

## **Maintaining Consistency on Tour**

by Phillip Kennedy Johnson

Here's a hard truth: Nobody cares if your chops don't feel good.

Nobody. Not your friends, your students, your peers, your conductor and certainly not your audience. They don't care if you're sick, hurt, dry, nervous or beat up from rehearsal. They want your best, as they should. When you're performing, you're expected to... well... perform.

I don't mean to suggest that not everyone has off days. We've all had them, and we all have more coming. But as performers, it's our responsibility to set ourselves up to succeed, and to keep those off days to a minimum.

Of the U.S. military's premier bands, The U.S. Army Field Band of Washington, DC sets itself apart with its rigorous touring schedule. No other military band tours as much as we do. Not counting local performances or individual and chamber group appearances, each performing component spends more than 100 days per year on the road, most of those as part of our Spring, Summer and Fall Tours. On these tours, the band plays at least nine full concerts every ten days, plus educational clinics and chamber recitals. Four programs are rotated and combined throughout the tour, allowing for a more customizable performance. With such a demanding and dynamic tour schedule, the Army Field Band places great value on consistency.

Practicing is obviously an important part of consistency, but when you're traveling every day and performing a different show every night, practicing alone doesn't get you there. With so many variables between performances, you have to control as many aspects of your day as possible. Here are some ways to do that:

### **Pre-tour Preparation**

This one is the most important. Before you worry about maintaining a certain level, you have to achieve that level. Once tour starts, it's officially too late to clean technique and perfect your parts. That has to be done at home, where things are relatively consistent.

In addition to just practicing your music and studying recordings, you should figure out what other factors help you play your best. How much playing should you do the day of a performance? What's the optimal time to do your warm-up? How long before the performance should you eat, and how heavy should you eat? What kind of exercise at what time of day will leave you energized (but not tired) for the performance? Nobody can give you these answers; they're all matters of personal preference. Knowing these things about yourself is vital for building a successful tour routine.

## **Building the Routine**

This step encompasses all the steps that follow. By the first performance of tour, you should be well-prepared and ready to do your best. But tour, by definition, takes you out of your environment, your schedule and your comfort zone. Building your routine is an attempt to recreate your ideal conditions for performance, even while conditions change continuously around you.

When on tour, your daily routine should revolve around the performance as much as is practical. If you like to play your first practice set before lunch, get to bed early the night before; if you prefer to practice late after evening performances, grab a nap in the afternoon and sleep late the following morning. Sometimes the schedule will demand harder choices, but you want to figure out your ideal playing day (peaking for the performance) and try to get each day as close to that as possible. Tour is not like home. There is no morning commute, no evening class, no tv schedule, no discernible weekend. On tour, all days are the same, each day revolves around the performance, and your tour routine does not have to resemble your home routine. Do what works.

## **Listening and Practicing**

These are two things you can't afford to neglect, at home or on tour. If concerts are demanding, "saving chops" by avoiding extra practice time can be tempting, but some maintenance is essential to staying strong throughout a tour. The key is to find the best times of day to do it.

My daily practice routine depends heavily on what kind of playing I'm doing on the concert, both that night and the following night. If that evening's concert is especially demanding, I won't play at all until afternoon, when I do a "practice set" that scarcely involves a trumpet: listening to recordings, lots of breathing exercises, the most basic mouthpiece practice and minimal time on the instrument. The purpose of this set is to set myself up for the most efficient playing possible that night. (If that night's concert is especially light, I'll play a more traditional warm-up and a set of excerpts and etudes.)

When I arrive at the venue a few hours later, I'll do a little more listening and breathing and go on to a traditional warm-up: mouthpiece, basic lip slurs, wider slurs, intervals, a few scales or melodies, ending in excerpts from the program, focusing entirely on efficiency and ease of playing. I try to finish 10-15 minutes before the concert begins.

Immediately following the performance, I play a 2-3 minute "cool-down," during which I play a few basic flow studies, bending tones, pedal tones, and ending with one final flow study, low, slow and soft. Your cool-down should almost be a warm-up in reverse, taking you back to the easiest, most relaxing playing you can do. This

washes out lactic acid and relieves stiffness/soreness the following day. This is extremely important.

Back at the hotel, I'll finish the day with a proper practice set. This usually means some general technical maintenance before focusing on the difficult aspects of the next day's performance, or the day following. Another cool-down concludes the playing day. (If there's an early performance the next day, I'll usually forego late practice sets.) In a hotel setting, if no conference room or meeting room is available, you'll have to practice in your hotel room. Invest in a good practice mute, one that offers little back pressure, keeps intonation consistent and, of course, effectively mutes the trumpet.

This routine is one I've had success with, but other players in the section have very different routines that work for them. I feel strongest for evening concerts when I practice the night before, but most prefer to play in the morning or afternoon preceding the concert. Find what works best for you and commit.

### **Proper Care and Feeding**

On tour, lifestyle factors can have a serious impact on your playing, more so than at home. First: rest often. Tour has a way of exhausting you while somehow hiding the fact. If you want to end the tour as strong as you started, sleep as long as you can at night and nap when you need it.

Diet is just as important. A poor diet can have a detrimental, if gradual, effect on your performance. Tour lunch stops tend to be 45 minutes or less, and often the only choices are fast food. Occasional indulgence isn't the end of the world, but make it a habit and you will notice a decline in performance. Keep healthy snacks with you all the time. A cooler can be handy, but even without one you can do pretty well. A small stash of fruit, nuts, granola/protein bars and water can help you stay healthy and keep you playing well... better than you will on fast food and vending machines.

Another aspect of diet is dietary supplements, which can help prevent illness. One recent tour took the Army Field Band from Florida to Michigan in just fifteen days. Changes in temperature and humidity were sudden and extreme. Taking multi-vitamins and Vitamin C and drinking water regularly may not feel like musical preparation, but the player who misses a gig due to illness will feel differently. An incredible number of tour illnesses happen as a result of poor diet, dehydration and stress.

Protecting the chops is important, especially when a great deal of travel is involved. Use your preferred brand of lip balm whenever you're feeling dry, chapped or wind-blown. Also, a medicated cream in case of cold sores or blisters is a worthwhile precaution. Above all, there's no substitute for staying hydrated. In some scenarios, decreased endurance or fuzzy attacks can be just as avoidable as a missed key signature.

By now, you've noticed that these tips are not exclusive to tour. Being prepared, knowing when and how hard to practice, eating well, staying rested and hydrated... these are common sense approaches that serve any musician well. But on a tour in which you travel every day and perform every night for weeks or months at a time, they aren't optional any more; they're the difference between failure and success. Put your body and mind in much the same circumstances day after day, and you'll come to produce the same sounds night after night.