



## **THE CRAFT AND TECHNIQUES OF PERFORMANCE**

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# 1. Getting the Good Start

*What follows is a primer for starting well on the horn. If followed carefully and thoughtfully, a student (with help from a teacher) should be able to create a very substantial beginning. The details discussed would also be of assistance to any student who has perhaps made a few unsuccessful choices along the way. These are the basic details of our craft.*

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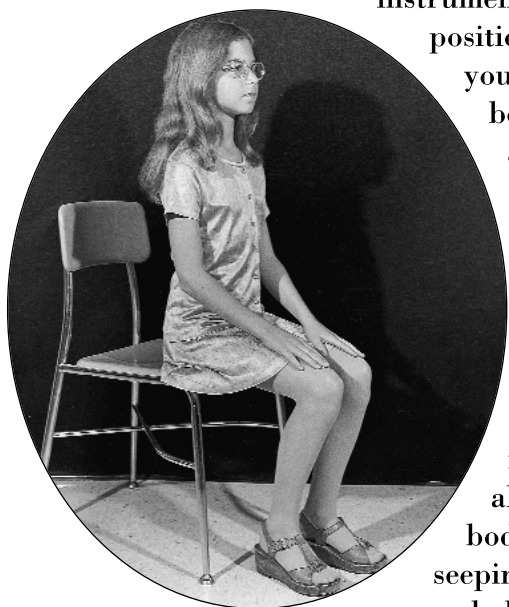
The horn, which is often called the French horn in North America and England, and also among jazz aficionados (to distinguish it from all of the other horns), is a popular instrument with the audiences of the world. Its mellow tone quality, smooth articulations, and true vocal character charm the listeners, while its ability to sound muscular and aggressive demands the attention and respect given to other powerful voices. The horn is an instrument of great beauty! We must never lose sight of this fact as we discuss and work with all of the little details which go into successful performances on the horn.

The horn is basically a metallic loudspeaker that is gently placed in contact with the player's lips. It is the player who produces and controls the sound, not the horn. The horn simply amplifies and enhances the player's sound. So, let's look first at what the player must do.

Relax! Relax as much as possible while you learn the following steps. Relaxation is the key to all successful development. You can identify relaxation through the physical sensations of warmth (in the hands and the face) and heaviness (throughout the body, especially the shoulders and the face). It is true that it takes the actions of many muscles working together to produce a tone. You must learn to use only the muscles needed and no others; all other muscles should remain relaxed and uninvolved. As often as possible, allow for the sensations of relaxation to enter all that you do while practicing and performing.

## POSTURE

Let's work first on posture. Good posture is not just about looking good; it affects all that you do on your instrument. You must first learn to hold your body in an upright and balanced position. It is your bones that should ultimately do this job, not your muscles. Let



your carriage carry you. You should avoid leaning on the backs of chairs because they differ drastically one from another and are almost never well aligned with the human body. (Most chairs are designed primarily to stack, not to support all possible body shapes.) While sitting on the edge of your chair in eager anticipation, with both feet flat on the floor creating a tripod with your torso, allow your body to feel a bit taller than normal by letting it follow your forehead as it points gently toward the stars. With such a lofty thought in mind, allow your shoulders to feel broader while not allowing them to raise. Imagine that your shoulders are very heavy. Your backbone should feel straight, not arched. Add to all of this a relaxed face starting at the top with sleepy eyes and on down to a loosened jaw. With all of the above in place, if you feel stiffness or tension anywhere in your body, especially in your face or hands, try to shake it out. Imagine the tension seeping out through the pores of your skin. Or better yet, tighten the tension even more, hold it for two seconds, and then let it all out, feeling the chills and warmth of

the blood rush, while returning your full body to a well-balanced, ascending posture.



## 9. High Expectations

*This chapter is primarily directed at public school teachers, conductors, and those giving lessons to young horn students in hopes of discouraging that dominant belief in the one label so often granted the horn. High expectations are needed of us all for dreams to be realized.*

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Have you ever heard it spoken, “The horn is the most difficult of all instruments to play”? Have you ever noticed how most published composers and arrangers are always extremely careful not to write anything too high, too low, too fast, too extended, or too exposed for the horn? Have you ever gone to a band or orchestra concert and heard the horn players sound as if they too believed that such ideas are accurate assumptions?

Based on their beliefs of the limitations of the horn’s capabilities, many music teachers expect less from horn players than other instrumentalists. They pass this attitude on to their students, some of whom go on to become professional performers. In turn these performers, along with overly cautious composers and professional conductors conditioned to ignore the horn section, transmit this lowered set of expectations to the audience.

To be realistic, the primary problem is ultimately inherent in the horn itself. The quality of its sound and attack make it virtually impossible to hide a missed note. For a string player, the near miss simply sounds out of tune, and for many other instruments it might be a wrong note with the right sound. However, for the horn player, the sound of a miss is an obvious calamity (often referred to as a “clam”). All performers miss notes, but with the horn there is often that minor explosion, a miss that admittedly destroys the musical line. This causes tentativeness or even fear in the performer, a cautious and frequently undemanding attitude from the conductor, and a general sense of uneasiness from an audience listening to an exposed horn solo. I contend that in most cases, it is this factor and this factor alone that has perpetuated the difficulty of the horn attitude. This mindset of fear then turns in on itself and becomes a greater problem than the inherent idiosyncracies of the horn.

However, when teachers and conductors expect as much from their horn players as they do from the other instrumentalists, these horn players are often much more successful and usually more accurate. They feel more a part of the group, much less ignored, and no longer feared. No one can succeed where success is not expected. A number of years ago, I was teaching a near beginner. He was quite intelligent and learned quickly. Near the end of one lesson he asked, “How high can the horn go?” It was then that I realized my answer to that important question could have quite an effect on his perception and potentially his high range. My answer could make that potentially slippery register a problem for him for some time to come, or I could mislead him (just a little) into a comfortable, free-blowing high range. I answered, “The written F to G (above high C) are good notes to work toward,” and I played them for him. (The embouchure I used to produce these notes was drastically curled inward producing a rather pinched sound, but he was unable to evaluate such a lack of tone quality at his age.) He took it all in stride and returned after a few weeks with a very secure high C.

My first teacher also kept his attitudes about the difficulties of the horn to himself. While in high school, I was learning a Mozart concerto and needed to know how to play a lip trill. He demonstrated one with very little fanfare, and I returned the next week performing lip trills with ease, which is the only way they can be produced.

Over the years, I’ve had a few students who had been told that they had a natural set of high chops but that their low ranges would be difficult for them. Such a judgment became a prediction, which in turn became true, at least until these powerful, negative labels were discarded. Students have been told that trills are impossible, that stopped horn below middle C is not possible to produce on the horn, and so on. In almost all cases these negative attitudes, fed to them by others in authority, have developed into walls that block out the joy of making music.

*“Men are not disturbed by things, but by the views which they take of them.”  
Epictetus (55–135 A.D.)*

Many aspects of horn playing can be made into impossible dreams by the views one takes of them. Quite often the view a student takes of a specific technique has been instilled by a teacher the first time the challenge presented itself. Do not pass on your prejudices or your own problems to your students. Try to discard such pessimistic attitudes and, as a result, raise expectations of these students. Sure, the horn has its difficulties, maybe even a few more problems than some other instruments, but why should that become the focus? That is