

# Ask Mike!

*Stressed about an upcoming gig? Work got you singing the blues? Columnist Michael Goode can help!*



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In my last column, in August, we talked about how to manage when you have yourself overwhelmed and overbooked in your career and your life and why it's okay to listen to music outside of your area of specialization. Today, we are going to talk about positive thinking and your nervous system, the value of using intuition in playing and imparting this skill to your students through sight reading.

**Q: You know Mr. Goode, everybody tells me about positive thinking but I don't really believe that it really helps your playing. The only thing that matters is practicing and more practicing. What do you think about positive thinking while playing?**

**A:** Positive thinking has gotten a bad rap in music. Too many times we feel like we have to be chained to the

practice room to be truly great at what we do. But practicing isn't enough. You also have to have a positive attitude towards playing. In my research at the University of Chicago I discovered that emotions and your general attitude have a direct effect on nervous system function. The more positive you are, the more your nervous system chemistry becomes even more efficient. When you are happy, you are relaxed, when you are relaxed, all the cells in your body are free to function more freely and efficiently. Tension, which comes from stress and negativity, causes the tissues in the body to tense up and not operate at an optimum level. The tiniest blood vessels in the body that deliver all the nutrients we need to think and play at our absolute best are only one blood cell wide. Any kind of tension will slow down the delivery of nutrients to our brain and to our muscles from these blood cells, and this will cause us not to be able to play as well. Without the most efficient delivery of oxygen and other nutrients by the blood cells because of tension the muscles will accumulate much more lactic acid and tire faster. Our endurance and precision will suffer. All this tension, muscle fatigue and imprecision can be avoided by being positive in our thoughts and in our approach to music. Unfortunately, a lot of our training is negative and is

focused on competition and worry about missing notes. This kind of thinking only adds to our body tension and makes playing difficult and consistency a struggle for many players. We need to stop the negativity and focus on being positive. By being positive, do I mean that we should avoid sensible performance practices? Of course not, we still need to practice and prepare our material in whatever way will give us the highest artistic and musical result. For each of us, the path to that goal may be different. What may require ten hours of practice for one individual may only require two hours for someone else. Never compare yourself to others in the way you prepare, only look at the level of the musical and artistic result. You play for your own standards and those of the audience, not for your colleagues. Too many of us play far below our musical and artistic potential by worrying too much about what our colleagues think. You must run your own race, not the imaginary race of others. If you keep your artistic standards high, you don't need to worry about what others think of your playing. You achieve all of this by being positive in your entire approach to your instrument and to your devotion to music and the composer's intentions. Learn as much as you can about the music you are playing in whatever

style it may be and it will make a huge difference in getting you away from negative thoughts about whether you got all the right notes. It will also enable you to focus on the positive energy of the music which will lead to the best artistic result. By having such an approach you will also become confident and secure, and be able to work easily with your colleagues.

**Q: Hi Mike! I played on an outdoor orchestra gig recently, and noticed that the conductor was not really counting off the time in any noticeable and clear way. We were backing some singers and the beat didn't seem to exist anywhere. I was scared to death of not being in the right place, but thankfully I was at the end of the section and not playing lead. I asked the lead how do you know what's going on when you play with this bandleader and he said you just have to feel what the singers are doing and ignore the conductor. This has never happened to me before on a gig. How do I cope with this if it ever happens again?**

**A:** I remember playing at Ravinia in Chicago backing singers from the Metropolitan Opera in New York and we had a famous conductor with a similar situation. There was absolutely no beat and there was no relationship to any metronomic tempo whatsoever.

Some conductors conduct creatively from the podium and that's fine but this was an extreme. So, I figured out then and there that I had to do a combination of both intuition and still keep time within that intuitive framework, translated "playing by the seat of your pants." Since that time this has come up in other situations. What this kind of situation requires is playing by instinct. You might want to try to do some sight reading with friends who are pretty good players to continue to develop this ability; it can really help you out at times! When I ran my professional reading orchestra in Chicago, we put people to the test by having them sight read the classic orchestral pieces cold. The players all ended up developing very good instinctual skills and they won major auditions as a result. You can help impart this skill to your students by forcing them to sight read totally unfamiliar material as a part of every lesson. Good luck!

*Send your questions to: Ask Mike!, Trumpetworks Press, P.O. Box 11574, Marina del Rey, CA 90295 or you can check out my website at [www.trumpetworkspress.com](http://www.trumpetworkspress.com) and see information on my book, "Stage Fright in Music Performance and Its Relationship to the Unconscious" and my upcoming book, "Your True Self." All names are confidential and will not be published.*

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## > ASMAC continued from page 18

Part of what arrangers and orchestrators do is what composers may consider "the grunt work" of composition, and once composers have completed the task of composition, they are relieved to turn this grunt work over to a professional upon whom they can rely so they can turn their attention to the next composition project.

In order to work this way as a professional composer, it is necessary that one is able to separate out these tasks – i.e. composing, arranging, and orchestration. Many composers attempt to do all three of these tasks simultaneously (and often with great success), but some composers would benefit by stepping back and rethinking the process. The excruciating deadlines in film and television music make it essential for composers to use orchestrators and arrangers

and they value these special talents and abilities.

When I went back to composition after a 12-year hiatus, I studied with Hollywood composer, arranger and orchestrator Mauro Bruno. He introduced me to the technique of sketching compositions out on three staves (two treble and one bass, for example). The concept is that if you cannot express the essence of your composition on three staves, it may in fact be too complex or "over written" to work well for most ensembles. In other words, work on the basic conceptual nuts and bolts of the composition—melody, harmony, rhythms, counterpoint, motivic development, and so forth before starting the orchestration aspect of your work. Once Bruno had opened this up for me, I began to write fluidly and with greater clarity than ever before, and have been writing for

symphony orchestra regularly ever since. The sketches can be in great detail as to orchestration, etc., and once one goes to full score, the job of fleshing out the work becomes easier.

This idea of sketching in short score is a tool used by many successful composers and not only in the film and television scoring world. Some sketch on five, six, seven or eight staves. If you are interested in this technique, you should try to study a sketch of a composer you admire. When one compares the sketch to the full score (orchestration), one can clearly see what an orchestrator brings to the table.

The American Society of Music Arrangers and Composers is the professional organization for arrangers, orchestrators and composers. Please visit [www.asmac.org](http://www.asmac.org) or visit them on MySpace.com.