39. Trumpet Textural Support

*The uses of trumpets in a support role offer the orchestrator a wide palette with which to colour their orchestral textures.*

This is basic. As is discussed in other tips, trumpets devolved from a soloistic role in the Baroque Period to a support role in the Classical. Parts from Classical symphonies often have the trumpets playing simple octaves, 3rds, and 5ths behind the music for harmonic and rhythmic emphasis - and little else. Melodic passages are necessarily simple, covering the 6th, 8th-10th, and 12th partials when they happen at all. Nevertheless, these passages are absolutely worth studying to show how an economy of resources may be used to terrific effect.

Here’s a score-reading/thought experiment. Pick up any large-scale work with a wide variety of emotional and textural approaches. Score-read the trumpets, but ignore any melodic passages, focusing instead on support. With an imaginative orchestrator, you’ll uncover many ways the trumpets can colour a work, imbuing it with more vitality.

Let’s choose a few passages from Holst’s *Planets*. In *Mercury* on p. 56, Dover ed. (13th bar of Fig. IV), flutes, clarinets, and violins I & II are playing a soaring melody. Double reeds, bass clarinet, horns, and double basses are holding down an open B♭ spanned 3 octaves, while harps, violas, and cellos play harmonised patterns over a B♭ chord. A very luxurious texture. But what makes it positively glow? The trumpets, sitting on the mediant of the chord in a D octave. They’re not loud at all - in fact, they’re marked down to *mf* under everyone else’s *f*. Yet they they bring a radiance to the passage that would otherwise be absent, particularly as their tied D turns from mediant to dominant four bars later in the G minor chord.

Another beautifully crafted passage comes at the end of Saturn on p. 129 (13th bar of Fig. VI). Ignore all the flurries and the slowly rising melody in the strings. Focus instead on the harmony, a simple C major chord voiced as two stacked 6/4 chords. The English horn, bassoons, and trombones cover the G octaves, while four trumpets play stacked C 3rds, doubled in part by oboes and bass oboe. If this chord were scored in a loud passage, it would make little sense, as the double-reeds would be mostly superfluous. At *pp*, however, the effect is luminous, bringing a flavour of transcendence to the slowly ascending theme. Keep in mind that the trumpets aren’t muted, and this is proof right here that there’s little need of them for brass to play extremely soft in certain passages and registers. It also underscores the unique relationship between oboes and trumpets, also explored by French orchestrators such as Debussy and Lili Boulanger.
Fig. 39b: Holst, Saturn, brass and winds 13th bar of Fig. VI.

Fig. 39c: Holst, Jupiter, brass and winds bars 12-16.
Check out *Neptune* for more examples of heavy brass playing extremely soft background harmonies. For this tip, let’s jump back to Jupiter for two more support ideas for trumpet. The first one is the trumpet’s entrance at bar 12. There’s a tutti orchestral hit in the middle of the bar, with the whole wind section plus trombones, bass tuba, pizzicato double basses, and trumpets III & IV. Holst approximates an *fp* < arc here by having trumpets I & II start a simple *p*, C5 3rd on the same beat, and then crescendoing greatly across the next 3 bars. By also dropping the level of the interweaving string pattern, and then building dynamically while adding wind doubling, the passage suggests a huge increase of strength, even though minimal change is actually occurring.

The last example is textbook trumpet scoring, but it’s well worth looking at all the same. In the passage from Fig. IX-X, Holst brings the hymn-like section to a rousing conclusion. The trumpets come in on the pickup, taking over harmonic support duties from the horns on nearly identical notes, and marked down to the same blending dynamic of *mf*. Note how this part mutates into counterpoint with the returning horns four bars later, and then settles into a heavy emphasis on beats 1 and 3, as the strings, horns, and upper winds go all-out with an octave melody. Like many other passages in this work, the functional content is uncomplicated, but the balance and texture are stellar.

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Fig. 39d: Holst, Jupiter, brass and winds 13th bar of VI.