2021

A student tubist's guide to doubling on bass trombone

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A STUDENT TUBIST’S GUIDE

TO DOUBLING ON BASS TROMBONE

A Thesis Submitted

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Designation

University Honors

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May 2021
This Study by: Donovan Klutho

Entitled: A Student Tubist’s Guide to Doubling on Bass Trombone

has been approved as meeting the thesis or project requirement for the Designation

University Honors

05/03/2021  Stephanie Ycaza, Honors Thesis Advisor, School of Music
Date

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Date  Dr. Jessica Moon, Director, University Honors Program
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section Title</th>
<th>Page Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Explanation and Background</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. An Overview on Doubling</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. Bass Trombone Mechanics and Fundamentals</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Holding the Instrument</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Slide Technique</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Air Considerations</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D. Articulation and Slurring</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E. Range</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F. Physical Differences Between Instruments</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G. Beginning Arban Exercises</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. Musical Development on Bass Trombone</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. Suggested Listening</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. Suggested Books for Further Study</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. Bibliography</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Explanation and Background**

The purpose of this project is to provide high school-aged tuba students a brief resource for learning to double on the bass trombone. As will be discussed in the guidebook, there are a number of reasons that students could want to double: jazz band, pit orchestra, show choir band, classical concert ensemble, etc. No matter the reason a student may want to learn to double, I wanted to provide a guide that would hopefully make it more accessible for them to learn. To accomplish this, I have made the language digestible for high schoolers without too many technical terms.

My personal experience with this subject is that throughout middle and high school, I played tuba in band and in some other settings. My band directors asked me to play in the jazz band, but I declined because I did not want to put in the effort of learning an entirely new instrument. After I got to UNI, I went to a few jazz band concerts and almost immediately wanted to start playing in jazz bands, which led me to taking bass trombone lessons. I sincerely regret the decision to not participate in jazz band in high school, because I feel that it would have helped my musical development and flexibility of style earlier on. I do not want other students to have a similar experience, and I feel as though offering this resource to high school students will make learning bass trombone easier and less daunting.

In writing this guidebook, a majority of the work was done without a thesis in mind. I began learning bass trombone my freshman year of college, which I believe helped me be more analytical in the ways in which I approached the learning process. Because I already had knowledge of the tuba and fundamentals of brass playing, I tried to go about learning in a similar, but condensed, process. This led me to taking the exercises and etudes that I already knew had helped me in my development on tuba and using the same or similar exercises and
etudes to learn bass trombone. Through this process, I was able to learn the bass trombone quickly, while also learning *how to learn* the bass trombone, especially from the background of tuba. My thesis helped me directly apply that knowledge, in a way that I believe will benefit anyone who wants to learn to double.

Through learning bass trombone, and subsequently playing in jazz band and other trombone-specific ensembles, many aspects of my musicianship have improved. Learning how to blend with a jazz ensemble in terms of tone, articulation, releases, style, dynamics, and intonation helped my ears listen more closely to the people around me, which made me a much better ensemble member. In addition to that, learning the trombone led me to learning the concept of “body mapping,” which is an awareness of the entirety of one’s body and how it is moving. The skills I learned from body mapping applied to tuba, as well as everyday living. These are only a few examples of the skills and knowledge I gained from learning to double.

The addition I am making to the already-existing work on this topic is a more targeted and specific instructional guide. There is one book, *The Low Brass Player’s Guide to Doubling* by Micah Everett, that contains a lot of information about doubling on tenor and bass trombone, alto and tenor trombone, euphonium and tuba, etc. This book, however, does not include a section specifically about tuba players wanting to double on bass trombone, and is not necessarily written for high school-aged students. Additionally, if someone wants to learn one doubling instrument contained in that book, that individual has to purchase the entire book, there are no individual chapters available for separate purchase or online.
I. Introduction

This short book will be your guide to learning the bass trombone from the background of playing tuba, leading to 'doubling' on the two instruments. Before starting the instructional portion of the guide, there are a few things you will want to keep in mind regarding this process.

Firstly, I am writing this mostly based on my own personal experience and what has worked for me. I will, of course, introduce insights from other musicians who have had more experience either with playing trombone or with the doubling process than I have had. Additionally, every single person has a slightly different face and bone structure, and different learning methods work better for some people than they work for others. Due to this, not everything that has worked for me will work for you, so I encourage you to try out a variety of different approaches to learning the new instrument to figure out what works the best for you. I will also be including some thoughts and ideas in this book that do not only apply to doubling, but to music in general. These are things that I wish people had told me earlier in my musical career, and I hope they will be helpful to you as well.

Next, before you attempt to learn a secondary instrument (in this instance, bass trombone), you should make sure that you are proficient on your primary instrument (probably tuba). This means that your fundamentals, including breathing, tone, lip slurs, articulation, scales, range, etc. should be pretty solid before you start doubling. I will leave the definition of ‘proficient’ up to the discretion of you and your band director or private teacher, as that definition can vary among different individuals. As long as you and your director or teacher are comfortable with your level of playing on your primary instrument, and agree that you can begin the doubling process, you should be okay to get started.
Another consideration should be the availability of a bass trombone (or whatever instrument you will be doubling on). If your school does not have its own bass trombone for you to use, there are a number of methods you can use to rent or purchase one. Obviously purchasing an instrument is fairly permanent, so if you have the option of renting, that may be better until you are sure that you want to continue playing the secondary instrument. Renting instruments from music stores such as West Music, Griggs, or online stores is pretty straightforward and inexpensive, but if you have any issues, your band director should be a good resource.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, you should have fun doubling. Whether you’re doubling to play in a jazz band, pit orchestra for a musical, in a studio orchestra, or just to learn a new instrument, you should have fun while you are doing it. Genuine enjoyment will lead to a more fulfilling process of doubling, and will make you more likely to stay with it. When learning the new instrument gets frustrating, as it often can, you are more than welcome to leave the technical exercises for a bit and learn something you want to learn—whatever helps you make the learning process more enjoyable!

II. An overview on Doubling

As I mentioned in the introduction, you should have solid fundamentals on your primary instrument before starting to learn a double. This foundation of fundamentals will serve as a way to help you connect aspects of playing tuba to new concepts found in learning bass trombone. Discovering what you can keep consistent between the two instruments will help your progress because you should not have to focus as much on those things, and it will be able to put more of your attention on the motions and mechanics that are completely new to you.

To add to the mention of instrument rentals in the introduction, there should be some consideration on what instrument and mouthpiece would work best for you. If you are able to
test out different bass trombones before renting one, that would be ideal. You should choose the instrument that you sound and feel the best and most comfortable on, so try to bring someone with a good ear for music with you if you are able to test out instruments. For mouthpieces, I have found that larger mouthpieces, more similar to the size of a tuba mouthpiece, work well for me. I had used a 1½G mouthpiece for a while, but tried out a 1G and 1¼G, which are both larger than my old mouthpiece. Eventually, I decided that the 1¼ worked best for me for tone production and articulation in the low range and higher range. Again, I encourage you to try out whatever is available to you and decide for yourself.

Another helpful tip I have found is to try to do almost as much listening as you do practicing. Listening to world-class bass trombonists or tenor trombonists and internalizing their sounds will make it possible to develop your own sound by attempting to replicate theirs. As you listen, pay attention especially to their tone, articulation, dynamics, and overall musicianship. Imitating can often be the best way to learn a new skill, and this is especially true in music. In the Suggested Listening section of the book, you will find recommended artists and albums that feature extremely high-level trombone and bass trombone playing that I suggest you listen to while learning.

III. Bass Trombone Mechanics and Fundamentals

A. Holding the Instrument

One of the differences between the tuba and bass trombone that you will probably notice immediately is the way each is held. With the tuba, you generally do not support much of its weight. Often, it will sit on your chair, a tuba stand, or on your lap and all you have to do is make sure it doesn’t tip over or fall. This makes relaxation during playing fairly easy, since your muscles are not under much pressure holding the instrument. In contrast, with bass trombone, you are responsible for holding its entire weight only in your left arm in order to be able to move
as freely as possible with your right arm. At first, this can cause a lot of excess tension and fatigue quickly since you are not used to supporting an instrument in that way yet. Over time, you will become more comfortable holding the bass trombone for longer periods of time, but be aware that it could take a considerable amount of time for the positioning to be comfortable to you. See Image 1 and Image 2 for examples of the left and right hand grips on the instrument. Some people will buy hand grips to attach to their instruments to help ease the amount of weight supported by the left hand. This can help with muscle pains and fatigue while holding and/or playing the instrument for long periods of time, but are not necessary for playing bass trombone.

Speaking on posture, the seated positioning of your body should be essentially the same on bass trombone as it is on tuba; with your feet flat on the floor, a fairly straight back, and relaxed arms and shoulders to allow the lungs to expand. The standing position for bass trombone should be similar to the seated position, but pay more attention to your legs and feet, which should be about shoulder width apart from each other.

**B. Slide Technique**

One of the most important mechanics on the trombone and bass trombone, and the differentiating factor between it and the other brass instruments, is the motion of the slide. In
order to create a smooth, steady sound, the slide must also be moved smoothly to avoid 'bumps' and other unwanted noise within the sound.

This is a chart of the typical slide positions on the trombone, which will come in handy when you begin playing. In comparison to the Bb tuba fingerings, which you should be accustomed to, the trombone slide positions equate roughly to:

- 1st position: open (no valves pressed)
- 2nd position: second valve
- 3rd position: first valve
- 4th position: first+second valves
- 5th position: second+third valves
- 6th position: first+third, OR fourth valve
- 7th position: first+second+third, OR second+fourth valves

Thinking about it in terms of tuba fingerings or something you are already familiar with will help speed the process of learning these positions up. In addition to these slide positions, when you begin playing with the triggers on the bass trombone, there will be slight differences in the placements of the slide to account for intonation. The notation seen here for these triggers is using “V” for the F attachment (thumb), and “VV” for both attachments (thumb and middle finger). As you continue to work on the bass trombone, your intonation should improve and the slide positions will become more natural. A common mistake that trombonists make when learning slide positions is to place their fingers on the bell of the instrument to find 3rd position.
This should be avoided mostly because it is not always in tune, and can result in choppy slide motion.

The actual physical motion of the slide should stay relaxed, but still firm. This can be achieved by mainly using your wrist and fingers to move the slide, with your wrist fluid and your fingers just firm enough to keep the slide under your control. Your shoulder and elbow shouldn’t need to be used much, unless your arms are a little bit shorter or you have a lot of notes in 5th, 6th, or 7th position. If you can think of keeping your slide going straight in a single direction without a comparison to doing something else, that is fantastic. If not, you can imagine your slide going through a small crack between two wooden planks, or one side of your slide as a pool stick and you’re trying to hit the cue ball just right, or anything else you or your teacher think would be help you keep the slide going straight back and forth as you move it. The less up-and-down and side-to-side motion you have while you play, the more consistent you can make your air and tone.

Before getting into much music, you should try to make sure the basics of your slide technique are present. To do this, you can do slow glissandos down from first position to each of the lower positions while trying to keep the rest of the instrument steady. As you work on this, you can make the movement faster and faster until you are comfortable moving the slide very
quickly. Another exercise to work on slide technique is used for right hand stability. In this exercise, you place a quarter between your slide and the pads on your first two fingers. If the quarter falls, you are not holding the slide firmly enough, and if you are gripping it too firmly, your arm will get really tense. This exercise also prevents you from finding third position by touching the bell because the quarter will also fall then.

C. Air Considerations

The amount of air you use on the bass trombone in comparison to the tuba should be pretty similar. I personally have found myself using more air on the bass trombone, but that may simply be because I am not as efficient with my air on the new instrument yet. In any case, the more air you are able to use, the more flexibility you will have in finding the right amount for each instrument. As with tuba, playing lower and/or louder on bass trombone will require a larger amount of air, while playing softer and/or higher will require somewhat less, however you should strive to maintain a good amount of breath support in whatever register and dynamic you are playing.

The way you use air should be a little different for each instrument. Since the mouthpiece and lead pipe on bass trombone are smaller, you will have to make your air column slightly more compact to adjust. The airstream, although more compact on bass trombone, should be very steady on both instruments. When changing between notes, you should keep the air going with no breaks or hesitations, even when changing partials or slurring. This consistency of air will take time to get used to, especially slurring on bass trombone, which requires soft tonguing and moving the slide quickly simultaneously.

D. Articulation and Slurring

For articulating on the trombone, the method by which you achieve separated notes will be almost the same; use your tongue to briefly block the air going through your embouchure so
that the buzz stops for a moment. The mechanic will be the same on the bass trombone, but should actually be slightly easier because the area of your embouchure that is vibrating is smaller due to the smaller mouthpiece size. A piece of insight into having clear and clean beginnings of notes is to remember that your tongue does not start the note, your air does. Keeping this in mind will help your tone come through the instrument immediately, rather than cracks or flubs that often happen at the starts of notes.

Slurring on the bass trombone is very different than on tuba. Whereas on tuba, you have valves to help you slur on the same partial, you will only sometimes have valve privileges on bass trombone. For all of the other slurs on the same partial, for instance D in 4th position to F in 1st position, you will need to utilize the legato tongue. For this, you will need to combine a really quick slide motion with a light tongue to graze the air stream. Your tongue and slide will need to move at the exact same time so that there is no audible glissando between the two notes you’re slurring. For your tongue motion, it will be somewhat similar to licking an ice cream cone. If you prefer to think about consonant sounds, a lightly tongued “doe” or a heavily pronounced “low” should work, but try out a few methods. Your air should not stop when legato tonguing, there should be just enough of an interruption in the airstream by the tongue to not create a glissando, and no more space than that. This is quite possibly the biggest difference in playing these two instruments, and it takes the longest to get used to out of any fundamentals on the instrument. Because of this, you should prioritize the legato tongue in your practicing.

E. Range

The playable range for these instruments is essentially the same, but the range requirements in the music they play is quite different. For both, the extreme low and high ranges go from around Bb0 (the Bb at the very bottom of the piano) to around C5 (an octave above middle C). The tuba will be more likely to have parts written closer to the lower end of that
range, typically around E1 to Bb3 in band and orchestra repertoire. The bass trombone will usually have ensemble parts written from around Bb1 to G4.

With these differences in the ranges used on both instruments, it is important to focus your practice on the development of your playing within them. While it is fun to try to play as high and low as you can, the 'mid range' of the bass trombone should be the area you practice the most. Developing your tone, articulation, dynamics, lip slurs, etc. should be done in this register before extending your range. If this is done well, your fundamentals will be extremely strong in the areas of the bass trombone that will be asked of you the most often, leading to a better chance of success on the instrument overall.

Working on the typical range on the bass trombone will also help your tuba range. Something that it took me a long time to realize was that working on the middle and upper range on bass trombone— which is much higher than what is classified as the tuba’s middle and upper range— helped me further develop my high range on tuba.

To summarize, the required ranges for tuba and bass trombone have a lot of overlap, but when learning bass trombone, you should focus on developing your fundamentals from around Bb1 to G4, specifically targeting the higher portion of that range.

**F. Physical Differences Between Instruments**

There are many similarities in how you can play the tuba and bass trombone, but the instruments are quite different physically. You should take this into consideration when approaching the bass trombone.

The main difference between these two instruments is the tubing layout. The tuba’s pipes are conical, meaning that from the mouthpiece to the bell, there is a constant increase in the diameter of the piping. This leads to a fuller, rounder, more mellow sound overall. Other brass instruments that have conical tubing are the French horn, euphonium, cornet, flugelhorn, and a
few other instruments played in typical British or European brass bands. The trombone is a cylindrical instrument, meaning that the tubing stays close to the same diameter all the way through, until it gets wider just near the bell. Cylindrical pipes lead to a more direct, bright sound. The trumpet and trombone are the only widely played cylindrical brass instruments.

Another difference between tuba and bass trombone is the positioning of the bell. Whereas the tuba bell faces almost straight up, the bass trombone bell faces forward. This leads to the tuba’s sound spreading throughout the room you are playing in, creating a 'blanket of sound,' while the trombone’s sound goes almost entirely in the direction the instrument is facing.

To account for the physical differences between these instrument types, there are a few things that you should do. First, do not try to make your bass trombone tone similar to your tuba tone, as this can cause your sound to be thin, without much of a pitch center. Trying to achieve a bright, brilliant sound, similar to that of a trumpet, should give you a good start to transitioning to bass trombone. By emulating a trumpet tone, you will find it easier to play the new cylindrical instrument than it would be to attempt to sound like a tuba.

Adapting to the forward-facing bell can be difficult, especially because the bell is in front of your ears, making it difficult to hear how you really sound. I have two main suggestions for this adaptation. First, when you have separated passages, you do not need to play with as much space between the notes as you would on tuba. The forward-facing bell makes it so that any separation you have will be immediately apparent to the listener. Second, legato or slurred passages will need to be more connected, again because the sound gets to the listener faster, any space that you have between notes will be more apparent, so you should try to make your sound project as consistently as possible.


**G. Beginning Arban Exercises**

The Jean Baptiste Arban Method book is the largest collection of exercises that brass instruments have to offer. Originally written by a trumpet player and teacher, this book has been adapted for the rest of the brass family. I would highly recommend purchasing this book for yourself. There are versions available for either trombone/baritone or tuba, either book will work. For now, I will insert a few pages of exercises on fundamentals from the book that will be useful to you in starting your doubling process.

Here are two pages from the “First Studies” section of the Arban book, with slide positions for each note. (If the music is too high for you, feel free to take it down the octave to start with. However, if you do this, the slide positions may not be the same.)
Exercises from the “First Studies” section in the Arban book. These exercises take you through all of the slide positions, and include the slide positions above each note, as well as the euphonium fingerings below (the same fingerings you can use on tuba).
The next exercises are designed to work on slurring on the bass trombone. The first few are slurs across partials, known as 'natural slurs,' and exercise number 12 focuses on legato tongued slurs. For the legato tongued slurs, it is important to move the slide at the exact same time that your tongue touches the roof of your mouth. If your slide and tongue do not move at the same time, it will result in a glissando sound. Again, feel free to take these down an octave.
IV. Musical Development on Bass Trombone

Once you are comfortable with your fundamentals on your new instrument, you can begin developing musically. 'Musicality' is probably the most-used term that is defined the least among musicians. This is because there are so many different ways to convey musicality that there is not one particular way of doing it. The one common factor which people seem to hear as 'musical' is putting your own emotions, expressivity, and intention into the music you play. It can take a very long time to be able to do this consistently, and even a lot of professional musicians struggle with it from time to time.

Even though musicianship is difficult to develop, it is definitely possible. The best ways to do this on a new instrument, in my experience, are playing songs and melodies that you know by ear so that you are not bound to music, and playing music that you have previously learned on tuba. Playing music by ear, especially music that you like, can connect you to the music more sincerely and honestly. It doesn’t matter if it’s a pop song, country song, a song from a musical, or your favorite soundtrack. You can play anything you want to as long as you really enjoy it. Try to imitate the singer or instrument that performs the song in their dynamics, articulation, even the slight nuances in the way they articulate their words. Imitation is definitely a great way to learn how musicians play or sing 'musically,' and will help you develop your own style.

In addition to playing music by ear, you can play music that you have already learned on tuba. Playing old solos, band parts, etudes, etc. will help you learn not only the slide positions and intonation tendencies on the bass trombone, but will also help you learn to be musical while reading music.

The last tip for musical development is listening. Listening to fantastic musicians is one of the best ways to learn to be expressive through music. Not simply listening mindlessly while
focusing on something else, but really thoroughly and thoughtfully listening to how people make music their own. This includes paying attention to the performer’s tone, dynamics, tempo, articulation, overall style, and intensity. While listening to bass trombonists will help you find your ideal sound on the instrument, listening to all kinds of musicians performing a wide variety of music will help you develop your sense of musicianship overall. The next section of the book, *Suggested Listening*, includes music played by some of the bass trombone’s most well-known figures in different genres and styles. This should be a decent list to start with, but find other bass trombonists, tubists, violinists, pianists, flutists, guitarists, vocalists, etc. whose music or recordings you find extraordinary and take concepts from their musicianship to apply to your own.

V. Suggested Listening
- James Markey, *On Base*
  - Classical bass trombone album, mainly with piano accompaniment, but also includes a bass trombone and tenor trombone duet. James Markey’s devotion to creating the best tone on every note he plays is incredible. His sense of style and character changes in different genres is also very good, and there is a light playfulness to a lot of the music he plays.
  - Available on Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube
- Micah Everett, *Stepping Stones for Bass Trombone, Vol. 1*
  - Classical bass trombone album. This album includes a few bass trombone solos that are not too difficult for younger players. Micah Everett plays with a really good sense of style in all of these pieces, differing his style according to the composer and the setting of the piece. His tone is also very consistent, and his phrasing is excellent.
  - Available on Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube
- Ben van Dijk, *World Concerto*
○ Classical bass trombone album with brass band accompaniment. This album is a good listen, shows off a lot of different aspects of the bass trombone. The intent of articulation Ben van Dijk displays throughout the album is really admirable. It’s also cool to hear how the bass trombone sounds with a brass band behind it.

○ Available on Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube

- Randall Hawes, *Melodrama*
  ○ Classical bass trombone and piano album. This album almost exclusively shows the lyrical and expressive side of the bass trombone. The entire album is Russian romantic music, which is really beautiful. Randall Hawes’ tone is extremely rich, full, and warm in all registers of the instrument and at all dynamic levels. His phrasing throughout the album is also really nice to aurally digest.

○ Available on Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube

- Charles Vernon, *American Music for Bass Trombone*
  ○ Classical bass trombone and piano album. This album contains many of the staples of the solo bass trombone repertoire. Charles Vernon is one of the most technically proficient bass trombone players, and his sense of time is almost unmatched. His tone, style, phrasing, and lyrical playing are also very good, but his time and technique are what really sets him apart from many other bass trombonists.

○ Available on Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube

- Massimo Pirone and Bill Reichenbach, *Two Brothers*
  ○ This album is a jazz bass trombone duo album. Both of these players execute jazz playing really well, and they both improvise at a high level. The interaction between the bass trombones and rhythm section in this album is really good if you pay attention to it (which you should). The phrasing in and between the bass trombones is also a good way to listen to how musicians can interact during tunes.

○ Available on Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube

- Reginald Chapman, *Prototype*
  ○ This album was created by a bass trombonist/multi-instrumentalist and features the bass trombone in more of an ensemble setting. The style in this album is technically labeled 'jazz' but I’d consider it closer to R&B and hip hop for most of
it. Whatever its label, the music on it is very well performed, and this can serve as a little bit of an introduction to how trombone/bass trombone can be used in non-classical ensembles.

- Available on Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube

VI. Suggested Books for Further Study

A. *Method for Trombone and Baritone* by J.B. Arban, adapted by Joseph Alessi and Brian Bowman

   a. This includes basically all the fundamentals exercises you could ever need for trombone. Because there is no version for bass trombone, this will mostly be applicable for working on different aspects of your playing in the upper range or playing the exercises down an octave, fifth, or fourth.

B. *Bass Trombone Craft* by Brad Edwards

   a. In this book, you will find a collection of exercises much more geared to the bass trombone. This includes learning and working on alternate valve positions, specific bass trombone range exercises, scales, and short musical etudes. A lot of these etudes were written to work on an aspect of playing bass trombone while working on musicality at the same time. There are no other etude books that work on bass-trombone specific mechanics and fundamental development as well as this book.

C. *Daily Routines for Bass Trombone* by David Vining

   a. This book contains practice routines for daily use. There is a 'basic routine' that covers a little bit of all the different fundamentals you’ll probably need in your playing, and there are other routines for working on specific parts of your playing like articulation, range, flexibility, dynamics, etc. These routines are usually good to do at the beginning of the day as warm ups, but can also be used to work on fundamentals later in the day if you’d like.

D. *Melodious Etudes for Trombone* by Johannes Rochut (or the bass trombone version)

   a. The etudes in this book are used almost entirely for developing legato and slurred playing, phrasing, and lyricism. The trombone version of the book has a lot of high register playing, so if you purchase or already have that edition be prepared to either read the music down an octave or play in the high range for a while. The
bass trombone version of this book has basically the exact same music, but transposed down about a fourth or fifth from the original melodies to better fit the bass trombone range.

**E. Jazz Conception** by Jim Snidero (bass trombone version)

a. This book contains jazz etudes that become progressively more technically demanding as you go through the book. If you have never played jazz music, this book can serve as a pretty good introduction to the style. The book also comes with recordings of the etudes and play-along tracks on a CD that I recommend listening to and playing along with.
VII. Bibliography


