understood by the greater music community.

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CHAPTER ONE

A HISTORY OF EXCELLENCE: PEDAGOGICAL INFLUENCES

Exposure to Music and Beginning with Robert Marstellar

Since his early childhood, Tommy Johnson was surrounded by music. His father was a lead vocalist for the Angeles Temple where the family consistently attended services and all Johnson’s siblings were involved in music heavily.\(^7\) Johnson began learning music in the Los Angeles area, performing first on piano and trumpet. Upon entering middle school, his band was no longer in need of trumpets, so Johnson was faced with the decision of picking another instrument. He chose tuba and quickly came to appreciate it as he had his prior endeavors.\(^8\)

At the time Johnson began tuba study, there were very few tuba players offering lessons nationally and none on the west coast. With the Los Angeles musical community heavily weighted towards recording and sound for television and movies, most tuba parts were handled by a string bass player who doubled on tuba.\(^9\) As a result, the orchestration was typically not very challenging so there was little demand of professional-level tuba instruction or performance. During his secondary school study, Johnson won a contest sponsored by his school’s Parent Teacher Association and was awarded a scholarship to take music lessons. He searched out and began study with the faculty of the Thornton School of Music at the University of Southern California. His tutor was the principal trombonist of the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Robert Marstellar (1918-1975), a former student of Emory Remington at the Eastman School of Music.

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\(^7\) Sue Jacobson (daughter of Tommy Johnson and executor of estate), in Zoom discussion with the author, February 9, 2024.


\(^9\) Michael W. Millar, “Los Angeles Studio Brass Players” (DMA diss., Claremont Graduate University, 1999), 111, ProQuest Theses and Dissertations Global (9932573).
Music in Rochester, New York. By his own admission, Johnson was unaware that Marstellar was not a tubist until the first lesson.\textsuperscript{10} Despite this difference in instrument, he was struck by Marstellar’s grasp of music and his ability to teach outside the medium of his own instrument.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{marstellar_with_trombone.jpg}
\caption{Robert Marstellar with his trombone}
\end{figure}

As Johnson says, “I think [Marstellar] was a very musical teacher. He taught music above everything else.” It seems to not be a coincidence then, as discussed later, that many of Johnson’s students echo the same praise of his teachings with them. Johnson continues that Marstellar was “very well read. He could express himself on any subject, even sports.”\textsuperscript{11} This ability to relate to students at the level and in a way that resonated individually with each of them was another area in which many of Johnson’s students found a profound correlation. Marstellar


himself knew very little about the tuba. In an interview completed in 1999, Johnson described his first lesson, “He told me…‘I don’t really know anything about tuba so I’m going to teach you like a trombone player.’ That didn’t really mean anything to me at that time but, as I look back on it, it was the greatest thing that ever happened because he showed me that the instrument had no boundaries, that everything was possible.”12

When the scholarship funds were exhausted and Johnson’s family could not afford the five-dollar fee per lesson to continue, an agreement was reached that Johnson would mow Marstellar’s lawn in exchange for his instruction.13 After completing a high school education, Johnson enrolled in school at the University of Southern California to continue his study with the trombonist. In addition to music, Johnson was also quite talented at athletics and walked on to the Trojan basketball team. The team was going to provide him an athletic scholarship until Johnson suffered a catastrophic knee injury, ending his basketball career and pushing him completely into music, where in his words, “I had a pretty good scholarship for music, so I didn’t really need the basketball. I just about had a free ride.” According to his son Michael, despite the move away from participating in athletics, Johnson was always competitive and had a drive to constantly improve, a character trait also useful in music and motivating himself and his students to practice towards a greater goal.14 The teachings of Robert Marstellar, in combination with Johnson’s musical talent and drive to practice, were an effective pedagogical model for young musicians. Johnson would use this knowledge throughout his career in education to create a

12 Michael W. Millar, “Los Angeles Studio Brass Players” (DMA diss., Claremont Graduate University, 1999), 107, ProQuest Theses and Dissertations Global (9932573).


14 Michael Johnson (son of Tommy Johnson), in Zoom discussion with the author, January 25, 2024.
modified approach to teaching tuba and music and yielded a great number of highly-successful students.

**Ear Training and Focus on Sound**

We can glean several ideas about Marstellar’s teaching from the materials he created and used and the accounts of Johnson’s students across a range of years. First, there was a heavy emphasis on singing and ear training. Multiple students of Johnson recall him singing constantly both in private applied lessons and in group masterclass settings. In an interview with Stephen Oberheu, a student of both Johnson and Roger Bobo and reporter for the tubanews.com website, Johnson recalls the same of Marstellar, noting that the teacher sang consistently in lessons. To Johnson, it made him an inspiring teacher.\(^{15}\) The idea of singing not only allowed for musical expression in a common way but focused the training of the ear and the security and clarity of solid intonation. In the preface to his published method book, Marstellar writes,

> In the exercises for attack and tone placement, it is advisable to make all adjustments of muscle and slide well before releasing the air. The two factors involved in locating a tone (the purely mechanical kinesthesia and the prior hearing of the pitch) should be practiced separately and then reunited so that they focus simultaneously on the proper note. This dual approach can give an extraordinary assurance in performance.\(^{16}\)

Marstellar notes in the same book his belief that exercises should never be performed to the extent “execution becomes insecure, blurred or unsteady.” There is an adherence to the idea of tonal color and clarity that is consistent and homogenous throughout the range of the instrument. In this instance, range of the instrument refers not only to the pitch-range of high to low, but also dynamic, loud to soft, and at all variations of articulation. These are all concepts that can apply to any instrument as a player works to master their craft. According to the text, performance of

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exercises such as scales and arpeggios is a necessity and is the correlation to vocal solfeggio used in ear training and singing exercises.

Marstellar’s pedagogy concerning tone heavily emphasizes the idea of consistency. In his instructions about daily routine, he encourages students to, “play about 100 notes on each semitone.” These semitones should be performed at various speeds, either forte or piano and flowing freely until reaching an allegro tempo. He also suggests taking time to scatter dynamics and articulations randomly at times throughout the study to achieve flexibility in any situation. In Figure 1.2 below, we see how Marstellar begins explaining daily routine, beginning at an easy,

PART I
ATTACK AND TONE PLACEMENT EXERCISES
When being used in a preliminary routine, the attacks should be gentle, and the dynamic level should be no more than mezzo-forte, until the embouchure is both responsive and resilient. From that point, the dynamic demands may be extreme.

Figure 1.2 An excerpt from page 6 of the Basic Routines for Trombone by Robert Marstellar
gentle, relaxed dynamic and allowing the embouchure to respond and build before adding additional demands of the player.  

When discussing tone, it is important also to recognize its relationship to intonation on any instrument, especially the low brass that provide harmonic structure for many orchestral ensembles. Johnson’s children who witnessed of his interactions with middle school band students all noted how much their father focused on intonation in his teaching. According to their accounts, this can be heard clearly on recordings of the Sepulveda Junior High School band and was always an area in which the band excelled during concert evaluations and Los Angeles area band contests. This focus on tone and training of young musicians’ ears for exact intonation

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**Figure 1.3** An intonation chart and description of the harmonics of a brass instrument, taken from page 5 of the *Basic Routines for Trombone* by Robert Marstellar.

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18 Michael Johnson (son of Tommy Johnson), in Zoom discussion with the author, January 25, 2024.
also correlates to the pedagogy passed down from Marstellar. In figure 1.3 below, we see an example of the lengths to which he went to ensure students understood the physical concepts of sound and how positions, fingerings, and the harmonic series were integrally tied to performance, not only on trombone, but every wind instrument.19

**Flexibility and Security Throughout the Instrument**

Once tone and sound were mastered, flexibility on one’s instrument was paramount to success as a student of Robert Marstellar. Johnson was adept in this area of playing as he never saw the tuba as having the limitations because of its size or range relative to his musical counterparts.20 A large portion of the latter half of the Marstellar trombone routine focuses on increasing intervals, lip slurs, and broken arpeggios. This is echoed in Johnson’s own suggested warmup routines passed to his students at the University of Southern California. Notice in Figure 1.4 below, etude number 29 detailing the performance of the “broken arpeggio” exercise from

![Excerpt from page 39 of Basic Routines for Trombone by Robert Marstellar](image)

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20 Michael W. Millar, “Los Angeles Studio Brass Players” (DMA diss., Claremont Graduate University, 1999), 107, ProQuest Theses and Dissertations Global (9932573).
Marstellar’s *Basic Routines for Trombone* and its relationship to Figure 1.5 and 1.6, excerpts from a music packet given to the USC tuba studio during classes with Tommy Johnson. Much of Marstellar’s pedagogy in this area, and as a result, that of Tommy Johnson, is derived from his own study with Emory Remington, the Professor of Trombone at the Eastman School of Music. Figure 1.7 details the exercise from the *Remington Warm-Up Studies* that was the basis for all these flexibility etudes. This connection to one of the original low brass pedagogues further explains how Johnson was able to achieve such success in his own teaching. Utilizing proven

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21 Beth Mitchell (student of Tommy Johnson), in zoom discussion with the author, January 22, 2024.
teaching techniques of a strong lineage of education and adapting those same ideas to tuba made him extremely effective in his craft.
Flexibility, particularly with respect to range, was clearly a focus of both Marstellar’s and Johnson’s pedagogy. Johnson adapted the idea to be appropriate for tuba as the instrument faces unique challenges separate from those of the trombone. While tuba has advantages in flexibility as a valved instrument, the range demanded of it is far greater than most other instruments.

Figure 1.6 Further adaption by Johnson of the Marstellar basic routines, exploring the lower tessitura of the tuba’s range over multiple octaves.
In Chapter 2, the repertoire implications are discussed more in depth as you notice in Figure 2.2 the three-octave range and speed (presto) with which the performer must achieve this great range. Johnson discussed many times that much of his success in the recording studios when sight-reading music was because he always had an extremely flexible lip. Though he had no argument against the idea of a warmup, he rarely had to go through the process. Few tubists can make this claim, but the focus on readiness and keeping oneself as flexible as possible before any reading or performing opportunity is tangible and achievable for any student. Pedagogically the principal is very sound that if one wishes to prepare for a professional audition or performance, one must understand that advanced abilities will be needed. The best preparation, then is to prepare for that required flexibility and technique before it is needed.
Focus on Music: “Can’t Do It? Say Yes and Figure Out How”

Marstellar also exposed his students to countless other musicians and non-tuba related musical outlets, using his positions in the orchestras of the Los Angeles area to provide professional connections to Johnson. Recording artists Vince DeRosa, Lloyd Ulyate, George Roberts, and Dick Nash were named as some of Johnson’s greatest brass inspirations who did not perform on tuba. Within two years of his arrival, Johnson was also introduced to an tubist who arrived in Los Angeles to also study with Robert Marstellar, Roger Bobo. Though different in their approach and outcomes, Bobo and Johnson developed a close friendship and inspired each other through their music. They would often practice together, performing duets from Oskar Blume’s *12 Melodious Duets for Trombone* (down one octave). The photograph in Figure 1.8 demonstrates the friendship they developed while studying tuba. It is also notable that Johnson spent a good deal of time in his professional career transcribing and arranging music for the tuba.

![Image of Roger Bobo and Tommy Johnson](image.png)

Figure 1.8 Roger Bobo (L) and Tommy Johnson (R) following a performance in southern California

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Due to the lack of literature written for the tuba during Johnson’s professional years, there was a need for music. He commonly borrowed from the repertoire for trombone and violin as people with close personal ties in his life performed on these instruments.23

The exploration of unfamiliar music and instruments was something Robert Marstellar would actively push his students towards. In his first year as a student of Marstellar at USC, Larry Zalkind, current Professor of Trombone at the Eastman School of Music, recalls being told to play euphonium in a school ensemble: an instrument he had not previously played. He complained to Marstellar about this requirement and was met with the reply, “Someday, you’ll thank me.” Marstellar had a well-known saying within his instrumental studio, “Can’t do something? Say yes and then figure out how to do it.” According to his students, this paid dividends. For Zalkind, in his first year as trombonist with the Utah Symphony, he was called upon to perform a difficult euphonium cadenza in Symphony No. 2 by Richard Yardumian. His performance on this one piece could have easily determined his continued tenure with the orchestra, as his trial contract was coming to an end. In the end, the performance on euphonium went well and his contract was renewed. He credits Marstellar with preparing him to adequately fill the role asked for in his position. Mastering euphonium also opened to him countless doors with pieces such as Don Quixote and Pictures at and Exhibition.24 During interviews with Johnson’s students, they recounted that he would often use the same saying, encouraging them to experiment with tuba variations and alternatives such as cimbasso, contrabass trombone, F tuba, CC tuba, and BB-flat tuba. Many remember the same success as Zalkind, finding music directors

23 Michael W. Millar, “Los Angeles Studio Brass Players” (DMA diss., Claremont Graduate University, 1999), 108, ProQuest Theses and Dissertations Global (9932573).

24 Larry Zalkind (USC student of Robert Marstellar), in Zoom discussion with the author, January 20, 2024.
and composers who were thankful that Tommy Johnson’s students were so flexible in their abilities and knowledge.

Marstellar’s role in breaking Johnson out of his comfortability came with Johnson’s entry into the Los Angeles freelance scene. When approached by Dave Raskin searching for a vastly different brass sound for the soundtrack to the 1959 film *Al Capone*, Marstellar suggested Johnson as the musician to fill the tubist’s role in the score. Entering the Los Angeles freelance scene was difficult as musician turnover was rare and those holding gigs were hesitant to leave the area or turn down work requests out of fear of relinquishing and coveted and important stream of personal income. Finding a position available on an instrument used infrequently by the industry’s composers catapulted Johnson to a level that tubists on the west coast had yet to achieve. This also served as a teaching moment as Johnson was not treated with respect on his first gigs.25 This shaped the direction of Johnson’s future teaching, providing him with a more varied assortment of musicians, styles, and sounds on which to base his own concept of performance. He modeled his playing and sound after the likes of trombonists George Roberts, Dick Nash, Lloyd Ulyate, Joe Howard, Eddie Kusby, and Kenny Shroyer. He also held horn player Vince De Rosa in especially high regard, along with Richard Perissi, Jack King, and Jimmy Henshaw. Recall that there were a select few tubists on the Los Angeles studio scene. Those who were often doubled as primarily bass players and were average at best. George Green at Columbia, Ray Seagal at Paramount, Sam Rice at Universal, and Clarence Carella at Fox, who was a viola doubler. This provided Johnson with the ability to define the characteristic sound and abilities of the recording tubist.

For Johnson, heeding his teacher’s rule of “say yes and figure out how to do it” led to a long and prolific career in the LA studios. It also may have been one of the reasons Johnson’s work rarely took him away from the west coast, as leaving the area meant losing gigs and once a gig was lost, it could prove difficult, if not impossible, to reacquire. Johnson was known to enjoy the freelance life because of the variety it provided. The career of an orchestral tubist never appealed to him because of its repetitive nature. The idea of practicing and performing the same group of excerpts concert cycle after concert cycle seemed “boring” to Johnson. It is interesting, that despite this aversion to orchestral playing, Johnson taught many of the tubists that occupied Principal chairs in twentieth century American orchestras.

In fact, it was the flexibility that Johnson applied in his pedagogical approaches to fundamentals and the quality music to which he exposed his students that led to a great deal of flexibility in their playing, giving them the necessary skills to stand out from the crowd and win most of the high-profile tuba positions open from 1950-2000. His contributions also vastly expanded the tuba literature and could be fashioned into further exploration by the composers he influenced. When his career began, very few, if any etudes, solos, or music of any kind existed that were intended for the tuba. As noted in a short biography published through Windsong Press, written by his student, Gene Pokorny:

Most don’t realize that Tommy Johnson inadvertently contributed to the fame of some fine tuba players like John Fletcher. Early on, especially in the 1970s, some studio composers were captivated by Tommy Johnson’s artistry and approach. So, instead of writing regulation, unchallenging tuba parts, John Williams and others

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26 John van Houten (USC student of Tommy Johnson), in Zoom discussion with the author, January 16, 2024.
28 Michael W. Millar, “Los Angeles Studio Brass Players” (DMA diss., Claremont Graduate University, 1999), 108, ProQuest Theses and Dissertations Global (9932573).
got into the “thin branches” and wrote some very, very challenging tuba parts with Tommy Johnson in mind.\textsuperscript{29}

In an interview with the Los Angeles Times in 2006 for Johnson’s obituary, John Williams had to say about Johnson’s solo in the blockbuster \textit{Jaws}, “What I had in mind were the lower instruments of the orchestra, those capable of plunging the sonic depths…that would represent the shark in music. The tuba was one of the instruments that could create that atmosphere. It’s a difficult tuba part, and players need to be on their toes to do it. Tommy played it with great facility and ease, from where I was standing on the podium, as he always did. He was an outstanding instrumentalist.”\textsuperscript{30} Tommy Johnson clearly taught just as he had been taught, utilizing care and differentiated instruction for every student that came through his door. He would bring the musicality and fast-paced style of the sound studio into his university masterclasses and create some of the most well-rounded musicians at the end of the twentieth century.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE CONCEPT OF “GET ON”:
A DIFFERING APPROACH TO THE CONCEPT OF SOUND

Johnson’s Influence and Visualization

Many of Johnson’s students vividly recall his concept of sound and his focus on the quality of sound produced in lessons. All of them remember him singing constantly in lessons, a reflection of his own experiences with Robert Marstellar.¹ In conversations with students who started applied study with other tubists, it’s apparent that Johnson had a very different concept of sound than some of his contemporaries. Several of Johnson’s students spoke of entire lessons spent talking about sound and tone production. John van Houten recalls Johnson’s suggestion to picture a strobe tuner window in one’s mind while playing to center of the sound. His advice was to “put your head in that window.” Even with Johnson’s southern California colleagues, such as Roger Bobo, van Houten recalls a difference. He described Bobo as having a very dense sound while Johnson’s was not. Johnson had an innate ability control every register of the horn with distinct clarity. In Johnson’s teaching, van Houten also recalls some of the practice techniques he was encouraged to follow. On various etudes, such as the Rochut, Grigoriev, Blazевич, and others, one would be called upon to play one or two octaves lower, as loud as possible. The focus was the “control the edge” and center the tone without cracking and while holding volume. According to the accounts of multiple students, this idea was pivotal in developing their approach to all registers of the horn and being able to control the sound, articulation, and tone no matter what the music asked.²

² John van Houten (USC student of Tommy Johnson), in Zoom discussion with the author, January 16, 2024.
This ability of extreme control, tonal color, and artistic expression is also evident in Johnson’s performance practice. He noted in multiple interviews that he rarely needed to warmup to play. In fact, numerous times, he had to play and perform extremely technical and difficult passages in a high tessitura without playing beforehand. The most notable instances were the recording session for the movie *Jaws* and the recording of a commercial jingle for the BankAmericard Credit Card. Both required extreme mastery of range, with the BankAmericard jingle moving quickly through distance of 3 octaves, almost the entire range of the instrument. Before performing the *Jaws* theme (Figure 2.1), Johnson’s substitute teacher at Sepulveda Junior High was late, causing him to miss the call time for the recording session and walk in after it had already begun. John Williams was waiting on the podium and began as soon as Johnson was seated and ready.

![Figure 2.1 Shark theme on tuba from the John Williams score to *Jaws*](image)

The BankAmericard theme is shown in Figure 2.2. Notice that the ranges of this piece differ greatly from the *Jaws* theme in Figure 2.1. The resulting timbral difference is striking with the low, heavy sections evoking a very full, orchestral sound and the high scalar sections demanding of the performer a virtuosic, soloistic style of playing. This excerpt was also performed in one take, with no rehearsal due to the high cost of paying studio musicians for their time. The inclusion of this excerpt in the USC masterclass packets emphasizes the idea in
Johnson’s pedagogy that the musician should be prepared to perform anything at any time in different styles with minimal practice time to prepare.

Figure 2.2 Excerpt from USC Tuba Masterclass packet, a piece performed by Tommy Johnson as a commercial jingle for Bank Americard
Johnson also modeled the behavior necessary to achieve the extreme abilities necessary for these performances in his own practice routines. His children vividly recall his home practice sessions and the voracity and repetition with which he approached his work. His son Michael also equates Johnson’s success to his competitive nature and the repetitive way in which he had to approach the game of basketball. It has been a major point of many professional athletes that the thousands of quality repetitions they had in practice ensured their likelihood of “making the play” in performance was highly increased. In Johnson’s case, his constant attention to fundamentals, especially in relation to flexibility and range, provided the necessary basis for performing in a career in which sight-reading ability and tonal readiness are paramount. The correlation to his pedagogical approach and students’ success in auditioned ensembles becomes apparent when considering the nature of such a career path. Though different in their outcomes, both orchestral auditions and recording sessions require the musician to be able to produce excellent output in no more than one take. In this way, it is clear to see how the concept of “Get On” was useful to so many classical tubists in their musical training.

**Approach to Beginning Tonal Production**

When viewing Johnson’s own materials, it is worthwhile to note his adherence to the basic principles of air, tone, and sound production. This focus on fundamentals is an idea that affected his teaching at all levels. Within the band method series he produced with Kjos Music Company, the first pages deal specifically with air, embouchure, and sound before a single note is produced. His first step in creating a sound is the use of effective air and breath control. As with most wind instruments, this is quite important, however with Johnson’s place as one of the

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3 Michael Johnson (son of Tommy Johnson), in Zoom discussion with the author, January 25, 2024

first pedagogues to teach tuba, it become even more so. There are subtle differences between every brass instrument and Johnson recognizes the increased use of air demanded by the larger horn and bore size of his instrument. He also caters to various visual learning styles by encouraging the use of a piece of paper to see the air moving consistently from one’s mouth into the space in front of them. In Figure 2.3, we see that the first item mentioned in his published method is air and breath control.

![Air and Breath Control](image)

Figure 2.3 The first set of instructions from *The Tommy Johnson Tuba Method*

Second, Johnson emphasizes breath/air control over a set period, building upon the technique of using a paper to visualize the air stream. In Figure 2.4, we see Johnson encouraging the student to focus on continuous air movement. As soon as a breath is taken, it is immediately expelled in a slow, relaxed fashion while counting and adhering to proper rhythm and time. It is also noticeable the connection of Johnson’s teachings to the educational methodology of scaffolding to build upon concepts and skills already learned by a student. From step one, Air and Breath Control, to step two, Breath Control Routine, there are minute changes that allow the student to connect what they are doing in subsequent steps to what has been done previously. This is indicative of his many years teaching junior high school band, working not with advanced
collegiate students, but with young players just beginning with the fundamentals of performance on their instruments.\textsuperscript{5}

Though this method is used in a beginning band method book, it has been copied and used many times in etudes and methods used in collegiate applied teaching, including \textit{The Brass Gym} series by Sam Pilafian and Patrick Sheridan. Note the similarities in the description pictured in Figure 2.5, taken from \textit{The Brass Gym}.\textsuperscript{6} The title has been altered, but the concept remains the same. Tensionless air, blown in rhythm, can be used to build musicianship and quality tuba tone.

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\textbf{WIND PATTERN}

To wind pattern an exercise or song is to blow air (without buzzing the lips) out of your body in the rhythm of the music. Begin just by blowing the correct rhythms without the resistance of buzzing. As your facility increases, add all the elements of the music to the sound of your wind pattern. (i.e. dynamics, articulations, crescendo/decrescendo, releases, etc.)

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\textsuperscript{5} Michael W. Millar, “Los Angeles Studio Brass Players” (DMA diss., Claremont Graduate University, 1999), 110, ProQuest Theses and Dissertations Global (9932573).

\textsuperscript{6} Sam Pilafian and Patrick Sheridan, \textit{The Brass Gym} (Mesa, AZ: Focus on Music Publications, 2008), 7.
Finally, after adding the tongue and describing articulation, Johnson adds the first two notes to the beginning routine. In Figure 2.6, the notes are added slowly with the first two open pitches, B-flat and F, which is typical of most modern beginning band method books. However, there are several items important in Johnson’s pedagogy that are inserted as instructions throughout the page pictured. Numerous times across the page, Johnson mentions to both listen for and “THINK pitch and tone.” This would align appropriately with the accounts of former students, and his own children, that Tommy Johnson’s band exhibited some of the best intonation and mastery of sound and tone of any school bands in Southern California. It also explains Johnson’s success with applied teaching and his overwhelming ability to place students in high-profile positions across the nation.

Figure 2.6 Excerpt from *The Tommy Johnson Tuba Method*, page 5

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7 Michael Johnson (son of Tommy Johnson), in Zoom discussion with the author, January 25, 2024
In Figure 2.7 also note the statement “Attack and Release – The Attack must be precise. The Release must be controlled.” Multiple students and colleagues noted Johnson’s ability to be heard no matter the situation or size of ensemble. He had an ability with his clarity and projection to cut through the sound of any group and be heard on the microphone. This is also true of many live performances as well. Following Johnson’s death, Gene Pokorny of the Chicago Symphony, a former student of Johnson, remembers a performance by the Los Angeles Philharmonic of Holst’s *The Planets* in which Tommy Johnson and Roger Bobo could be heard easily on a low E above the combined might of the rest of the orchestra. That knowledge of projection and tonal energy is what perhaps made Johnson so adept at being one of the most heard tubists across the planet.

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Figure 2.7 Excerpt from *The Tommy Johnson Tuba Method*, page 5

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8 John van Houten (USC student of Tommy Johnson), in Zoom discussion with the author, January 16, 2024.

Applied Teaching Applications of Sound Concept

Johnson carried these concepts of sound production, tonal clarity, and pitch into much of his applied teachings as well. Perhaps one of the most poignant descriptions of Johnson’s teaching relating to sound was given by Alan Baer, current Principal Tuba of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. Baer attended the University of Southern California after studying with several other well-known tuba pedagogues, most notably, Ronald Bishop, former tuba with the United States Army Field Band and Principal Tuba of the Cleveland Orchestra. Bishop is also renowned for his role, alongside Abe Torchinsky (Philadelphia Orchestra) and Arnold Jacobs (Chicago Symphony) in the creation of the landmark recording, *The Antiphonal Music of Gabrieli*. Baer describes Bishop’s teaching on sound to be a very “dark” concept. His sound was completely viable and an example of a quality tone, but completely different than the sound Johnson modeled and taught.

Originally, Baer arrived in Southern California in the Fall 1989 and stayed through Spring 1990 to study with Roger Bobo. However, was greeted with the fact that his prospective teacher was going to be leaving the country for an extended time and would be unable to work with him. As a result, Bobo had secured Baer a spot in the studio of Tommy Johnson at USC. Baer distinctly recalls that first lesson. After playing what he had prepared for the lesson, he waited patiently for Johnson’s critique and was met with “We gotta fix that sound.” The lesson proceeded with the trying of up to forty different mouthpieces to affect Baer’s performance. Johnson continued this direction for the next several lessons, telling Baer, his concept of sound needed to be “Get on.” At first, this idea was foreign in its nature, but as they continued to study, Baer realized Johnson’s purpose and idea was to “get on” or be heard on the microphone. After the completion of several lessons working on this concept, Johnson invited Terry Cravens,
Professor of Trombone at USC, into the lesson to listen to Baer play. The two listened and Cravens pointed at Baer and exclaimed, “Yes!” Much to Baer’s dismay, the sound he was playing with was not at all what he had in his ear. By his own description, it was “tight” and “oinky.” However, looking back, he now realizes that core and focus he needed to “get on” were the aspects of sound that he was missing in his playing.\(^\text{10}\)

This realization also led to some other thoughts about the concept that Johnson was teaching. First, the idea that one cannot truly understand one’s own sound until it is heard from a vantage point not behind the instrument. This explains Johnson’s adherence to a personal policy of self-recording passed on to all his students. Unless you know what you sound like out in the audience, you have no idea how you truly sound. This idea is explored in subsequent chapters. Second, the idea of “get on” revolutionized Baer’s ability to advance in orchestral auditions. He

\(^\text{10}\) Alan Baer (Principal Tuba, New York Philharmonic/student of Tommy Johnson), in phone discussion with the author, February 5, 2024.
equates the idea of getting on the microphone to the concept of getting sound to the back of the hall in an audition setting. Finally, Johnson was always honest, meaningful, and well-thought when he spoke. People tended to listen because they respected him as a musician and as a person. Baer recalls after playing in a particular masterclass when he had been going through a difficult period, Johnson offered the words, “You know, I don’t think I’ve ever heard you play so badly.” While seemingly harsh in nature, it was the realism and honesty of the words that pushed Baer to improve in his playing and eventually win one of the most coveted orchestral tuba positions with the New York Philharmonic. Many of Johnson’s students recall his caring honesty, especially in teaching, giving them honest appraisals of their playing, but never withdrawing his support or care for them as musicians and individuals.11

Focus on Music

Johnson’s concept of sound, as mentioned previously, relied heavily upon instruments outside the tuba/euphonium family. As a result, his tone and interpretation was extremely musical and could not be relegated to one particular idea. As a student studying with Marstellar and learning from his peers like Roger Bobo, much of the music Johnson performed and provided to his students, was not written for the tuba.12 There are several examples of this provided by another Johnson student, Beth Mitchell. She distinctly recalls Johnson attending weekly studio classes, often with musical examples he had transcribed during his hours in the recording studio waiting for his moment to play.13 These examples included music such as that in Figure 2.9, the first movement of Bach’s *Violin Concerto in A minor*, BWV 1041. He spent his

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11 Beth Mitchell (student of Tommy Johnson), in Zoom discussion with the author, January 22, 2024.

12 Michael W. Millar, “Los Angeles Studio Brass Players” (DMA diss., Claremont Graduate University, 1999), 108, ProQuest Theses and Dissertations Global (9932573).

13 Beth Mitchell (student of Tommy Johnson), in Zoom discussion with the author, January 22, 2024.
mornings transposing the music into keys comfortable for the studying tubist, for instance moving this example from Bach’s original key of A minor to G minor.

Figure 2.9 The first page of Johnson’s transcription of BWV 1041

In addition, when assigning etudes and duets for students to prepare for upcoming lessons, Johnson would often choose music not composed for the tuba. However, he would require them to be performed in a way to give useful technical and musical applications for the student tubist.\textsuperscript{14} Examples of this include the following Figures 2.10 and 2.11. The first is the

\textsuperscript{14} John van Houten (USC student of Tommy Johnson), in Zoom discussion with the author, January 16, 2024.
The second example, Figure 2.11, demonstrates Johnson’s self-made transcription of the same trombone duet. This book is also one often used by Johnson while studying with Robert Marstellar and performing with Roger Bobo. In his transcription for the USC tuba studio, Johnson has placed both Blume books into an easy-to-read score and transposed the key down a perfect fifth, from B-flat into E-flat.
The performance of these duets by student tubists presents the opportunity to experience several important facets of tuba playing. First, one must play with a good tone and play in tune. Often, student tubists are not forced outside the sound of their own playing. Even professionals
find themselves as the one tubist in an orchestra amongst a multitude of strings, woodwinds, and other members of the brass family. However, to be effective, an orchestral tubist must play in tune and in tone, at the least, with a section of trombones. Often, student tubists rarely play musically with other musicians outside the large ensemble context. Johnson’s formula for practice pointed to the belief that on a daily basis, the tuba player should be playing enjoyable, difficult music. This requires pulling from outside the tuba and euphonium community, just as Marstellar had done when training a generation of developing tubists.

Second, the tubist must understand musical and historical style. With the patent of the bass tuba in F in the mid eighteenth century, it is significantly behind its instrumental counterparts in terms of music composed before the romantic. As a result, Johnson understood that tubists would be understandably lacking in their interpretation of this music. He chose to face that educational dilemma head on, constantly writing, arranging, and transcribing good music from instruments that did exist in those periods. During an interview with Roger Bobo and Brian Bowman at the International Tuba Euphonium Conference in 2006, when asked “transcriptions or original music: how do you balance it,” both Bobo and Johnson as noted as saying, “Definitely play transcriptions. Play great music rather than mediocre music, and make lesser music sound great.”¹⁵ In Figures 2.12-2.15, we see the manifestation of this pedagogy. Using the same duet layout as the arrangements of Blume’s duets, Johnson has transcribed the Sonate in F for two bassoons or celli, Op. 40, No. 2 by Joseph Boismortier.¹⁶ The use of music from two instruments with more perceived dexterity than the tuba provides the student quality, challenging music to play with other members of the same studio.


¹⁶ Beth Mitchell (student of Tommy Johnson), in Zoom discussion with the author, January 22, 2024.
Figure 2.12 *Sonate in F for two bassoons or celli*, Op. 40, No. 2 by Joseph Boismortier (1689-1755), transcribed by Tommy Johnson (1)
Figure 2.13  *Sonate in F for two bassoons or celli*, Op. 40, No. 2 by Joseph Boismortier (1689-1755), transcribed by Tommy Johnson (2)
Figure 2.14  *Sonate in F for two bassoons or celli*, Op. 40, No. 2 by Joseph Boismortier (1689-1755), transcribed by Tommy Johnson (3)
Figure 2.15  *Sonate in F for two bassoons or celli*, Op. 40, No. 2 by Joseph Boismortier (1689-1755), transcribed by Tommy Johnson (4)
Transcriptions from the baroque also served a role in Johnson’s pedagogy to encourage musical creativity. Many modern compositions have very specific musical nuances demanded of the performer by the composer. This includes simple concepts such as dynamics, tempo changes, phrasing, and articulations. With music of the baroque, these interpretations were left to the discretion of the performer. Johnson was a believer in staying true to the intent of the composer. So music that lacked composer instruction was the perfect avenue for Johnson to explore technique, musicality, and interpretation. Of simple Rochut studies, Marstellar would ask him, “Can you make it more interesting?” Making music was always at the forefront of everything Tommy Johnson taught.

17 John van Houten (USC student of Tommy Johnson), in Zoom discussion with the author, January 16, 2024.

CHAPTER THREE

“KNOW WHAT YOU SOUND LIKE:” TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATION

Through the course of numerous former student interviews, Tommy Johnson’s use of technology both as a conceptual model and a teaching tool was a recurring theme. Many colleagues and students describe him as always having the latest technology or newest device. When it came to instrument technology, as one of the foremost artists on Mirafone tubas, students describe him constantly modeling and trying new instruments the company would send him. In an ironic twist, Johnson’s family was also a part of advertising instruments. Though his children did not play tuba, a marketing photo from an journal of the Tubists’ Universal Brotherhood Association, shows all his children holding “their” tubas (see Figure 3.1). The irony is especially apparent as Keith, Johnson’s oldest son, went on to a professional career as a cellist, graduating from the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University and performing for many years with the Melbourne (AU) Symphony Orchestra.

Colleagues and family members who would accompany Johnson to his sessions in the studios of Los Angeles also recall his knowledge of and talent with the technology being used to record the motion pictures of the time. He is remembered particularly for being very vocal about the mix used by recording engineers. It was not uncommon for Johnson to be found in the recording booth providing commentary about the brass and tuba sound and ways to improve the mix. On one occasion, colleague Bruce Broughton remembers Johnson bringing a Sony Walkman recording device into the studio, as was commonly his practice, to listen back later and make necessary adjustments based upon his presence in the mix. Broughton recalls,

One day he [Johnson] was playing one of his surreptitious recordings for some of the other brass players through some little speakers he had hooked up. As everyone was standing around listening, the composer walked over towards the

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1 Michael Johnson (son of Tommy Johnson), in Zoom discussion with the author, January 25, 2024.
group while complaining to the scoring mixer about the recording. “What I want…” the composer said, and then he heard Tommy’s playback. He looked towards the group and pointed to the little cassette recorder Tommy was holding. “What I want is a recording that sounds like that!”

This Tommy Johnson sound was known throughout the Los Angeles studio circles for its clarity and uniqueness when compared to what had previously been characteristic. Many described Johnson’s sound as “overtaking” the orchestra, yet also providing a harmonic basis that made playing easier for all performers involved. This is something at which Johnson worked: to make the work of all those around him easier.

Figure 3.1 Tommy Johnson’s children pictured with Mirafone tubas in the journal of the Tubists’ Universal Brotherhood Association

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Violinist Bruce Dukov performed with Johnson for many years as a colleague in the Los Angeles studios. Dukov described Johnson’s technological prowess when paying homage after his death,

Tommy became an expert in whatever he put his energies into, and computers were no exception. He was such an aficionado that every new gadget or gizmo that came out, Tommy had to own or upgrade to. Now, as we all have seen, that industry has changes and improvements almost every six months. You can imagine Tommy’s stockpile. One of our musician colleagues remarked that he could just hang around Tommy’s TRASH BIN and come away with some cutting edge stuff!3

![Tommy Johnson with a new piece of technology](image)

Figure 3.2 Tommy Johnson with a new piece of technology

Recording and Listening Technology

This one described incident was one of many and Johnson’s use of recording technology in the teaching studio was even more prevalent than in his recording sessions. He is noted as telling John van Houten, “If you’re not recording yourself, why are you even studying music?”

Beth Mitchell recalls numerous studio classes, especially before a major audition, when Johnson would enter class with a recorder, set it up, hit record, and have students begin playing. Alan Baer recalled every student receiving 20 minutes to record all the excerpts of a particular audition list. Johnson was noted as giving those performing two chances to record. This proved an excellent preparation for taking audition as students were prepared to play immediately and knew exactly what sound the committee would be hearing. Bear, in his preparation for several auditions, recalled using two digital audio tape (DAT) recorders (see figure 3.2) until they would

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4 John van Houten (USC student of Tommy Johnson), in Zoom discussion with the author, January 16, 2024.

5 Beth Mitchell (student of Tommy Johnson), in Zoom discussion with the author, January 22, 2024.
no longer work. At this point, he began using a minidisc recorder and it was used so much, it stopped working right before he won the New York audition to replace Warren Deck. Johnson recorded students so much in studio that is was this unedited, live recording that Baer sent to the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra when auditioning for their open tuba position.

For Johnson, using recording served another purpose, as well. He was well known for encouraging students to study with others and telling them to expand out from USC once their degree was complete. When asked at the International Tuba Euphonium Conference in 2006, “Who were your role models? When did you develop your own personality?” Johnson mentioned the obvious, Bob Marstellar, Vince de Rosa, and many great violinists, but concluded he came into his own sound after listening to others. Once Johnson began listening to a greater breadth of music and exploring all the sounds available through recording, he go away from, as he put is, the distinctive “Marstellar sound.”

The concept of individualization also derived heavily from Johnson’s use of recording in his teaching. All students would start with the same etude, “Grigoriev No. 1.” However, this moment of standardization was short lived. As students performed, Johnson approached the applied educational experience, not as a lecture one, but one framed by questions. Often, instead of telling a student what to do, he would let the student mold the direction. Just as in studio class, Johnson would set up the recording device and then begin the lesson by saying, “You’re going to tell me what you hear.” The consistent subsequent question was, “what’s the next step.”


7 Scott Sutherland (Professor Tuba, University of the Redlands), in Zoom discussion with the author, February 1, 2024.
This form of instruction created a stronger sense of self-awareness and independence in all of Johnson’s students. Though never enumerated as such, the line driving the students towards steering their own education and outcomes becomes clear. Across all those interviewed, a pattern emerged that students were pushed to develop their own high standards. This style of pedagogy can prove extremely effective, especially in today’s digital-focused world. With the use of greater and greater forms of technology and their seeming ability to take the place of the human in many endeavors, modern musicians cannot consistently rely on another person to listen and critique their playing. In the early middle school, high school, and undergraduate years, training a musician’s ears to be efficient and knowledge is much more sustainable in the long term.

Johnson was also on the forefront of interactive music technology, similar to the Smart Music system used in schools today. In of the winter 1997 issue of the Tubists Universal Brotherhood Association Journal, he wrote an article entitled “Accompaniment Technology for the Portable Tuba Studio. Because of his positions at most of the Universities in southern California and the necessity of being mobile, he recalls trying the Vivace Intelligent Accompanist ® system. He says,

I find accompaniment critical to my own playing, and I see my students benefitting from it as well. Not only have I been dedicating the last 20 minutes of their lessons to playing solo tuba repertoire with Vivace accompaniments, but I have them use the chromatic tuner and metronome to improve pitch and rhythm accuracy. The most valuable thing they get out of Vivace is the opportunity to hear themselves. The accompaniment forces them to listen and adjust their pitch. When they use the Intelligent Accompanist, they can experiment with tempo changes, phrasing and breathing while the accompaniment follows along.⁸

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This software, combined with adequate recording technology, provided motivated students the necessary skills and knowledge to grow substantially. When combined with constant exposure to Johnson’s sound and the professional connections to the hundreds of musicians in the Los Angeles area, student growth becomes increasingly likely.

**Music Notation Software**

To supplement the use of recording technology within his studio, Tommy Johnson used the latest music notation software extensively to provide learning experiences for his students. From various accounts, his bands and applied students often were some of the most able to perform in tune. Part of this is due to Johnson’s focus on tone as a characteristic tone is the fundamental building block of ensemble intonation. However, there is another way in which he provided his students with the tools necessary to develop awareness of intonation.

If one was to evaluate instrumental practice before the advent of the internet and the information age, one would find that the availability of tools such as recorded cello drones, digital tuners that fit in the pocket, and devices were much less useful than they are today. Learning to play in tune with a piano or an ensemble would have been limited to live performance. Even today, unless students take advantage of the technological tools at their disposal, they only perform live with a collaborative pianist three or four times within the academic year. When compared to all the other skills that are practiced on a daily basis, it is little wonder that playing in tune and understanding different tuning systems for pianos and large ensembles is an area in which most students are lacking. Tommy Johnson noticed this deficiency and was one of the first to begin addressing it with the technology available to him. Despite the limitations of early midi and playback devices, he quickly realized that simple piano accompaniments created on a computer and saved to a cassette tape or disk could provide
students consistent access to a digital collaborative artist. In many instances, during his daily recording sessions, Johnson would transcribe piano parts to commonly performed pieces. During studio classes, he would often ask them to perform with these piano parts to focus on their listening skills and ability to follow an electronic sound, also creating a pseudo-metronome to focus on pulse, rhythm, and ability to adjust to their own human error.

Not only did this apply to often-performed solo repertoire, but to fundamentals and etudes as well. As mentioned earlier, Marstellar’s teachings emphasized playing all music, no matter how simple, well and musically. One of the basics of the trombone etudes literature are the Vocalises of Marco Bordogni. Typically, trombonists read out of a transcription created by Joannes Rochut, in which the numbering differs slightly from the Bordogni etudes. Number 9 in the Rochut book (what Johnson would have performed from while studying with Robert Marstellar), Figure 3.4, corresponds to number 7 in the Bordogni vocalises (Figure 3.5). There are minor differences in these two books concerning tempo and interpretive marks, but the basic thematic material remains the same, transposed by one octave. Johnson has cut and adapted the return to the A theme, demonstrating the idea of never playing the same music the same way twice in a row. This was a major part of Martstellar’s teaching that Johnson carried forward. When speaking with Larry Zalkind about Johnson’s teaching in this way, I mentioned it before he did and it didn’t surprise him as he had heard Marstellar say the same many times.⁹

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⁹ Larry Zalkind (USC student of Robert Marstellar), in Zoom discussion with the author, January 20, 2024.
Figure 3.4 Etude No. 9 from *Melodious Etudes for Trombone* by Joannes Rochut
Simple etudes provide one of the primary functions in traditional applied instruction as short, musical examples connecting solo literature and the fundamental studies of instrumental performance (tone, articulation, flexibility, scales, etc.). However, one important aspect is missing, the inclusion of the other musicians, in this case the collaborative pianist. Using early
version of music notation software, Johnson would often create simple accompaniments for his students to use in their everyday practice and performances.\textsuperscript{10} Figures 3.5 and 3.6 are an example of this: Tommy Johnson’s transcription of “Bordogni No. 7.”

\textbf{Bordogni No. 7}

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Bordogni_No_7.png}
\caption{Transcription of Bordogni Etude No. 7, arranged for tuba and piano by Tommy Johnson (1)}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{10} Beth Mitchell (student of Tommy Johnson), in Zoom discussion with the author, January 22, 2024.
Figure 3.7 Transcription of Bordogni Etude No. 7, arranged for tuba and piano by Tommy Johnson (2)
If he had lived longer into the twenty-first century, I hold the opinion that Johnson would have thrived in the technology-heavy learning culture we have today. Student motivation and constructing patterns of learning around self-efficacy without the presence of external motivating factors is an area in which Tommy Johnson found a great deal of success. His honesty in evaluating public when it did occur was always reliable, yet he was never cruel or malicious in his statements. Because of this honesty, his students respecting his opinion and listen intently when it was given.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{11} Alan Baer (Principal Tuba, New York Philharmonic/student of Tommy Johnson), in phone discussion with the author, February 5, 2024.
CONCLUSION

GOOD, BETTER, BEST – NEVER LET IT REST UNTIL YOUR GOOD IS BETTER AND YOUR BETTER, BEST

Despite completing a career in relative obscurity to many of his contemporaries, Tommy Johnson stands as one of the most influential teachers in the tuba/euphonium family of instruments. What is interesting about his pedagogical legacy is the form in which it was left behind. He wrote no treatises, novels, or manuals for performing on the tuba. His lone, published educational work is a band method designed for beginning tuba students as part of a series with other great musicians. Yet, perhaps, this is the most appropriate way to remember true excellence in instrumental performance and the teaching of performers, educators, and future musicians. Johnson espoused a sense of simplicity and beauty to learning music: play good music often, train your ears to listen to others and yourself, don’t be bound by the preconceived notions of the instrument you play, never stop working and changing for what is better, and have a kind, caring nature in the way you work with other people.

Of all things said across the students interviewed for this dissertation, the most common thread was that Tommy was a good person and someone who, even when he was providing negative feedback, was genuine and caring in his demeanor and approach. When Johnson spoke, everyone listened as his thoughts were meaningful and well thought-through.1 He cared for the musician as a person, just as he had been cared for by Robert Marstellar years before when the Johnson family ran out of scholarship money to pay for lessons. Johnson often individualized instruction and care for each student based on their needs when arriving in southern California.

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1 Alan Baer (Prinicipal Tuba, New York Philharmonic/student of Tommy Johnson), in phone discussion with the author, February 5, 2024.
Some students recall working on tuba less than anticipated in lessons, still learning about music and receiving what they needed to succeed in their chosen career path.²

Johnson’s children remember a performer who enjoyed the “fun side” of music and never took his art so seriously that he lost view of its role in entertainment. They talked fondly of trips in an RV to play in the band at Dodgers Stadium as the baseball game went on. There were many memories of being called to Disneyland and any numbers of parks and venues across the Los Angeles area for any number of gigs, but Johnson remained fun-loving and sincere, even going so far as to bring a small, red hot dog cooker into the movie studios for the intermissions between takes.³

The effectiveness of Tommy Johnson’s teaching can be seen in the successes of his students and the continued legacy of his teaching through them. Johnson’s mother told her children quite often, “Good, better, best – never let it rest until your good is better and your better, best.” I think this saying adequately describes why Tommy Johnson was successful for such a long period of time with such a wide variety of students from all over the globe. There is no one way to teach every student and pedagogues who find themselves constantly staying in the same route will find stagnation in their output and in their professional lives. Many teachers also find themselves outpaced by their own students and unable to keep pace with the moving artistic world surrounding them. Tommy Johnson was able to keep up until the end. Students were witness to the vigor with which he continued to practice, especially after medical challenges made it difficult to do so and forced him to relearn how to play the tuba.

² Beth Mitchell (student of Tommy Johnson), in Zoom discussion with the author, January 22, 2024.
³ Susan Jacobsen (daughter of Tommy Johnson), in Zoom discussion with the author, February 9, 2024.
The best teachers are proponents of developing the total musician as well. This is an area where Arnold Jacobs and Tommy Johnson are quite in sync, that attention should be paid to the music the student is hearing and the concept in the mind of what the sound should be. These are pedagogical and musical influences that every tuba player and musician should work towards that would continue to have profound impact today and shape the musical future of our craft.
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