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LETTERS FROM NEW YORK: THE CARMINE CARUSO "METHOD"

[Sam Burtis](#)

In this edition of "Letters From New York" I'm going to cover a question I am often asked regarding the quintessential New York brass teacher Carmine Caruso and some of his teaching methods.

Here is a paraphrase of this commonly asked question.

"I have heard about an embouchure-strengthening method called the Caruso method, and seen a number of different method books bearing his name. Can someone give some insight into this method and whether it would work for trombone players?"

Here's what I have to say about the subject: ***There is no "Caruso" method.***


There was only Carmine Caruso, who passed away some years ago after teaching brass to hundreds and hundreds of players in New York City for over 50 years. Carmine was his "method". None of the books about his "method" are of much use, as far as I know. (I haven't seen them all, but I've seen enough of them to come to this opinion.) They're not bad, or necessarily harmful, they're just not what he taught.

They contain the what, but not the *how*.

Many of Carmine's more common exercises have entered the world of "general brass knowledge" through word of mouth. Most of the time when I encounter someone who thinks they know something about what Carmine, the "knowledge" they have has been so warped away from the original, so distorted, as to be either totally useless or even harmful. I can't tell you how many versions of Carmine's "six notes" I've heard from various students. Unless they had studied directly with Carmine or with one of his best students, not one of them were even close to being able to get the desired results from the exercise.

There are however, many students of Carmine's who teach their own "methods" which are based, to a greater or lesser degree, on Carmine's. The best of the bunch is undoubtedly Laurie Frink, a trumpet player who does a great deal of

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teaching in New York City. We've talked about what she's teaching, and it's very close to the way Carmine taught.

If you're really interested in Carmine Caruso's approach to brass playing, find a really good teacher who studied with him extensively, someone who acknowledges Carmine as a major influence. After that, the books can serve as reminders and research aids. It was Carmine's *approach* that did the real work, and it can hardly be put into words, let alone written down.

Carmine's "exercises" were not the real focus of his teaching. They were fluid, adaptable, and often made up or altered on the spot to address the particular needs of an individual student.

His way of tailoring an approach to each student was to give very specific, simple exercises, which, when played, would result in the individual reaction proper to the person playing the exercise. There was no talk of embouchure, mouthpiece placement, cheeks, tongues, diaphragms, corners, breathing or horn angle. There was only "play this exercise this way."

If the notes came out well, whatever you were doing was correct. If they didn't come out well, then you repeated the exercise until they did, or played other exercises that would lead you to the "right" way. His idea was to let the body discover the right way without being verbally instructed, without being told "this is 'right,' and all these other possibilities are 'wrong'."

When Carmine did speak about playing, it was often in metaphors, analogies and pictures. Here's one that I remember and use regularly.

❗❗ All the common teaching words: support, embouchure, corners, correct, good, tongue, diaphragm, open, dark, bright; these are merely metaphors, code words for what we really experience. ❗❗

One of the most common problems brass players have is trouble with attacks of various kinds. Many teachers try to treat this problem as a tonguing matter, but Carmine had a different approach. He said that almost anyone can pronounce the letter "t" correctly, that this fact pretty well eliminated the tongue from the equation. One of the real primary reasons for attack problems is an unbalanced embouchure - sometimes too tight, sometimes too loose.

He would ask the student to picture the swinging doors in an old western movie saloon. If the prop man were to adjust them so that they were pressing together too tightly, when the hero made his entrance, he'd have to force his way through them, ruining his entrance. Afterwards, they'd clack together as they swung, ruining the scene further.

If, on the other hand, they were adjusted so that they were too far apart, when the hero came through them they'd open too easily, he'd fall right on his face. Even if he didn't fall, the doors would swing in bad sequence and in an improper relation to one another, again ruining the scene with their random and uncoordinated movement.

If, however, the prop man adjusted them just right, the slightest touch from the hero would set them to swinging in perfect rhythm, he'd make his entrance, and the scene would continue into the more important stuff.

Carmine would then assign the student one of a large number of variations on his basic exercises that would require fairly quiet breath attacks. These exercises would help to bring the lips into the proper balance and relationship to one another, allowing the student to begin to be able to attack properly.

This is a process that does not lend itself to printed form. A lesson with Carmine was more like a dialogue than a lecture.

Carmine taught all his students to tap their foot and mentally subdivide in sixteenth notes while doing his exercises. He claimed that rather than try to figure out which muscles and nerves to control (and precisely how to control them) among the thousands necessary to perform any action on the horn, the application of good time and repetition would allow those muscles and nerves to align themselves in the most efficient manner necessary to provide the desired results.

He used the story of the centipede and the ant to illustrate the idea of paralysis through analysis.

Once there were an ant and a centipede living in the same house, and the centipede was continually chasing the ant around, meaning to eat it for dinner. (Centipedes are quite vicious, you know. And fast, too.)

Up and down, back and forth, the chase went on, under the sofa, across the living room, behind the bed, around the garbage pail, day after day after day after day. One day the ant found himself looking down on the centipede from the safety of a high table.

And the ant had an inspiration.

"Hey! Yo! Up here, ya dummy! Yeah, right up above you!"

The centipede looked up.

"I've been meaning to ask you a question, but with all this running around, I never got a chance."

"What?", said the centipede.

"You're real fast with all those legs and all, I know, but I often find myself wondering, as I hide beneath the rug or under the bread basket....WHICH LEG DO YOU MOVE FIRST?"

The centipede never moved again.

The genesis of this concept came while he was quite young.

In the mid 1920's, when Carmine was in high school, he was taken on a tour of the Ford plant in Detroit. All throughout the tour, at a regular interval, he kept hearing and feeling a gigantic slamming sound that shook the entire plant, and he wondered what was making that sound the entire time he was there. As the finale of the tour, the guide took them outside, where a very tall, multi-ton steam press operated by a man in a booth up at the top of the machine was pressing metal on various molds which would be placed underneath the press by workers...fenders, hoods, etc. The operator would release the press, and it would come crashing down, forming the part. The guide told them that each part

needed a different amount of pressure to come out right, and that the man controlling it was the only one in the world who could do it correctly, having operated that particular machine for many years. As a demonstration of the man's expertise and control, the guide put an inexpensive wristwatch on the base of the machine, and the operator dropped his press with such accuracy that he cracked the crystal without harming the rest of the watch at all.

Carmine, whose whole family was involved in music, realized at that moment that the man's perception of time, his ability to subdivide the second or two it took the press to fall, must be so accurate that he had total control over his machine (his instrument, if looked at in a different way). Furthermore, he understood that time...good time, really accurate, subdivided time...was the secret to developing this kind of technique and control over the body, and by extension, any objects one wanted to control with the body. There was no way the operator could have intellectually figured out how to control the very small body movements necessary to operate that machine with that amount of accuracy and finesse; his expertise had to be a function of time and repetition.

To illustrate his consistent refusal to label with words things pertaining to playing, here as an example, is a reconstructed (and slightly formalized) dialog from a lesson with Carmine. (C=Carmine, S=student):

S-"I think I need more support."

C-"Support? What IS support?"

S-"Well, EVERYBODY knows what 'support' is. Support is what you do with your diaphragm when you're playing."

C-"Diaphragm? Where IS your diaphragm? Can you see it? Feel it? Separate it from all the OTHER muscles down there?"

S-"The diaphragm is the muscle you use when you're breathing 'correctly'."

C-"Correctly? Do you mean you can breathe 'incorrectly'? If you were to breathe 'incorrectly', you'd asphyxiate."

And so on. This would continue around any number of subjects until the student tired of "thinking about playing." At this point Carmine would give him an exercise or metaphor that would indeed help him do whatever it is he wanted to do "correctly." Regarding breathing, for example, I remember him saying that if you wanted to know what "correct" breathing LOOKED like, observe an infant breathing in the crib. If you wanted to know what a full breath felt like, yawn. If you wanted to know what good support felt like, you had to observe your own body when certain exercises were going well.

I can't say enough about this reversal from common practice teaching. All the common teaching words: support, embouchure, corners, correct, good, tongue, diaphragm, open, dark, bright; these are merely metaphors, code words for what we really experience.

I'm not saying words are unimportant, but I am saying that the experience of playing in a certain way and the description, the map of that particular concept, are radically different. Further, any given "experience" is different for every human being, and can even be "different" for any one human being from one day (or minute) to the next.

Carmine's method was, in part, an attempt to go around this verbalization problem. He expressed a degree of unhappiness with his books because of this very contradiction. Due to their very nature as books, rather than being live teaching, they solidified and therefore limited the fluid nature of his approach. I must say here that he almost never spoke "theoretically," even about his teaching. What I'm saying is what I perceived through inference, translated through my own take on things.

Left to its own devices the body figures out how to perform some very complicated actions. It walks, it talks, it hits a baseball, rides a bicycle and drives a car; it does the thousands of things necessary for everyday life, and does most of them with very little thought or reflection. It's only when we find we either cannot do those actions through accident or injury, or when we wish to truly excel at some of them, that we need instruction.

If someone tried to teach you to run well or hit a baseball without regard for who you are and how you're built, laying down a certain set of rules for you to follow, it would be simply a matter of chance whether those rules, effective as they might have been for certain other people, would apply effectively to your own individual case.

However, if a teacher of hitting had the wisdom to observe your own strengths and weaknesses and give you exercises and concepts that, if followed correctly, would automatically put you in the proper position to hit a baseball, much of the difficulty of learning how to perform that action would have been ameliorated.

That is the essence of Carmine's teaching methods, and the exercises to follow in the next "Letters From New York" will be those of his (and some of my variations on them) that I have found to be generally effective for almost all players, regardless of their level of achievement or personal strengths and weaknesses.

Until then, as always, feel free to email me at sabutin@mindspring.com with any comments or questions you might have. Your continuing feedback helps me enormously as I try to put my teaching concepts into words.

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