

# Imagination

**Richard Steggall** asks the question, “Are you using yours?”

**I**magination is the ability of the mind to be creative; to form new ideas or concepts not present to the senses. It’s actively practised by young kids, inventors and daydreamers. Many musicians wouldn’t consider its use to be a key skill but auditory imagination is vital to all musicians, particularly brass players, and is woefully neglected and undervalued by many performers and teachers alike.



Composers are masters at conjuring music and telling stories. They can imagine sounds and melodies which take the listener on a journey. Great conductors (not an oxymoron, dear cynics) take time to understand the composer’s intentions until they can fully imagine a score in their heads. Jazz improvisers take a composer’s imagination and then add their own on top, making every performance fresh and spontaneous.

YouTube video - *Six quick fixes to make you a better horn player?* And then we have the Eureka moment, the final piece of the jigsaw, the missing link in your technique when you play with amazing freedom and confidence and are absolutely the world’s greatest horn player. For a while.

So why do we humble musicians need imagination? Well, without it are we not just machines mechanically reproducing the written music put in front of us? But we seem to turn away from using our imagination as we mature, looking for the technical solution, the constant search for more information. We search for fast answers: “Hey, have you seen this

We put so much stock into valuing new information that it blurs our previous knowledge. When a virtuoso horn player tells you their playing “secret”, they fail to tell you the thousands of other things they have worked on, and probably forgotten about, over so many hours and years. Oh, and they forget the small fact that they imagine the exact sound that they want to make at any given time. They may not realise that’s important or, because it’s become so habitual, they don’t even notice any more. Even if they did tell you, that’s not what you’ve paid to hear; you want to know what to **do**.



We also forget that, when worked on in isolation, any technical change can be countered elsewhere in the body. You can increase the amount of air coming from your lungs by strengthening the contraction of your abdominal muscles but if your tongue moves back to compensate, blocking your airways, the air supply to your lips will be no greater. Technical motivation such as “keep an open throat” or “breathing low” isn’t enough.

If you start trying to change your sound by making technical adjustments, you will associate your new-found playing with various physical processes. Initial success will cement your confidence that you’ve

## Horn I in B basso

Allegro non troppo (M. M. ♩ = 92)

(Solo) Solo 1 3 1 Tutti 4 Solo 16

mp

Opening of Brahms *Piano Concerto No. 2*

cracked it. However, it takes many days and repetitions to form a new habit. At some point, musical and performance concerns will divert your attention and your new habit will waver. Frustration that your technique is not “working” invites excess tension that will undo the progress you have made. An eventual loss of form is inevitable. Instead, be compassionate to your body and just allow it to follow, not lead.

Start your motivation in your imagination. Can you imagine this new sound you want to make? In every detail? The tone, the front of the note, the sustain, the ending? You might listen to other players for inspiration, but form your own version clearly in your mind. This could be called a sound picture, using your inner ear, auditory imagination or pre-hearing. It’s not just about pitch. All good brass players will hear pitch before they play but this is a fully detailed image of the sound that you have a desire to make. Think about the *story* you are telling. How does each note move to the next? Where’s the music flowing? Can you maintain the tension and direction of the phrase?

Orchestral works that start with a solo horn can be some of the most nerve-wracking of all. Consider the opening of Brahms’s *Piano Concerto No. 2*. Can you sing the theme in your head? Probably. Can you imagine the still, anticipatory silence followed by a fully present emergence of your tone? How does the second note appear? Can you look deeply into the exact moment the note changes? And how late dare you leave the magical appearance of the high F? Are you tempted to creep in early, or can you hold the silence right until the tone appears?

When you can truly imagine sound and story, think *situation*: the end of the overture, the conductor entering with the pianist, the gesture to start. Fill your mind space. Don’t try to mimic your playing action. Sit in an easy, neutral position and invite a new dimension of insight. Scan your body as you imagine -

you may find excess tensions and mannerisms as your story progresses. You may find how your fears and insecurities physically appear, as you try to grip and control your body. And you haven’t played a note yet.

**“Your imagination is everything. It is the preview of life’s coming attractions” – Albert Einstein**

The seed is sown when a teacher first mentions a technical solution to a pupil. We must utilise a child’s imagination when it is at its most fertile. This doesn’t mean ignoring the fundamentals, but relating everything to sound and story. Make time to encourage imagining in silence before playing. Why do students forget dynamics when sight-reading? (And articulation, key signatures and basic rhythms, come to think of it?) Because they haven’t got those elements in their imagination.

Each time something is taught technically, the mind processes it as an “add-on”. We try to build instruction onto instruction, and eventually they start contradicting themselves or we end up having to prioritise the most recent ones. I’ve witnessed many beginners completely thrown by changes in pitch and tone when solely attempting to change dynamics. I’ve also heard excellent players thrown by a conductor’s instruction to change a phrase. Have they processed the instruction as an add-on, or have they wordlessly adjusted the sound in their imagination?

Your imagination is a muscle that must be exercised. It’s a skill that must be practised. To shut off all distractions and completely focus on an imagined sound is a tool well earned. I was told a story of a student in Heinz Holliger’s Freiburg class who was struggling to control a challengingly long diminuendo to nothing in a Bozza showpiece. When asked for advice, Holliger’s answer was simple: “You have to want to.” **RS**