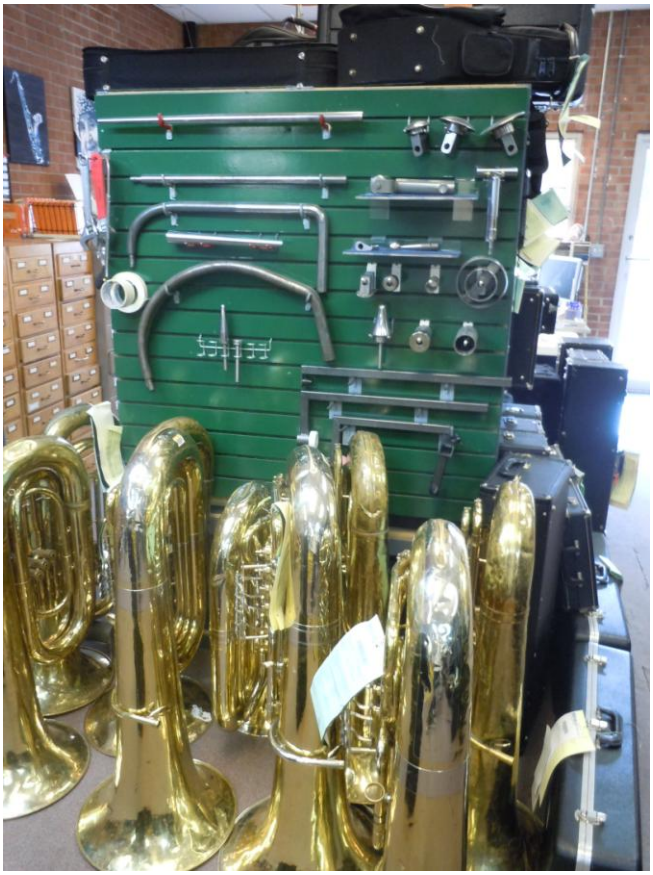
“Playing Doctor”

A Look at How Old Instruments Get New Life

“I do admire what Music for Hope tries to do,” Mike Elswick told us when we stopped by his Charlottesville shop. But when it comes to instrument repair, few understand as well as Elswick the difficulty of the task at hand. Music For Hope visited Mike at Elswick Band instrument Repair shop to get an inside look at the instrument restoration process. Along with the cost of the unique tools and tracking down hard-to-find parts, repairs can be tedious tasks consisting of trial and error. However, Mike’s smile while explaining the process proved to us that instrument restoration is a true labor of love.



The shop, consisting of Mike and three other employees, repairs woodwind and brass instruments. Elswick has practiced his craft in many different places for over 39 years. His travels across the country as a musician have provided him with many fascinating anecdotes. He fondly recalls bumping into Charles Neville at an airport, the two acknowledging each other’s Saxophone cases which led to a discussion about parts. While stationed with the Navy at nearby Waukegan, IL in the late 70’s, Elswick would visit Chicago on the weekend. There he watched and even occasionally played with some of the greatest talents in blues and jazz.

Despite all of his experience as a musician, Elswick surprised us with one trick of his trade. “When testing an instrument,” he said, “You have to play as if a novice.” The reason is because a skilled musician can make even an out-of-tune instrument sound good. Playing ability can make an instrument seem in better-or worse-condition than it actually is. Since Elswick’s repairs usually end up in the hands of a beginning student, he says that it is best to “Make it as simple as possible” when testing out a repaired clarinet or flute.

In fact, the very musicians talented enough to force beautiful sounds from the instruments are often clueless when it comes to repairing them. Elswick chuckles as he recalls countless accomplished sax and horn players handing over instruments with shoddy adjustments and sub-standard modifications. He is

delicate with the artist's ego when he provides a diagnosis: "Wow! Looks like *Somebody* tightened these keys WAY too stiff…That is what's affecting the sound."

The culprit is usually evident when the musician answers with a blank stare or avoids eye contact all-together. Elswick offers an interesting analogy, "I use a computer everyday but I don't know how to repair one!" It took Elswick four years of apprenticeship and many more on the job to hone his repair skills.

The first step to repairing a brass or woodwind instrument is, interestingly, taking it completely apart.

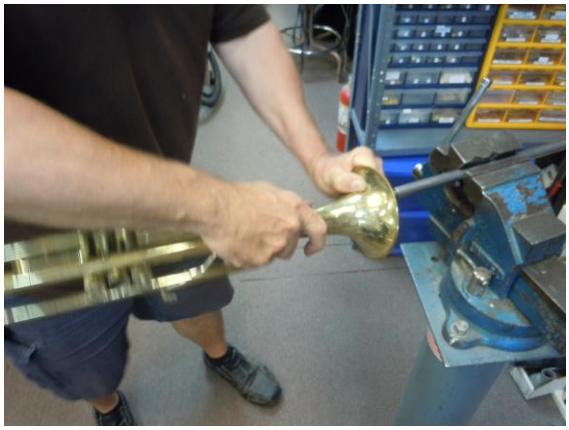
After it is completely apart, such as the trumpet shown to the left, the instrument must be sterilized and cleaned. The main frame is scrubbed and the individual parts soak for several hours in a special solution. The solution is strong enough to sterilize the items, but at the same time delicate on the older, sometimes fragile metals.

With the parts clean, it is now time to put them back together. This is the tricky part. "At this point it's kind of like playing doctor," Elswick jokes, "you just try to do no harm." Along with identifying which keys, pads, or parts are reusable, and which need to be replaced, one must also figure out how and where the small pieces fit into the larger functioning of the instrument.

This is especially difficult in complicated instruments like Oboes or Picolos, which often have miniscule parts. "They also have difficult mechanisms and button controls," Elswick adds, with some buttons controlling as many as three or four different functions! Again, it is a long process that often involves a lot of tinkering. The only way to truly know if an instrument is repaired correctly is to test it out- as Mike explained earlier.

As we toured the shop, it was interesting to see some pretty beat-up instruments ready for repair. Mike pointed out that a trained eye will quickly evaluate whether an instrument can be restored or not. Some are admittedly not worth the money or effort to repair. But we were surprised at just how hopeless some fixable instruments look.

Take, for instance, the heavily dented horn in the picture to the right. It appears to be damaged to the point that it is simply scrap metal; or at best a conversation piece. However a skilled repairman, like Elswick, can carefully smooth out the horn with a dent rod (below).



The horn has now been restored to playable condition:

And this is exactly what gives Music For Hope, well, Hope. Although our task can seem daunting and our mission can seem bold, we very much believe that we can accomplish our goals. Just as this trumpet seemed hopeless, so do some of the stories we hear every day. We hear stories of children, looking for an outlet or a moment of escape from a tough situation. Stories of school band programs, unable to pay for the necessary equipment.

Through your help, we have been able to bring joy and relief to some hard circumstances. With your continued support, we aim to carry on our objective and assist wherever we can.

Please do what you can to lend a hand. You can donate instruments, money for repairs and shipping, or volunteer your time (www.musicforhope.org/giveinstrument.php).

Thanks again to Mike Elswick and Elswick Band Instrument Repair for allowing us to visit on a busy work day.