

Brent Mead

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Composing for the Trombone

Description of the instrument

- [Harmonic Series](#)
- 7 Positions – each position is a ½ step
- Valve
 - Most orchestral trombones have an f-attachment. The F-attachment lowers the pitch of the instrument a perfect fourth
 - When using a valve, the slide only has 6 positions
 - Bass trombones will typically have two valves. There are several configurations of valves but the two most typical Bb/F/D or Bb/F/Gb/D

Range

- Non-transposing
- Clefs
 - Bass clef is standard
 - Many high school but most college trombonists learn tenor clef. You can use tenor clef to avoid excessive ledger lines
 - In jazz, the tradition is to only use bass clef
 - Alto clef usually is saved for composing for alto trombone. If you compose for alto trombone, please use alto clef
- Playable Range (C4 Middle C)
 - Straight Tenor: E2–D5
 - Comfortable range Bb2–Bb4
 - Best range D3–F4
 - Experienced players can play higher than D5
 - F-attachment Tenor: F1–D5 (**No B1**)
 - Comfortable range D2–Bb4
 - Best range Bb2–F4
 - Bass: D1–Bb4
 - Comfortable range Bb1–F4
 - Best range Bb1–Bb3
 - Eb Alto: A2–G5

Mutes

- Common Types
 - Plunger (+Pixie): wah-wah
 - Harmon: wah-wah, but brassier than a plunger
 - Straight: buzzy, nasal
 - Cup: mellow, glassy, cool
- Less Common
 - Whisper/Practice: muffled, quiet
 - Bucket: airy, distant
- Notations
 - *Mute type: straight mute, cup mute, tight/close cup mute, bucket mute*
 - *Open*

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- Harmon & Plunger:
 - + = covered/closed
 - O = open
 - +O = 'wah'
- Considerations
 - Low range is difficult in a mute. The sound will not project and in the F-attachment range, there might be notes that could be impossible to play
 - For plunger and harmon, it is impossible to both operate a valve and do any 'open/close' with the mute
 - Please always notate 'open'. This is often left out or forgotten.
 - Leave about 5-6 seconds before and after a mute change

Extended Techniques

- Multiple Tonguing
 - Tonguing with the front and back of the tongue can allow for faster articulation (Dah-Gah-Dah-Gah)
 - Most college performers will learn this technique
 - Repeated notes are easier than running scales
 - No notation needed – performers will decide when to use this technique. Note that if it is challenging or impossible for you to vocalize, it likely will be difficult to perform
- Flutter-tongue
 - Constant rolled-'R' sound while playing
 - Commonly notated as 3-line tremolo, sometimes *fl.*, *flut.*, or *flutter* are added
 - This technique loses its effectiveness below the bass clef.
- Glissando
 - <https://www.islandtrombone.com/Glissinfo.pdf>
 - **Can only be performed on the same partial.** Consult a slide position chart above.
 - Notated with a straight line between noteheads. For clarity, 'gliss.' can be added
- Rip
 - Aggressive connection between two notes
 - Large leaps only (several partials)
 - Often notated with a rippled or squiggly line between noteheads
 - Best achieved if the slide can move out instead inward.
- Scoop/plop
 - A quick portamento before a note. A scoop approaches the note from below and is the most common. A plop approaches the note from above and is most commonly found in jazz.
 - Notated with a short curved line behind the notehead
- Fall/doit
 - Similar to the scoop/plop, this is a portamento sound but occurs after the note. A fall descends in pitch and a doit ascends in pitch.

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- These are often longer than a scoop/plop. A quick fall/doit is often noted with a short descending/ascending curved line after the notehead while a longer fall/doit would use a rippled line
- Multiphonics
 - Sing and play at the same time
 - Most common and easiest to sing above the written pitch
 - Notate 'sung' note with smaller notehead
 - Easier and most commonly found in the lower range of the instrument
 - Perfect intervals are the easiest to perform, followed by 3rds and 6ths, then 2nds and 7ths.
 - The singing part is often written in 1st species counterpoint or over a played drone.
 - Not a commonly acquired or taught skill.
- Disassembled instrument
 - 'Bell only' or 'slide only'
 - A mouthpiece placed in the bell receiver will play a lot like a bugle. The harmonic series is clear and stable but chromatic alterations are quite difficult.
 - Removing the bell leaves the slide and mouthpiece assembly together. Chromatic pitches can be heard but the pitch is different than normal slide positions. Most often used for airy, glissando effect.

General Considerations

- Please write beautiful melodies for the trombone. Trombones can, and often do, play proudly, loudly, and gloriously but that is not all the instrument can do.
- Trombone is just behind the tuba and flute in instruments that take the most air to play. Playing trombone can also be quite taxing, especially in the higher register of the instrument. Please be mindful in larger works to give moments of rest to the trombones
- Angular melodic lines are difficult to play. Additionally, the technique required to play fast passages is more challenging on trombone than valved brass instruments
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