LESS IS MORE
Method for trumpet
Basic techniques and daily exercises

Frank van der Poel
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Less is More.... These three simple words explain my vision on playing the trumpet. This particular methodology is suitable for advanced trumpet players, teachers and conservatory students.

This exercise book explains how to play the trumpet instead of fighting it. In this method I have tried to combine two worlds: the world of physiotherapy and the practical one of playing the trumpet. In the first two chapters I focus primarily on the technical and theoretical side of this objective. The reasons for developing this methodology are outlined in chapter 3. This exercise book is heavily based on my own experiences and decades of practical experience. Every now and then I'll complement this with stories and anecdotes from my professional career. Exercises start from chapter 4 onwards preceded by do’s and don’ts and useful tips.

Let's go back to the title of this book for a minute. How do you go about making playing the trumpet easier and what do you mean by “less is more”? Firstly by using less air and doing proportionally less with the embouchure, playing the trumpet becomes less difficult and more effective.

I would like to emphasize that this manual isn’t a course for long distance learning and that practical tuition by a professional should have your preference. This is a method for advanced trumpet players but teachers and students alike can also benefit from this book. The basic techniques that are discussed in this book can also be important for beginners to study.

For further information, like clips of the various exercises, or details about private lessons, clinics and workshops, please visit my website: www.frankvanderpoelmusic.nl
Chapter 1
BASIC TECHNIQUE WITHOUT TRUMPET

Introduction
Players of a wind instrument, trumpeters in particular, often underestimate the importance of applying the correct basic techniques. There are a number of reasons to delve deep into this subject matter and share my experiences through this publication. The first obvious reason is an injury I got about 25 years ago. This injury was the result of ignoring rest periods. By structurally straining my body, I began looking for alternatives – pitfalls – that resulted in moving further away from these basic techniques. Eventually, after a break of over a year, I started playing the trumpet again.

It was a traumatic experience. Everything that had once come so naturally was gone and I felt lost. I was at my wits’ end and consulted an institute that specialised in therapy for musicians with posture and breathing problems. For the first time in my life I was confronted with the fundamental importance of having correct posture and breathing from my lower abdomen. These issues were never really dealt with during my time at music school and conservatory. I’ll elaborate on this later in the book.

Secondly, years of teaching have taught me that explaining basic techniques and limiting yourself to catchwords like abdominal breathing, air, compact and core is not sufficient. A structural and overall focus on basic techniques is essential to eventually develop them into a natural reflex. Over the years I have discovered that playing the trumpet is a matter of prioritising. I’m totally convinced that basic techniques determine 80% of the outcome of trumpet play, while the embouchure (10%), the mouthpiece (5%), the course material (4%) and the instrument (1%) account for the remaining 20%. Usually it’s the other way round and the focus is on the embouchure, the mouthpiece and the instrument. The foundation is being overlooked – quite possible unconsciously. This often happens because teachers don’t really know the ins and outs of how it all really works.

Finally, my motivation stems from best practices I picked up from vocal teachers and speech therapists. Vocal teachers often spend the first half of a lesson on abdominal breathing exercises; a natural focus for them. These are basic techniques for posture and abdominal breathing, but also for sound and capacity. These exercises form up to 60-70% of a singing lesson. Abdominal breathing should be seen as something that comes naturally.

Once you realise that playing the trumpet will be easier if you use the right techniques, you’re on the right track. The only objective should be:
• make playing the trumpet easier.
• Focus on the technique and not the embouchure.

In chapter 1 I limit myself to explanations and exercises without a trumpet. Followed by exercises with the trumpet in chapter 2. The thought process behind this methodology can be found in chapter 3. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 cover the daily exercises. It’s very important to follow this sequence by practicing the breathing technique.
Standing position

You can practice and check the right technique both standing as well as sitting. However, the best results can be achieved by standing up. Just spread your legs slightly, and make sure to stand up straight with your crown held high. Try to relax your body completely by pulling your shoulders up high and dropping them. Repeat this a few times and feel how relaxed you are. If you move your bodyweight slowly and carefully to the heels of your feet, you are effectively standing in a passive posture: your body is not prepared to get active. On the other hand, if you move your bodyweight to the balls of your feet you are creating an active posture and your body is ready to jump into action.

Try shifting your bodyweight forward and backwards a few times, but don’t overdo it. You should be able to feel and find the tension in the lower parts of your body.

During this exercise you’ll experience a horizontal tension in your lower abdomen, between your belly button and your pubic bone, at the height of your belt. It’s an inward sensation, and it feels like your abdominal wall is being pulled inside (the use of the stomach muscles creates a vertical tension). The horizontal tension is caused by the pyramidalis, a muscle in the centre of the lower abdomen that is shaped like a triangle (see example 1 and 2).

One advantage of the active posture is that all tension in your body will be transported to your pelvis and even lower, while your upper body is totally relaxed.

The pyramidalis is an abdominal muscle that – when activated - makes the membrane around the diaphragm more flexible. Inhaling, the membrane around the diaphragm drops down and the lungs fill up and drop, while the lower abdomen expands. This is what’s called abdominal breathing.

With a passive position, the membrane around the diaphragm remains hard and doesn’t get the chance to drop down. During this process, lungs will fill up in an upward direction, the so-called chest breathing.

A correct posture – standing straight and with the bodyweight slightly forward – is crucial for the following exercises as well as for playing the trumpet in general.

Sitting position

While seated, ensure your legs are slightly parted, keep your head up, lean as far back as possible with your back right up against the chair; make sure your back is straight and your pelvis is tilted forward. To get the right feeling, try to tilt your pelvis backwards, so your back arches. If you tilt your pelvis forward again your back should be straight and should not be touching the back of the chair, assuming you’ve done it correctly.

Breath support — breathing in

Breathing in is the foundation for breath support. A complete inhaling procedure consists of three phases:

1. The lower abdomen (pyramidalis)
2. The sides
3. The chest
Standing position
Resume the position, as described in chapter 1. Move your body weight slightly forward and focus on the pyramidalis. Your upper body will be totally relaxed, with an active posture. While holding the trumpet you may experience a feeling of tension in your upper body. It is important to hold the trumpet in a relaxed manner. Your left hand is only holding the trumpet or even better – the trumpet is resting in your hand. The less tension you have in your left hand, the better.
Your right hand should be kept free for playing the valves. Keep your thumb under the lead pipe to keep the right balance. Try not to use the finger hook. If you do place your little finger behind the finger hook, you’re inclined to:

1. Hold the trumpet with both hands;
2. Pull the trumpet towards you;
3. Limit your movements.

Your ring finger is the slowest finger, because it’s connected to the same metacarpal as your little finger. If you cancel out your little finger by placing it behind the finger hook, your ring finger becomes even slower.
Many publications state that the trumpet needs to be at an angle of 90° to the mouth and also at an angle of 90° in relation to your hands. This last statement is correct, but to use the first one as a rule of thumb is totally ridiculous.

Sitting position
While seated, ensure your legs are slightly parted, keep your head up, lean as far back as possible with your back right up against the chair; make sure your back is straight and your pelvis is tilted forward. To get the right feeling, try to tilt your pelvis backwards, so your back arches. If you tilt your pelvis forward again your back should be straight and should not be touching the back of the chair, assuming you’ve done it correctly.

Breath support
To conclude, here are a few exercises to practice inhaling and exhaling with the trumpet. The principle of these exercises is the same as those in chapter 1. The following exercises are more practical though.

Exercise 5
• Check your posture and concentrate on the pyramidalis.
• Breathe out the remaining air, without inhaling first.
• Take a deep breath, from your lower abdomen, and play a C₂ for 10 counts in pianissimo*. Make sure to use all the air you inhaled and to take another deep breath.
• Repeat this sequence with 15, 20 and 30 counts of exhaling.

* It may seem impossible to consume all the air you inhaled with a note of 10 counts in pianissimo. However, by starting unreservedly without excessive compression and by turning all the inhaled air into sound and strength – not in volume! – you’ll notice that it’s possible to improve sound and strength considerably.
The dynamic signs with the following exercises are relative. The most important thing is the contrast between soft and powerful, which should be generated by the pyramidalis, and certainly not by using your lips or neck muscles! You might also want to try breathing in, without releasing the remaining air in your lungs first. While inhaling, pay attention to the tension in your lower abdomen and the use of your lower abdomen and flanks (no chest!). If this is still a bit too hard, just follow the old way, by expelling the remaining air first. Try the new method at a later stage again. Eventually this new way of breathing will come naturally, because exhaling the remaining air first isn’t practical.

Exercise 6
- Check your posture and concentrate on the pyramidalis.
- Take a deep breath, from your lower abdomen, and play a C2 for 5 counts in pp and finish with two strong quarter notes (see example 7). Play the quarter notes with a soft tongue (da instead of ta).
- Make sure to use all the air you inhaled and to take another deep breath.
- Do the exercise in a steady tempo of $\frac{4}{4} = 60$. Also make sure that you breathe in at the end of the line at the same tempo, and continue immediately with the following line.
- If possible carry on with this sequence with a starting note of 10 and 15 counts.

The reflex you develop in your lower abdomen with the quarter notes is a strong inward pulse of the stomach. If you push your stomach outwards with the quarter notes, you’re not creating any breath support. The possible reason for this is the flexing of your stomach muscles. The stimulation in lower stomach to turn inwards will be caused by the dynamic contrast of going from pp to ff. The bigger the contrast, the bigger the stimulation. By making the quarter notes broader and maintaining the right tempo, it’ll be easier for your breath support. The airflow is much smoother and isn’t obstructed by spaces between the notes.
In this chapter the exercises start with legato. This is the most obvious articulation to develop the breath support. You’ll be able to exhale without any problems because the airflow is not obstructed. It’s a common misconception that breath support is only important for the high register. Breath support has to be felt as a constant pressure on the airflow and has to be present all times! If low notes are not stable, it means there’s a lack of breath support. 

Breath support is more than obvious!

Enough time spent on theory, let’s get our hands dirty and start playing.

Exercise 1 – octave and fifth is an exercise that is perfectly suited for warming-up. The purpose of warming-up is to loosen the embouchure and breathing technique in an easy way. This is an essential part of the daily practise.

The objective of the exercise is to play a descending line with little air. You must try to keep the starting-embouchure position in the descending line. I call this technique compact play. You start in a certain octave and eventually you drop four octaves. You can start blowing out the remaining air, if you’d like (See chapter 1, page 11 section 4). With this exercise it’s important that you don’t breathe in too much air, as you’ll only consume a little bit. If you inhale too much air this will cause uneasiness after a few beats, because you can’t get rid of the air that you inhaled and it will start to build up. Try and play the first note of every piece with your lower abdomen instead of the embouchure. Pay attention to the fact that breath support has to remain active through the last note! Keep the legato tight and make sure that you don’t make a glissando in between the notes (See example 17).

Later in this exercise, when the descending line is three octaves, we’ll cover the pedal notes (see example 18). This is a register that’s not natural to a trumpet, but it’s good to practice it for the development of the embouchure. It’s also not a bad idea to combine extremely high notes with extremely low ones. The C in small octave (see next page for an explanation) is usually the first harmonic, but it’s almost impossible to play this harmonic, because of the cylindrical design of a trumpet. You will get the best results playing them with 1, 2 and 3 (7th position).

It will take some time to be able to play these pedal notes. Don’t forget that you’re playing notes with a lot of resis-
Exercise 1 octave and fifth

Continue and go higher if possible!
Exercise 7 continued

4 octaves

Continue/higher if possible!
Chapter 6
SPECIALS

After seventeen exercises in legato and twelve in staccato, it’s now time to focus on some exercises which involve special skills or extreme versions from chapter four and five. This book has a well-balanced order and it doesn’t make much sense to start in chapter 5 or this chapter for example. I would strongly advise against it! With special skills I mean techniques that go beyond the basic techniques. To be able to practise the special skills you do need to have mastered the basic techniques very well. Here are some of the examples that will be covered in this chapter: bends, trills and shakes. The extreme character of the following exercises will be mainly defined by the fact that these will be executed one step beyond the previous material, or in a scale or in chords we haven’t dealt with yet. All of this in order to reach the next level of playing.

Exercise 30
Diminished bebop drills
After having amply dealt with legato in chapter 4, this exercise will build on that even further. First of all the dim7 chord (exercise 28) will be combined with the bebop lick from exercises 25, 26 and 27 and the extreme low register from exercise 7 and 8. We’ll start with the first phase of the exercise: a build-up from the dim7 chord in a syncopated rhythmic pattern. Start this exercise in a more compact embouchure than you normally would. Think about the highest note in this phrase. When you play with a minimum of air, you’ll stimulate the breath support and play the accent notes from the lower abdomen and not from the quantity of air (see example 77).

![Example 77](ex77)
Exercise 30 diminished bebop drills

TIPS exercise 30

- Start in a compact embouchure position and think about the highest note in the motif
- Play with minimal air to stimulate the breath support
- Play the accents from the lower abdomen and not from the embouchure
- Keep starting-embouchure position intact in descending line (compact play)
- Play up to the fermata in one breath, inhale and play to the extreme low octave
Keep the TIPS in mind of example 95
Shake/whole-tone descending

Whole-tone ascending/descending in 3 octaves

Harmonic ascending/descending in 3 octaves
Dedication

I want to express my gratitude to the people who played a major part in the realization of this book. Without their help and support this method wouldn’t have existed or at least would have been much harder to realize.

Theo Mertens instilled in me the passion for the trumpet through his teachings, not only on a technical and musical level but also showing me the ropes as a human being and musician.

Detlev Weers a long time student of mine encouraged me to commit my ideas and thoughts on paper and formulate the methodology that is now in front of you. His grasp on languages, vast knowledge of the trumpet world and hours of editing proved to be invaluable in the realization of this book.

Marian Konings was a model of patience. My inexperience with projects like this was amply compensated by her insights. My lack of knowledge caused her to adapt the layout of this book endlessly. Without ever showing any sign of frustration she even became more and more enthusiast in the process. Her expertise and search for perfection are abundantly shown in the radiant end result.

I want to thank Hub van Laar and Heidrun Joechner for their support and promotion of my book. It makes me feel proud and happy that my method will be connected with a resounding brand name when it comes to manufacturing the highest quality brass instruments. Hub has created a truly perfect trumpet for me.

I am grateful for the help of Bob Findley, close reading the draft of the English version of my book and providing valuable comments. Without his help I would have felt a little less secure as far as the continuity of the method is concerned. Thanks again, Bob!

Last but not least my wife Désirée fully deserves my heartfelt gratitude for her support throughout my entire career. She was the only one who stood by me during the bleak period of my severe injury, taking the right steps at the right times and showing infinite patience for a partner as a musician. The support I received from her and my two children during the period I wrote this method withdrawing in my own creative bubble transcends every form of acceptance. Despite my self chosen ‘exile’ from daily life they kept on contributing to my work: my wife by taking decisions and proof reading, my daughter Simone by lending me her ear during long countryside walks and son Renier by offering his knowledge of languages, PR insights and maintaining my website. In my perception this book truly is a family affair.

Frank
Less is More

Method for trumpet

• Basic techniques and daily exercises

Bob Findley
L.A. studio and recording artist. Author of “Bob Findley on Trumpet”.
“I read through the book and Frank’s methodical approach matches almost everything I believe in where efficiency is concerned. ‘Less is More’ is a good title and covers it all. I do believe that the best teachers are those who had to face difficult challenges and found a way to deal with it through deeper understanding and patience. Frank’s method is a proof of that. Highly recommended for all brass players of all levels.”

Jan Oosthof
Former lead trumpet of the Metropole Orchestra, James Last Orchestra and currently Professor at the Jazz Department of The Conservatory of Amsterdam.
“In his book Frank makes it abundantly clear how much easier trumpet playing can be. The embouchure becomes subservient to the efficient use of air and air support. His comprehensive and articulate method shows you how to use your body instead of straining the embouchure. I recommend this method highly to all serious trumpet players.”

Andrei Kavalinski
Internationaal trumpet soloist and solo trumpet of the National Orchestra of France.
“This method represents the result of many years of research and ample teaching experience. As stated in the book, this method combines the practical application of physiotherapy with playing the trumpet on a professional level. I highly recommend the method of Frank van der Poel as being beneficial for both professional trumpet players and advanced students alike. Beginning students also may use this method to their advantage.”

Chuck Findley
L.A. studio and recording artist. International jazz soloist.
“I got to know Frank as a great lead player. His method provides you with the tools to reach an unprecedented level of playing by following it step-by-step. Get a copy, grab your horn and find out what this book does for you!”

Ladislav Kozderka
Principal trumpet of the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra.
“I just received the draft of Frank van der Poel’s Method. I immediately read the main chapters and found the explanation of his [abdominal] breathing technique fascinating. I felt very much tempted to try it out and…. it worked! Less is More really explains it all. It truly is a powerful method that will make your trumpet life much easier. Do yourself a favor and get a copy of the book!”

John Snell
Freelance trumpeter, Manager/Consultant of Bob Reeves Brass Mouthpieces, Host of “The Other Side of the Bell” Trumpet Podcast.
“Less is More sold me on the title alone. Rather than require the student to play notes in a certain order to build strength and endurance, this book brilliantly focuses instead on the underlying fundamentals. Frank van der Poel pulls from his vast experience and his own trials to masterfully explain how to use the body in tandem with the equipment, making trumpet playing more about efficiency and finesse.”