

# Canada's Finest Are Here To Help Brass & Woodwinds 2012

By Andrew King

## Get The Most From



Willem Moolenbeek, [www.10singingsax.com](http://www.10singingsax.com)



Brownman, [www.browman.com](http://www.browman.com)



Campbell Ryga, [www.campbellryga.com](http://www.campbellryga.com)

Much like the player that wields it, a good brass or woodwind instrument, with the proper care and attention, can actually develop an enhanced sonic character over time. It's an interesting thing to ponder – that an inanimate object can seemingly "feel" the care with which it's treated and even "respond" to its owner via a musical dialogue. Thus, the relationship a player develops with his or her instrument is paramount to maximizing that tool's potential output.

From selecting the right instrument and keeping it at its peak performance level through to eliciting new and unique sounds from it, *Canadian Musician* has invited a number of celebrated players from coast-to-coast to share some tips on getting the most from your instrument.

### Making A New Friend

When it comes to choosing a new horn, you need to clearly identify what you're trying to achieve sonically, shares Brownman. Based

in Toronto, Brownman is widely considered a vanguard for the evolution of jazz in Canada. An in-demand session and touring trumpeter with seven ensembles of his own, he's won multiple international awards, runs his own label, and has recently completed brief stints performing with Paul Simon and Dave Matthews Band with his Bach horn.

He explains that traits in sound production are often a function of two timbres: darkness and brightness. Several factors attribute to these sounds, from weight to lacquer to bell flare to wall thickness and more, but once you determine the sound you want to produce, the search begins.

Paul Merkelo, Principal Trumpet with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra, a Yamaha endorser, and a respected educator, recently returned from a recital and coaching session in Lima, Peru after performing master classes in major cities between BC and Quebec at the end of 2011. When buying a new horn, Merkelo agrees that sound is the primary concern, though he also pays close attention

to an instrument's response, intonation, and flexibility.

Jupiter-endorsing saxophonist Willem Moolenbeek adds that the instrument should be mechanically sound, playing to its lowest note with all fingerings readily-accessible. "A beginner will be frustrated if it's not easy to get around on the keyboard," he says. Moolenbeek boasts a background in concert-style playing and performs in recital, with choirs, singers, and ensembles, and is a member of the music faculties at McMaster University in Hamilton, ON and the University of Waterloo.

The differences between student and pro horns are subtle but significant: complexity of tone, secure slotting of notes, and more refined intonation, shares trumpeter Chase Sanborn. Sanborn has enjoyed a varied career as a freelance player and released five CDs as a solo artist. Lately, his playing jobs are usually jazz gigs or guest appearances as he's more focused on educating, entering his second year as a full-time jazz faculty member with the

## Ready To Join An Endorsement Roster?

Chase Sanborn is a well-profiled Yamaha endorser, and wrote a chapter on the subject of endorsements in his book, *Music Business Facts*. "A desirable artist is one who may influence people to check out their instruments," Sanborn suggests. If you think you're at a stage where a manufacturer could greatly benefit from your reputation, consider approaching them—but know that, if you're indeed at that stage, you should

already be on their radar.

As for your responsibilities as an endorser, Sanborn borrows from JFK, saying, "Ask not what the company can do for you, but what you can do for the company. Take every opportunity to promote the company that promotes you." Find an opportunity to talk about the instrument you're playing and why you like it. Include the company in your promotional materials and actively search

out opportunities to involve the company in your professional activities.

Finally, unlike mainstream rockers, brass and woodwind players don't generally boast the same level of star power. "Students are the primary demographic targets for a band instrument company," adds Sanborn, "so an artist's ability to teach is as important as the ability to play."

# Join Your Instrument!



Chase Sanborn, [www.chasesanborn.com](http://www.chasesanborn.com)



Joan Watson, [www.joanwatson.com](http://www.joanwatson.com)



Paul Merkley, [www.paulmerkley.com](http://www.paulmerkley.com)

University of Toronto. He also has three books to his name. He notes that a good student horn can serve a young player for a good chunk of time, and though intermediate models exist, when ready, he suggests making the jump from a student horn to a pro horn—even one that's been used. "Aside from smooth mechanical action, two things I look for when trying a new horn are clarity of sound and evenness of scale," he adds.

French horn soloist Joan Watson, Principal Horn of the Canadian Opera Orchestra, a Yamaha clinician, and founding member of True North Brass with two solo albums to her name, offers a sound idea for choosing a new instrument: "I strongly suggest going to a good music store and having a professional player meet you there to try instruments. If you offer to pay them for their time, it will be well worth the investment. You will hear the instruments played and will be able to try them yourself."

Once you've chosen your instrument, the real work begins—the process of

bonding with it and exploring every inch of its capabilities. The best means of bonding? "Time on the horn," shares Brownman. "Time on the bandstand is the way to gauge what's working and what's not. A horn that sounds great in your basement might not stand up to the rigors of bandstand, particularly over hours of playing. How a horn plays when you're tired is as important as how it plays when you're fresh, so don't fall into the trap of making decisions within the first 20 minutes of playing a horn."

Campbell Ryga is a professional saxophone player with Yamaha who works predominantly in jazz and has accumulated a number of JUNO and Grammy nods and wins throughout his career. He's a busy clinician and adjudicator, currently on the faculty at Kwantlen Polytechnic University in Langley, BC. "I feel if you have to work hard to get familiar with a horn, maybe it's not the best horn for you," he advises. "Tone quality, resonance, intonation, and tactile feel are the areas most important to me, and if the instrument exhibits them readily, the

relationship won't be hard-fought."

At the foot of your relationship with a new instrument, Moolenbeek suggests rudimentary exercises like slow scales, arpeggios, and others are essential to achieving comfort. "Speed will come with time as the fingers get accustomed to the idiosyncrasies of the new horn," he offers. "There really is no perfect [instrument]; once you have a top-quality instrument, you just have to put in the hours to get comfortable with it."

Perhaps the most important thing to keep in mind when getting to know your tool, says Watson, is "that the horn is the amplifier. [You are] the instrument." You need to stay relaxed and ensure proper breathing. Watson came to appreciate this outlook after studying with a vocal coach, which has since brought her focus from the outside horn to her internal instrument. "I focus on breathing deeply and supporting the air column with my abdominal and back muscles so that each note is vibrantly alive."

## Maintaining The Relationship

As with any tool, keeping an instrument in peak condition requires ongoing attention and care. "Most important is the lubrication of all bearing points," begins Moolenbeek, speaking to any place on the instrument where metal moves against metal. "Get an oiler with a precision needle and use a drop – no more – of light machine oil anywhere a key or rod moves," as a seized key can require a serious repair. He also suggests fellow wind players keep pads that remain closed when the instrument is idle dry by blotting with a napkin to avoid deterioration.

For brass instruments, ensure they get regular baths. "Wash it out more than you do now," advises Sanborn (and he puts it that way for a reason). "Weekly baths would be great."

Watson and Brownman, speaking to their respective instruments, agree on the importance of keeping the mouthpiece and leadpipe (where the mouthpiece connects to the horn) clean to avoid any and all air obstruction, offering the most consistent sound and even responsiveness. "As much as new horn owners obsess about the shininess of their horns, what really matters is the inside," says Brownman. You can find a snake to clear the leadpipe, similar to what a plumber would use but smaller, at most music stores, adds Watson.

Finally, if you're performing regularly, all of our players recommend bringing your instrument to a technician for a checkup on an annual or semi-annual basis. The repairperson can give brass horns an acid bath and ensure all valves are properly aligned, that any dents that will effect playability are eliminated, and that the horn is running efficiently. Merkelo actually has his trumpet professionally cleaned twice annually. Better safe than sorry...

And finally, a tip from Moolenbeek: keep your case clean and dry at all times.

## More For The Party

Much like a chain is only as strong as its weakest link, your instrument is really only as capable as its weakest component. Your selection of accessories – mouthpieces, reeds, ligatures, mutes, even straps – should be treated with the diligence akin to that used selecting your instrument, perhaps more...

"Your mouthpiece is more important than the saxophone," asserts Moolenbeek. "Don't skimp. As long as the horn is mechanically sound, a top-quality mouthpiece will help an average horn sound good. A poor mouthpiece will make a great horn sound bad." From there, your reed and mouthpiece should be matched for maximum efficiency.

Beyond the quality of the component, the tonality comes down to personal choice, says Ryga. "I need an alto sax mouthpiece

London, ON's Music Aid specializes in brass and woodwind repairs and receives work from across the country for refinishing from music stores, schools, and professional players. Owner and repairman Rob Munroe shares some answers to common questions surrounding the repair process. [www.musicaid.com](http://www.musicaid.com).

**Student Services:** Key alignment and pad replacement are the most common services for school or student woodwinds, while de-denting, freeing seized slides, and ultrasonic cleaning are those required for brass instruments. Taking care to prevent these issues can save significant repair costs.

**Keeping Time:** The time needed for a job often depends on the time of year, but also the size of the job. The smaller the job, the sooner it can be completed, so allot a comfortable amount of time for significant repairs.

**Minimal Money:** Players are often surprised how little instrument repairs cost in relation to trades like plumbing or electrical. Consider consulting a repair person in lieu of replacing an instrument with an inexpensive, entry-level model.

**Pro Tips:** Basic maintenance for owners includes keeping brass instruments clean and lubricated, while woodwinds need regular swabbing, key adjustments, and pad replacements.

## First Aid For Your Instrument



that works just as well in quieter acoustic environments and lead alto stage band situations. I believe in trying to find a mouthpiece that can do it all; I'll find different colours and projection in reeds." Just ensure your mouthpiece makes it easy to play in tune.

For tips on mute use for brass players, check out Paul Baron's two-part Brass column, "Mute Use & Intonation Tendencies," in the Sep./Oct. and Nov./Dec. 2011 issues of *Canadian Musician*.

For Sanborn, choosing a new mouthpiece is "rarely an easy process." He elaborates: "Often, a mouthpiece that works better in one area does not have the same effect in another. If you find a mouthpiece that improves all aspects of your playing,

## Playing With Pedals

Brownman studied at the feet of Randy Brecker, one of the masters of effect pedal usage, for a decade. Brecker's influence on the trumpeter, both as an improvising player and innovator of pedal usage, was rather profound. What started with a single wah-wah (think Miles Davis in the '70s) quickly led to a fascination with the idea of sonic textural changes via signal processing. Brownman's rig now has 14 carefully-selected pedals, all of which can be heard on Brownman Electric Trio's release *Juggernaut*. Watch for an upcoming Brass column from Brownman discussing his rig and some dos and don'ts for horn players wanting to incorporate signal processing into their sound.