

DAVE TAYLOR

PLAYING WITH BIG BANDS, CLASSICAL ORCHESTRAS, OR CHAMBER GROUPS, THIS INVENTIVE BASS TROMBONIST IS IMPROVISING HIS WAY INTO ANY MUSICAL SITUATION HE COMES ACROSS.

by Michael Bourne

"I don't think of myself as a jazz player or a classical player," said David Taylor, master of the bass trombone. "I hate to even think in terms of the bass trombone. It's like a painter with a brush or a writer with a pencil. It's a tool. Yeah," he laughed, "it's a hammer. Call me a hammer."

He's commissioned (or inspired) many of the best contemporary composers to create works for bass trombone: Charles Wuorinen, Frederic Rzewski, George Perle, and Alan Hovhaness, among others. He's a regular with the big bands, often with Gil Evans and Bob Mintzer, also with George Gruntz or anyone else gathering the best players around New York. He's won the Most Valuable Player award five times, the most times NARAS honors a musician. "They've retired the number," he laughed. "I'm proud of that—not so much how many times I got it, but that they didn't have a category for bass trombone before."

So why this particular, er, hammer? "I was a tuba player in high school. I love the tuba. I picked up the trombone very late. I played tenor trombone, then somebody put the bass trombone in my hand and it was great. This was me! You know it when you know it. I took to the bass trombone immediately. This was my instrument."

Taylor, born in Brooklyn, grew up interested in music but was never serious until Juilliard. There he studied with Hall Overton and Davis Shuman. "When I grew up I never studied music. When I got to Juilliard I knew nothing, couldn't find middle C on the piano. They told me it's between the S and T of Steinway," he laughed, "but I always loved music." He studied at Juilliard from 1962 through 1968, earned BS and MS degrees, and all the while was playing. "After about six months of the bass trombone I was up at Stokowski's house, hanging out! He had the American Symphony Orchestra. He needed a bass trombone. I auditioned at his place. He gave me a rating and I played with him. It was amazing. This was about 1966, between my bachelor's and my master's. I played with Stokowski's orchestra, with Ernst Ansermet and some other great conductors.



I played with the Philharmonic some."

Taylor also played jazz, especially with the big bands of Chuck Israels, George Russell, Larry Elgart, Thad Jones and Mel Lewis. "I was trained classically at Juilliard but it was more immediate to play in the clubs. If you play bass trombone in a classical orchestra, you play in the back, play sparse stuff. Everyone is competing at school and you don't know why you're playing. But when I got to the clubs and played with Thad and Mel, I knew why I wanted to play."

While at Juilliard, he married his wife Ronnie, and his family soon became his greatest inspiration. "I've been married 20 years now. We had kids right away. Scott is 19 and Jessica is 14. They're a great help. When things are going well and you get full of yourself, they keep you humble. When things are down, they keep you up. It's real life."

Taylor's family life determined another musical direction. "I was doing the big band/classical thing. Then, when I got married, I started doing the big band/classical/commercial thing. I started doing sessions. The first big hit I was on was *Midnight Train To Georgia* with Gladys Knight and the Pips. I was doing that kind of thing for years." Taylor recorded albums with everyone from Duke Ellington (*The New Orleans Suite*) to Aretha Franklin and the Rolling Stones. "They used to bring Sinatra to the Golden Nugget and spoke the band with me, Ronnie Cuber, Lew Soloff, Alan Rubin, George Young. I did the Sinatra album project with Quincy Jones. They did a movie. I open the movie, walking in," he laughed, "but they call me Urbie Green!"

Taylor's sound is unmistakable for anyone else's, especially when he's soloing. When he played with Dino Betti van der Noot last year in New York, his unaccompanied solo

was a highlight of the concert, a solo both humorous and virtuosic, extending beyond the limits of his instrument. Taylor was also featured (also wonderfully) soon thereafter with George Gruntz. Ironically, after more than 20 years of being a pro, it's only in the last several years that he's become a soloist. "When I was playing with Thad and Mel, Jon Paddis was always trying to get me to solo, but I never could understand the language, the vocabulary of solo-making. It never felt comfortable to me. It wasn't my way. I took one of my first solos with George Russell. He was always trying to push me out there. He heard me solo with Gil's band and came up and said 'Didn't I tell you!' I've always had great encouragement to follow my course."

Through the years it's fascinated (and strengthened) Taylor to listen to music uncategorically. "To this day when I hear Glenn Gould play Mozart piano sonatas, it's Miles. Or when I hear Coltrane playing solos with Miles, it's the same intensity as Edgard Varese. Ron Carter made a record, the one with the Indian head on the cover. When I heard that record I was studying the Pablo Casals recording of Bach cello suites. I made a tape that was Carter/Casals/Carter/Casals. You wouldn't believe the similarities! I don't separate. I don't try to copy Gil or George or these guys I play with. I don't look at the notes. I try to use the guy's voice, the intensity, the beauty, as an inspiration. And my style is developing, being myself."

Taylor's breakthrough, both musically and emotionally, as a soloist happened in 1984 when he played his first solo recital. "Gil got me playing recitals. I remember walking with Gil in Venice. I said to Gil 'You really inspire me and help me change.' Gil said 'Duke Ellington told me that you never know when it's going to happen, but if you keep yourself open somebody is going to come along and point you another way.' Playing with Gil, with Thad and Mel, with all these guys, made my classical playing more vital, more personal, more spontaneous."

His first recital was nonetheless a struggle. "I was 40. It was very difficult for me, never having done that. I'd never given a student recital at Julliard. It was unbelievably frightening. Carnegie Recital Hall sponsored it. I had what became my band. I did everything from unaccompanied things to things for six or seven people. I gave another recital at Merkin Concert Hall and it started to come together easier."

When he played the Kaufmann Concert Hall last year, Taylor's program was typical of his recitals: something original (the premiere of George Perle's *Sonata a cinque*, also music of Rzewski), something classical (works of Ravel and Satie), and one of Taylor's own arrangements. Instead of the

usual transcriptions of works from one instrument to another, Taylor delights in creating suites. *Five Songs With Benediction And Divertissement* features a benediction by Heinrich Schutz and a divertissement by Eric Ewazen with songs of Ellington, Ravel, and Ives. "I've got a Meet The Composers grant for a group in Bennington. I'm taking Ives with Orlando Gibbons and some Elizabethan songs and I'm composing and superimposing my own stuff."

David Taylor, Bass Trombone, his first recording as a recitalist, features works of Ewazen, Rzewski, Wuorinen, and David Liebman's *Remembrance*. (It's available from Triple Letter Brand, P.O. Box 396, Tenafly, NJ 07670.)

The Taylor/Pugh Project, a 1984 compact disc (DMP CD-448), features Taylor together with tenor trombonist Jim Pugh. "That was something, to improvise with Jim Pugh. I said 'I can't improvise like him!' Then I realized 'I *won't* improvise like him!' That recording said 'This is it!' to me." Taylor's invented a variety of mutes for colors. One of the mutes (for buzzing effects) he has played on a Kirk Nurock number called *Creature Memory*—some of the more "outside" music of the Project. Taylor is all the more pleased that even though the music isn't exactly the jazz expected, it's selling anyway. "We've sold over 10,000. There's a magazine called *Absolute Sound* that's voted it one of the 10 best compact discs ever made. There's no other jazz record on the list." They're now working on another Project—"this time more inside!"

Meanwhile, he's always working. "To be a player," he laughed, "you've got to play!" If he's not playing with the bands, he's playing with the Lincoln Center Chamber Society or the New York Chamber Orchestra or playing festivals in Santa Fe or Switzerland. And whatever he's "hammering," David Taylor is always being himself. "I've been lucky. Besides the stability, the nourishment, the responsibility of having a family, I've stayed in New York where the action is. The only way I've left New York was to play with chamber groups or the bands. My goal was never to go on the road. I've built my musical growth here at home. And now I have the chance to play my thing all the time!" db