

## Cat Anderson's Lip

Cat Anderson was one of the great jazz trumpeters of the 20th-century; the most distinctive aspect of his style was his ability to play very, very high notes, almost like a violin—a mode of trumpet playing called "screech trumpet"; the technique of making tiny, tiny streams of air requires the player to have a very strong lip. This story, about how he got his lip, was told by Cat Anderson to a friend of mine, who took a trumpet lesson from him, when he and Duke Ellington played the bowling alley in our town.

It seems that when Anderson was a boy he didn't like practicing any more than any other normal kid likes to practice; he liked to play darts, and play ball, and read comic books, and run around with his friends after school—anything but practicing music. However, his mother, bless her heart, made him practice every day; so he, clever boy, devised this way of fooling his mother into thinking he was practicing seriously, when he really wasn't:

He would go into his room, put his trumpet together, toot a couple of notes on the horn, and then throw the trumpet on the bed and read a comic book for awhile. After a few minutes, he would pick up the trumpet again, toot out a few more notes, put it down again, and resume reading his comic book again. For the length of his entire practice time, he just drifted from one amusement in his room to another, interjecting each activity with a few notes of trumpet music. This way, unless his mother was paying more than casual attention, the constant stream of trumpet noises coming out of his room fooled her into thinking that he was practicing seriously, when he was really just making noise to keep her from coming in and hassling him.

Now, eventually Anderson got into the trumpet, thanks to his mother, and became one of the great players of his time. He thinks that part of the reason his lips got so strong was that he gradually subjected them to the stresses of trumpet playing, giving them lots of time to rest and recover between efforts. G-r-a-d-u-a-l-l-y teaching your muscles to perform certain skills is always the best approach. If you stress a muscle too much all once, it just gets weaker instead of getting stronger.

Robert Schumann crippled himself when he was a young man, by over-using a contraption he invented for strengthening his left hand 5th finger—Schumann was a maniac, overdid his practice, and ended up permanently ruining his 5th finger instead of strengthening it. His 5th finger just couldn't handle the strain and just kind of gave up and wilted. He called himself, "Nine-fingered me."

The same principle applies to plants: for instance, if you take a little seedling and plant it out in the back yard, it will look around at the huge, scary place, freak out, and die; however, if you put that same seedling in a little egg carton of dirt at first, then into a larger pot, then a larger pot, then put it out in the backyard, it will survive, because it got used to life, got strong, gradually.

I tell this story whenever I start someone off on violin vibrato. Learning how to control the push/pull muscles in your arm, getting them to pump back and forth for hours without getting tangled up in each other, is one of the most difficult violin skills; it is also one of the techniques that can go wrong most easily, particularly if your muscle training is sloppy. The strength it takes to vibrate evenly, and expressively, for long periods of time, is just like the strength it takes to play high notes on the trumpet—it is best acquired gradually.

When I start someone off on vibrato, I recommend that they do a sequence of simple exercises a few minutes at a time, interspersed throughout the practice session; for instance, practice:

- 1.) vibrato,
- 2.) long shift, 1-finger-scale, 1-string scale,
- 3.) vibrato,
- 4.) three-octave scale,
- 5.) vibrato,
- 6.) solo literature,
- 7.) vibrato,
- 8.) orchestra literature,
- 9.) vibrato, etc.

When the student begins to get the hang of the movement, we begin designating certain notes in the music as vibrato notes (usually the long

ones, the stressed ones, or the high ones). The student plays through the piece and whenever he/she gets to a long note (a cadence) he/she struggles to turn on the vibrato. By the time the student gets good at turning the vibrato on and off for single notes, he/she is usually ready to vibrate faster; thus a cycle is entered, whereupon the student alternately learns how to vibrate more notes, and vibrate faster, until most of the notes performed are connected to each other with a healthy, round, expressive vibrato.