

## OU Tuba/Euphonium Ensemble: Defying All Stereotypes

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Jason Smith, Ohio University's sole full-time tuba instructor, stands before the tuba and euphonium ensemble in the rehearsal room in Glidden Hall. The students, with their heavy instruments resting in their laps, harmoniously coordinate the deep, smooth sounds of their instruments. The audience, who expected to hear the stereotypical "omp" and "pah" sounds of the instruments, leans forward in awe.

"My favorite part of playing the tuba in front of an audience is seeing their surprised faces," Jeff Barbee, a music performance graduate student, says. "A lot of people have never seen [a tuba and euphonium ensemble] before. They usually have no idea what to expect."

One of the least publicized ensembles in the music world, the unique tuba and euphonium ensembles suffer from the stereotype that tubas are too low to successfully create melody. Although the tuba endures a seemingly boring role in orchestras, this instrument remains fully capable of producing colorful, versatile sounds. In fact, the tuba actually produces a larger range of notes, over four or five octaves, than many other instruments, which allows tuba and euphonium ensembles to create melodies not possible for other ensembles.

"The best comment we get is 'I didn't know tubas could do that,'" Smith says of audience reactions.

When Smith arrived as the full-time tuba instructor at OU in 1999, the ensemble consisted of only three students. Now, about 15 students participate every year. With the widest representation of students of all OU ensembles, the tuba and euphonium ensemble includes not only music performance majors but music education, music theory and music therapy students as well. Students, all with differing ability levels, aspire to a variety of musical careers from band directors to contemporary jazz musicians.

The tuba and euphonium ensemble benefits students both educationally and socially. Tubas serve as musical background in orchestras, but the ensemble offer students an opportunity to encounter music they wouldn't normally learn.

"A lot of band and orchestra music does not have very challenging parts, which allows students to skim by and doesn't force them to develop into strong players," Barbee claims. "In this ensemble you have the chance to play melodies and other important roles that will enhance your ability as a musician."

Students in the ensemble, moreover, bond and learn from each other. For example, the younger students look up to the older students and strive to be as good as them. They all compete for the lead solo roles in the ensemble.

"It creates a competitive atmosphere," Smith explains. "It is a good vehicle to have."

Blending as a group while still being heard individually provides the greatest challenge to students performing in this ensemble. The frequency range is limited. The overtones are tight and overlapping. To convince their audience, students must know where they fit in the music to avoid playing too loudly or softly. They must carefully articulate each and every tone, for if any one of them backs off, the audience will notice.

"I have become a better player being a part of the ensemble," Jordan Vonwahlde, a music education and performance major, claims. "It forces you to know your part. You need to articulate every sound very clearly so the audience can hear you."

Playing the tuba is similar to singing. The breathing process is the same, requiring strong breathes from deep in the stomach. The tuba, in this way, serves as an amplifier.

"It is a struggle to keep the tone," Barbee says. "If you back off your air, it is easy to tell."

In order to succeed as tuba or euphonium players, participating students must practice at least two hours a day.

"The brass instrument is not something you can put down for a few days," Vonwahlde argues. "It requires muscle memory and breathing execution. It is similar to body building. You can't lift hard, stop for a few days and expect to be able to pick up where you left off."

The OU tuba and euphonium ensemble performs in concert every quarter. They also play at regional conferences and annual events, such as Octubafest, which is organized by Smith every fall.

"The concerts will have you tapping your toes and bobbing your head," OU Senior Matt Borchert says. "It's always a positive experience."