

Interview with Adam Rapa

(for the Italian Trumpet Forum)

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At what age did you start playing trumpet? How did you "meet" the music and why you choose the trumpet?

I started in 5th grade, at age 11, when my school offered us the opportunity to start participating in the band program. I couldn't decide between the trumpet or the tenor saxophone, so I flipped a coin. In the middle of the coin toss, I had a flash – like a momentary daydream – of myself as an adult playing the trumpet on stage for a huge crowd. Then I knew it was going to be the trumpet. And THEN, the coin landed in my hand: Heads -- trumpet!

Did you ever imagine back then that you'd become an international trumpet player?

Absolutely. It was my goal since age 12. In 6th grade I wrote a paper explaining that I was going to be the principal trumpet in the Boston Symphony Orchestra. Of course, I was influenced later on by other kinds of music, and changed my mind about the exact direction of my career, but I always knew I would be a trumpet player. As a teenager I was listening to folk music from all around the world: India, Africa, South America, Eastern and Western Europe, the Middle East, and I knew it would be my role to blend many of these influences together. Now that goal is beginning to come to life. One of my upcoming CD's is a fusion of Flamenco and Indian Classical music. The seeds for this project were planted a very long time ago. So yes, I knew I would be playing trumpet around the world, as a musical ambassador and advocate for greater cultural understanding through music.

Who were your teachers and how was your time as a student?

We're ALWAYS students....

That being said, I only had one private instructor. His name was Scott Aruda. I studied with him from age 13 to 15, maybe a little into age 16. I can't remember exactly. He did a great job of giving me a solid technical and harmonic foundation. Scott was Leon Merian's best student, and we worked out of Leon's book, "Trumpet Isometrics" and also a little out of the Gatti book.

With his guidance, I developed a solid range up to double A, and was playing lead trumpet at big bands in Berklee College. I'd say he did a fantastic job!

As for what kind of a student I was... I think I've always had the same relationship with the trumpet: sometimes very passionate about practicing, spending hours and hours per day – but also sometimes not interested in practicing at all, and going days without playing a note. It's been that way as long as I can remember, and I was probably that way with Scott as well.

How long do you study everyday? What is your daily routine? What exercises do you think are the most important?

As I started saying in the last question, I don't have a steady routine. Sometimes I don't even play every day. But when I do play, it's for at least an hour usually. Of course there are still times when I play for six hours or more. It really depends on my schedule, and whether I have other things competing for my time. In my practice time, I try to "kill as many birds with one stone" as much as possible -- meaning I create exercises that let me work on endurance, length of breath, high & low range, flexibility, dynamics, various articulations, and harmonic fluency, within a very short time, so that even if my practice session isn't very long, it will still be well-rounded. I have a pretty large bag of exercises that I fall back on, but most of the time I'm creating variations of them on the fly, based on how I feel that day (read: whatever sucks the most.)

Most importantly, I treat my practice time as extremely focused, meditative time, where absolutely every note is perfect, no matter how slow I must play. Whether at home, or on the road, I prepare a clean room for myself, put some peppermint oil under my nose and on my forehead to awaken my senses, light candles if it's night time, and generally create an atmosphere that is sacred, where massive changes can happen with my playing. Doing a few yoga postures before I play, or during my rest periods helps very much as well. I play in front of a mirror, with a metronome or music that gives me a solid metronomic groove, and I record myself a lot of the time as well. These things all help create a

sense of focus that helps me to make even a short practice time a very productive one.

What are the suggestions you'd give to someone who is going to start playing trumpet?

You give masterclass and lessons all over the world. What are the most common problems you found out in the students?

Beginners, long time students, and professionals all need to hear the same things most of the time. Beginners need them to start on a good path, and people who have been playing for a very long time often take these important points for granted:

- * Savor every single note you play. Don't take a single note for granted. Strive to make every note as resonant, in tune, well-articulated and effortless as possible.
- * If you are straining to play a note or phrase, then you are preventing the possibility of discovering the effortless way to play that note or phrase. I was guilty of this for many years, and I'm still reprogramming inefficient muscle memory from my past. Everything you play can -- and probably should (if there are ANY "shoulds"...) -- sound beautiful and feel easy. Always search for comfort and relaxation in every note. Every single note.
- * Instead of blowing right past something that didn't come out right and spending more time on things/phrases/songs/keys that you play well, spend the majority of your time really nit-picking things that are a challenge. Always aim for what sucks the most. Don't run away from it. There's only the familiar and the unfamiliar. I wish I'd embraced this point back when I was a teenager. I'd be a hell of a lot better now.
- * Regarding the last paragraph especially, practice everything slowly enough so that you can really nail it. Playing too fast is the leading cause of letting poop fall out your bell. If it's something that's supposed to be played at 180 bpm, and I can only play it perfectly at 60 bpm, that's where I stay. Then I'll work up the tempo incrementally – only once I own the coordination at that tempo. Always try to play perfectly,

no matter tempo you need to slow it down to. Teach your brain exactly the right coordination, and then cranking up the tempo will be a piece of cake.

- * Drink enough water that your always peeing clear. Otherwise you're dehydrated, and all of your muscles, including your brain and facial muscles/lip tissue are NOT functioning at their best.
- * Spend a lot of time listening to and trying to perfectly emulate sounds you hear that you love. I used to emulate the way lots of players played certain things, and still do, it's just that they're not trumpet players anymore. Basically, start with an ideal sound in your head, and aim to produce that ideal sound.
- * That falls in line with an even larger principle of always having specific goals you're working towards, and knocking them off the list one by one. They don't have to be very big goals either. That can get really overwhelming. Look for little victories everywhere. And CELEBRATE them! It'll help balance out all of the time spent obsessively nitpicking yourself. Take that huge piece of advice from an obsessive nitpicker... who had to wait many years to really find joy in practicing. You'll be a much happier person if you do!

What are your thoughts about the embouchure?

The embouchure is the essential foundation that your trumpet playing is built upon. If it's strong and stable, you can accomplish great things. Without a solid foundation, there will be many problems. This is a subject I could talk or write about for hours, but for now, I'll just give condensed explanations for some of the most important points.

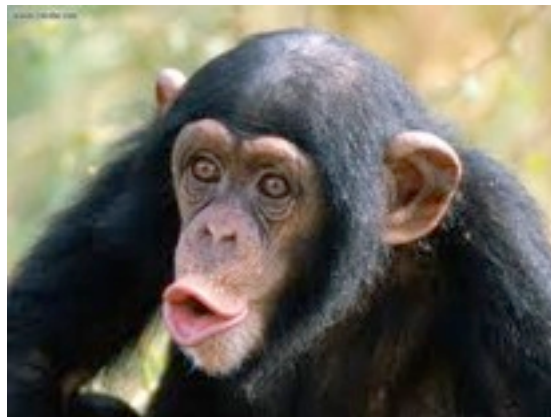
Most players I've seen have found a perfectly good position for placing the mouthpiece on the lips, so I'll skip past this subject. There is more to the embouchure than simply where you put the mouthpiece. It's also important (maybe even more important for most players) to discuss how your lip tissue and facial muscles connect with the mouthpiece. The best description I've ever heard about the embouchure came from Philip Farkas, who played horn in the Chicago Symphony. He basically described

it as a game of "tug of war" between two sets of muscles, the ones that smile and the ones that pucker. I don't think there's a word in Italian for "pucker", but you can see two examples here:

This is a closed pucker:



And this is an open pucker:



Finding the right balance between a smile and a pucker is important to create your best embouchure. In many cases, I see players who use too much smile and not enough pucker. With too much smile, your lips don't have enough thickness to create an optimal sound, and even a little inward pressure on the lips can make them tired very quickly. Usually,

when players begin to emphasize making the lips thicker underneath the rim of the mouthpiece, pushing the rim further away from their teeth, their sound and endurance improves. More blood can flow in and out of the lips, keeping them healthier, working stronger and longer. But it's important to use the right kind of pucker. A closed pucker, like we see with the boy above, will not improve your sound. That will make it difficult to move air through your lips into the mouthpiece. To have a full, beautifully resonant sound, it's very important to allow your air to move freely into the mouthpiece, without needing to fight its way through the lips. A tightly closed pucker is one way of impeding that flow. Also, some people use their pucker muscles in another inefficient way – by tightly pursing their lips. If there's no word in Italian for "pursed", here is an example:



Instead of allowing the lips to grow forward, this example shows what happens when you just clamp the lips together. That also makes it very difficult to move air through the lips and into the mouthpiece. If you have a tight pucker, or tightly pursed lips, the only way to move air through the lips is to force it through with an extreme amount of air pressure, by squeezing many muscles and compressing your whole upper body. This is definitely possible, but not the most efficient option. It requires much more energy to be spent, and it sacrifices your relaxation and comfort. Be aware that if you chose to play that way, and you squeeze the air through very tightened lips, the size of your aperture will be smaller than necessary, and your sound will also be smaller than necessary. I've found that a more open aperture allows more of the surface area of my lips to

be used for vibration, which creates a bigger, more resonant sound. This is especially important for opening up a beautiful and effortless sound in the upper register.

It's important to explain that what I'm describing are not embouchure changes – they're small adjustments that can help optimize your existing embouchure. You can continue to put the mouthpiece on your lips the same way and still make these adjustments. If you're curious about trying to open up your aperture and opening your sound, here is what I'd recommend trying:

Start the same way you always do – place the mouthpiece on your lips, begin to play... And then, look at the picture of that cute monkey above.... and while you're still playing, slowly allow your lips to blossom open, little by little, inside the mouthpiece. Your lips won't open as much as my monkey friend, but even just imagining that shape of the lips might inspire you to find more openness. Keep in mind that a change in the aperture will require a small adjustment of your air to find the right balance. If you consider your body to be a trumpet playing machine, then you must understand that even a small change in one part of the machine will effect the other parts. Everything is connected. If you try to change one thing, without allowing for small adjustments elsewhere, it may not bring the results you're expecting.

It is possible for people to misinterpret this information when reading it, so if you don't feel positive benefits after some time of experimentation, then put it away, I would be happy to help you in a lesson or masterclass. Personally, it's much easier for me to learn things when I can see it being done. I learn much better from tutorial videos than written manuals. If this is the case for you too, then it's better for us to work together in person or through Skype (if your English is good, or you have a translator).

Have you ever had problem with your embouchure?

Oh yes! I've had many problems! Which is why I understand how to fix so many problems. When I was in the show, "Blast!", I was hit very hard in my lips with basically a wooden 2 x 4. I was hit so hard that it split my lips open on the inside and outside and loosened my front teeth for several days. Also, I've had accidental run-ins with cast members where my horn was smashed into my lips hard enough to cut and/or severely bruise them - 4 times! There was a lot of bloodshed in my twenties. A lot of bloodshed. But I was very careful not to start playing too early after each injury. I took the time to recover slowly, and the lips always seemed to heal well. Then I took a long time after every injury to work only on the basics: developing the muscles my embouchure, regaining a clear articulation from ppp to fff, and flexible slurring up and down the harmonic series. This was very helpful. Other people in the show had similar injuries but took much longer to recover because they were impatient.

Also, I used to use too much inward pressure, which prevented my lips from having proper blood circulation. This is extremely common. The large majority of trumpet players have this habit. When I finally understood that this was a problem, I slowly began to grow muscle within the ring on my lips where there was no muscle. I had to play left-handed for a very long time, because that was the only way to change my habit of pressing the mouthpiece into my lips so hard. And I changed the balance between my lips and the mouthpiece so that my lips were growing forward to meet the mouthpiece, instead of the mouthpiece pushing inward. There was a lot of quivering in my sound for a while, like a silly vibrato, when I played long tones, but that was a good sign. It meant I was using the muscles that were very weak, and eventually they became strong and stable, and the quivering disappeared. I highly recommend trying this!

I've also experienced a very persistent double buzz in my sound several times in my career. Once was after one of those bad injuries, which really scared me. I thought my lips were ruined. But by practicing things slowly at pppp, I was able to discover the root of the problem. I needed to open my jaw just slightly, create a very tiny bit more space between my teeth

and my lips. The same problem happened again a few years later during a time when my jaw was too tight. This time it happened as a result of prolonged stress where I was unconsciously tightening my jaw and the muscles running up the sides of my head to my temples and my scalp. Once I figured that out, I worked on relaxing the muscles and consciously opening the space between my teeth just slightly while playing. And again, I fixed the sound by playing flexibilities, scales, half-step bending on long tones, all very VERY slowly at pppp and it corrected the problem.

I've also recently changed the angle of my horn to my face. As I recently began practicing a very difficult concerto, I realized that in order to have the necessary flexibility, and the ability to play the piece softly enough, I needed to angle the horn very slightly downward. I only moved the bell down by around 1.3 centimeters (half an inch), but it made a big difference. I suspect that this is because my top lip is thicker than my bottom lip, and in profile view, it's clearly visible that my top lip protrudes further out from my teeth than my bottom lip. Until I made this small adjustment, there was still a little more pressure on the top lip than the bottom, which I now see was not helping me.

I'm NOT recommending that everyone tip their horn down slightly. Nobody has the same shaped lips or teeth as me. The point is: Allowing both of the lips to have equal freedom from the imprisonment of inward pressure from the mouthpiece can allow the embouchure to function better. The teeth are very important in this equation, because if you play with an overbite, the horn will most likely need to point slightly downward. If you play with an underbite, the horn will need to point slightly upward. I have a natural overbite, and after a lot of experimenting as a kid, I found that it was best for me to eliminate it when I play so that my teeth are equal, creating one flat, vertical surface. This made it easier for me to have equal access to my upper and lower register. I have observed that most players with either a major overbite or underbite have an easier time playing in either the upper register or lower register – but not both equally.

That is another experiment you can make to your embouchure without changing the rim placement. It's possible that you might find a better configuration if you experiment with making very small adjustments.

For experimenting with this, I recommend playing a C major arpeggio or scale starting on middle C down to low G and then up as high as you can go – all in one breath – without taking the mouthpiece off your lips and resetting with a different placement. Find the angle that allows you the most evenness and freedom.

Also, play something wide very wide intervallic jumps, at least a fifth or wider. Something like page 128 of the Arban Book, for instance, works nicely by gradually increasing the interval. Make sure that you don't change the angle of the horn while you play. Experiment with only one angle at a time for the whole exercise, playing very slowly and precisely. If you don't nail an interval the first time, keep repeating it until you feel consistently accurate. Can you play the whole line without changing the angle of your horn? If so, then congratulations! If not, then try a slightly different angle with the horn, or consider eliminating your overbite or underbite and trying again.

Keep in mind that changing these things isn't always easy. Your mind can approach a lot of things with resistance, especially when you're paying your bills with trumpet playing. Use good judgement with how much you're willing to experiment, but if you're going to experiment, make it an honest attempt. Jump with your arms wide open!

Other problems I've experienced with my embouchure are mostly related to diet or climate: If I'm dehydrated, my endurance is shit. I get tired MUCH more quickly. If your urine isn't almost clear, you need more water. At the bar, drinking one water for every beer is a very helpful habit. If I've eaten way too much salt, and I'll retain too much water, then my lips become swollen. If you need an anti-inflammatory to fix the situation on a gig – fine – but try to be mindful of your diet so that you can monitor the patterns of cause and effect on your playing.

If it's cold and/or dry outside, that also changes the condition of the lips. It's helpful to find a lip balm that works well for your lips, which can easily be wiped away when it's time to play. And if you've just walked in from the cold, and your lips and face are cold, it's great to loosely buzz your lips under warm running water from the faucet. I also like to wet a facecloth with water as hot as I can tolerate, and hold it onto my face to

warm up the muscles. This will quickly give your muscles better blood circulation and save you time on your "warmup".

What are the most important things to consider when playing trumpet?

That's a very wide question..... On the technical side: Practice intelligently. Every moment you play is an experiment, where you're analyzing the cause and effect of everything you do, searching for greater efficiency and ease.

Writing notes about your practice during the breaks is very helpful. A practice log can help you to understand patterns that appear over larger periods of time.

On the spiritual side: Above all else, aspire to make a beautiful sound and let your heart sing through the horn. Here is a wonderful quote from one of my favorite poets, Rumi, which says it very well.

God picks up the reed-flute world and blows
Each note is a need coming through one of us
A passion
A longing pain
Remember the lips where the wind-breath originated
And let your note be clear
Don't try to end it
Be your note

– Rumi

(I'd recommend reading that again, and taking some time to really think about it before reading on)

What is the most powerful emotion you lived playing?

Most of my most powerful experiences while playing have been in times where I've been the most happy or the most sad. In both cases, the trumpet has been like a pressure release valve for the emotion. Such strong emotions allow you to bypass all fears and other internal dialogue from the ego and speak straight from the pain or joy from the heart. I believe this is the greatest thing about playing music; it can purge negative emotions, cultivate positive emotions, and create a huge catharsis within you, and also for the people who are lucky enough to hear you when it happens.

Two of the strongest memories that come to mind are:

- 1) During the four months right after my mom passed away, when I was on tour in Japan with "Blast II". I had a grueling schedule, and no time or private space to grieve. I felt like it was better not to open that floodgate until I was at home without any responsibilities. There was a surprising number of ballads in this show, which I gladly used to express the emotions that weren't being purged in any other way. I had many experiences during this period when I wasn't aware of what I was playing on a conscious level – and I really couldn't remember what I had just played immediately afterward. I was only aware of the thoughts and feelings that were flowing. At first I was concerned about not being conscious during these times, but other cast members told me that the playing was incredible and deeply touching. This isn't a state I've found myself in very often since then, but that's mostly because I'm usually in musical situations where I'm not able to relax and be 100% comfortable, which only happens when you play the same music with the same people regularly. But I remember the feeling, and I hope to return to it much more in future performances without having to experience such pain at the same time.
- 2) The other occasion that comes to mind is when I played National Anthem at a Dallas Cowboys football game. It was the last game ever at that stadium before they demolished it, and for that special occasion, they wanted to have a trumpet player perform the Anthem in memory of Tommy Loy, who had performed it on trumpet at every

game for several decades before passing away. I understood from the beginning that this occasion was about Tommy, not about me. So when I walked to the center of the stadium in front of 60,000 people, with millions more watching in TV, I played for Tommy. In fact, I invited him to play it through me, and the whole time I played, I was sending love to him and his family. As a result, there was no fear. My ego did not freak out, because I turned my ego off completely. There was only love. The ego is a very powerful and dangerous force, which can easily sabotage you in moments like that. All it would take is one fearful thought about what would happen if I didn't play well... what people would think of me... how it would hurt my career.... Just one negative thought from the ego and I could have crashed and burned. But because I managed to put my ego to sleep during an event with so much pressure, that stands out as a huge success for me.

Could you tell us something about your future projects?

The list of future projects is actually pretty large right now.... Soon I'll record an album of Classical music arranged for modern instrumentation including rock band. This will be similar to the material I performed in my feature concerts at ITG '08, however, the concept and the arrangements have been further developed. (And my parts are even more difficult!!) I've been practicing Classical music exclusively lately, and I'm looking forward to contributing a new perspective to all this wonderful music, none of which was written for trumpet. I promise you will never have heard anything like it!

In July, I'm recording a trio album with Zoltan Kiss, the freakish trombone player from Mnozil Brass, and a wonderful pianist from Vienna. We'll be recording the Tango music of Astor Piazzolla. It will be an incredible album, both virtuosic and accessible to everyone, even your grandmother.

Also this year I hope to finish two other recordings I started a while ago and have taken a break from: An exciting album with some of the world's greatest Flamenco musicians, which is uncharted territory for the trumpet, and an album of Indian Classical music which will be meditative

and hauntingly beautiful.

I have some very fun performances coming up this year, including a Mozart Festival in the US, where I'll be accompanied by full orchestra, and the Melbourne Brass Festival in Australia, where I'll be performing both Jazz and Classical music. 2011 is a very exciting year!!

Also, here's a plug for a project that's already been completed for some time: "One of Our Own", a compilation album that contains my most recent recordings.

A great friend of mine from the cast of "Blast!", Mike Welch, suffered a terrible bicycle accident, shattering two vertebrae and leaving him paralyzed below the chest. In order to raise the money for Mike's treatment, some past and present members of the cast of "Blast!" recorded tracks for this compilation CD.

The album is available for download on iTunes: [Visit iTunes](#)

I have two songs on the album and took part in producing it. One of my tracks, "Warrior Dance", is the most ambitious song I've ever created, and certainly the most meaningful. I highly recommend you download it, crank up your speakers to 11, and enjoy!!

PLEASE support our efforts to help our dear friend buy purchasing the album now, and please spread the word far and wide among your friends, family, co-workers, students.... everyone. It's a wonderful album and a wonderful cause.