Legato on Trombone: An Overview

There are two “schools” of thought concerning legato technique on trombone.

#1: Tongue only when necessary.

Do not tongue if a natural slur (downward slide movement on an ascending interval, or upward slide movement on a descending interval) exists. Tonguing should only take place on notes where a smear (downward slide movement on a descending interval on the same partial, or an upward slide movement on an ascending interval on the same partial) and the goal is to make the tongued notes sound exactly like the natural slurs.

Or….

#2: Tongue every note, so that all articulations match.

This school is seen by some as a “shortcut” to even legato playing, while proponents of this method herald it as the only way to truly sound even in legato playing.

I propose, much like slide technique, a third “school” where the music dictates the method used. I believe that the trombone is a truly unique instrument, capable of portamento and other inflections that can be beautiful when used sparingly and at the appropriate times. Most would not play a jazz ballad with the #2 approach, but there are times when more “diction” or definition is needed in a particular legato phrase, and tonguing each note may give the desired effect. I have been a student of teachers in both “schools” and having done both, believe that the third school is the best of both worlds. Simply put, LET THE MUSICAL NEED DICTATE THE METHOD USED.