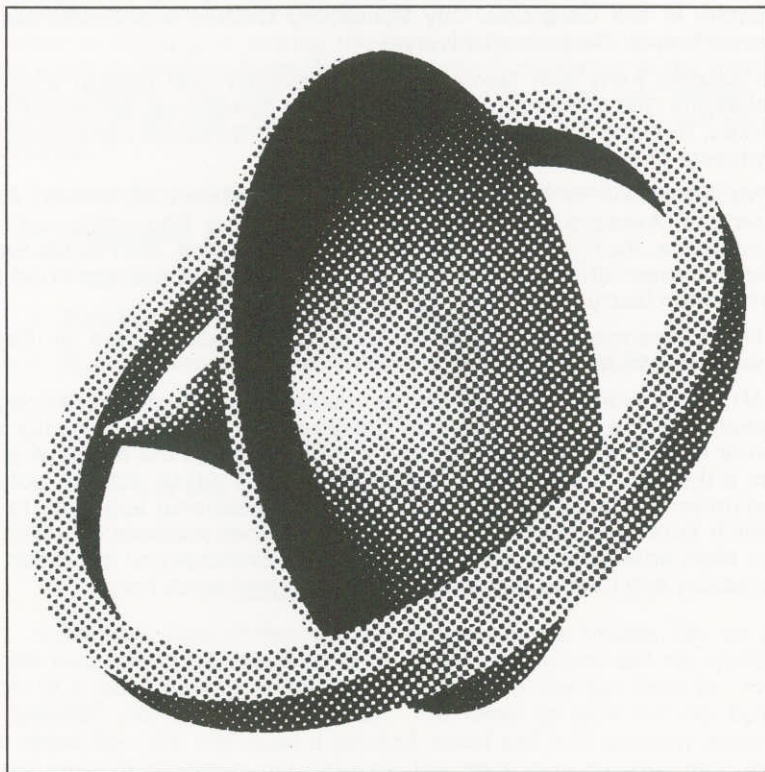


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Teaching the French Horn — Why All the “Mystery”?

by

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William C. Robinson received his Bachelor and Master degrees in Instrumental Music Education from the University of Oklahoma. He was director of Instrumental Music in the Norman, Oklahoma public schools from 1947 through 1958. For seven years during that time he was a member of the Oklahoma City Symphony Orchestra and also taught French horn at Oklahoma University.

He studied horn with George Yaeger, formerly first hornist with the Oklahoma City Symphony and San Antonio Symphony, and with Philip Farkas, formerly first hornist with the Chicago Symphony and presently Professor of Music at Indiana University.

Mr. Robinson is a charter member of the American School Band Directors' Association, a member of the Music Educators National Conference, the Florida Music Education Association, the Florida Bandmasters Association and the National Association of College Wind and Percussion Instructors.

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Mr. Robinson's many years of teaching students of all ages, including those in the elementary grades as well as those in junior and senior high school and college and university music majors have given him a thorough background of experience. His public school, college and university teaching, coupled with the professional approach to the French horn have provided a laboratory of experience out of which he has been able to learn what phases of the professional approach are necessary and helpful to young students of the French horn.

Frequent comments by Instrumental Music teachers who are not French horn players lead one to believe there is a great deal of “mystery” involved in teaching or playing the horn. Many of these “mysteries” stem from a lack of clearly understanding a few basic fundamentals in the approach to horn teaching. This veil of “mysteries” can be lifted only through the understanding of a clear, concise, logical explanation of teaching and playing procedures.

For the sake of clarity, the procedure will be explained in eight sections:

1. Embouchure Establishment
2. Tone Production
3. Breath Support and Use of the Tongue
4. Holding Position of the Instrument and Left Hand Position
5. Right Hand Position
6. Use of the Double Horn
7. Upper and Lower Range Development
8. Concentration in Practice

1. Embouchure Establishment

A few basic facts, if thoroughly understood by the student, can set him on the road toward the development of a good embouchure and the establishment of a sound foundation for horn playing. First, the lips must be “even” or “parallel” and must vibrate “evenly.” The lower lip must not slip behind the upper lip—this will cause a pinched sound and will seriously handicap upper range development. To make the lips even, most students must move the lower jaw forward slightly. The student can blow an air column and check it with his hand in front of the aperture to see if the air column moves straight out or down. If it moves in a downward direction it is a likely assumption that the lips are not even and that the lower lip will slip behind the upper one in the high register.

Next, the student should develop a free, unforced vibration of the lips. There must be a “controlled relaxation” in the corners of the lips, and the “buzz” must be free and not forced or squeezed. This can be practiced with a mouthpiece rim (or visualizer) as well as with the mouthpiece.

It is generally agreed that the mouthpiece should be placed $\frac{2}{3}$ on the upper lip and $\frac{1}{3}$ on the lower. This may have to be varied slightly for very young students with very small lips, but usually the bottom rim of

will not be lower than the lower edge of the lip, however, that the placement of the lower lip to be inside the cup. For aperture control—too little will not work properly. (It should generally not be in a

that pitches can be controlled by the size of the aperture. The pitch is controlled by the lip muscles, not by the tongue. The student can produce different pitches on the instrument in the same manner he can also play those same tones on a different instrument.

Tone Production

Established and is functioning properly, the student should focus on the embouchure, not with the embouchure of producing the tone. If the embouchure is not working of the breath. The embouchure must be relaxed, and the student must control lip tension. Since the tendency will always be to increase lip tension, the student should try to use the tongue for control. The tone must have a "core" and not be a "fluffy," "dead" quality. If the tone is not "ringing" and carry to the back of the throat, it will not have the desired levels.

Use of the Tongue

With the tone cannot have life. The development of the tone is described in many ways; sometimes in terms of the student but not to another. However, once the student is able to use the breath to create sound he is using the correct use of the breath. Breath pressure is the key. If the student thinks of the technique of "moving" the air column moving through every tone he plays, the tone will have life. While proper setting of the breath is necessary, the student should not be allowed to create tension on other muscles, arms, throat and neck.

The most important factor in conjunction with the tongue is the distance from the point of contact as the air. The tip of the tongue is usually placed against the teeth; the higher it is placed, the more tension. The feeling of "releasing" the tongue. The tongue motion should be across the mouth, not back against the flow of air.

The breath must work "independently." The changing the size of the aperture must not

affect the movement of the air column or the breath pressure. When the student can maintain steady breath pressure and keep the tongue and embouchure functioning properly he will be on the road to correct, relaxed playing with a minimum of mouthpiece pressure. For every attack the student should concentrate on using a fast stream of air.

4. Holding Position of the Instrument and Left Hand Position

Because of its unusual shape the horn is a very awkward instrument to hold. There are three things to keep in mind:

- (1) The position of the instrument must not upset the embouchure by changing the angle of the mouthpiece.
- (2) The bell must not be pointed in toward the body, thus deadening or muffling the sound.
- (3) The holding position must allow the left hand to remain relaxed so that the fingers can work properly.

This four step procedure can simplify the holding position:

- (1) Sit in a position with the body turned at about a 45 degree angle to the right.
- (2) Face the front from the waist up, without changing the sitting position.
- (3) Bring the bell of the horn to rest on the right leg. It should fit easily at this angle so that the bell will not point toward the stomach. The mouthpiece should not point to one side or the other, but should go straight forward, at a slightly downward angle from horizontal.
- (4) Lean forward slightly, bringing the head down a little to meet the mouthpiece so that the angle at which the mouthpiece meets the embouchure will be correct. Care should be exercised so that the embouchure will not be upset by the mouthpiece position.

The fingers of the left hand should be gently curved so that they touch the valve levers in a "relaxed but firm" manner. The fingers should always maintain contact with the valve lever—they should never rise above the lever. The fingering should be part of the attack; the finger should not move before the attack. Concentrated practice on this point will result in a clean, precise technique.

5. Right Hand Position

The right hand must be in a comfortable position, must cover the tone hole just enough to give the desired "sheen" to the tone, but must not distort or muffle the sound.

Here is an accepted procedure:

- (1) Keep the fingers together and straight; let the thumb touch the first finger at about the second knuckle, or between the first and second knuckles. This will cause a slight cupping of the palm.

all of the horn in a vertical position, with against the side of the bell opposite the body.

to the point where the sound will be

the Double Horn

7 teachers have asked:

t to transpose when he starts to learn to horn?" The answer is, of course, that you e. When playing the double horn you are tones are played with the thumb valve ie thumb valve not depressed. Historically been the instrument that produced the ch horn tone. Therefore it seems logical ie quality" in all ranges of the horn. For beginners on the single F horn or on the ngle Bb horn can be used of course, but e tone does not become thin, sharp and for a young student to learn the F horn from the cornet. Much more complicated woodwind instruments without too much

arts his study on the F horn and is ready e horn, where should he change to the ess the thumb valve?) As a general rule, nge on the larger horn (F horn) and the (Bb horn). There is some difference of int of change from one horn to the other, nge—the area between G# and C#:

tones in this range generally match very

1 on both F and Bb horns. The fingerings e same for both horns. Above this range certainly the reliability of attacks seems it would seem the student could change ere from G# to C#. The tones at the D, Db and C are thin and sharp on the be played on the Bb horn except in rare tweigh the tonal and tuning disadvantages.

a in the low range for the tones between

while this practice may have merit

agility, the student should remember that

the tone quality does change noticeably and should realize that these tones can be mastered on the F horn.

7. Upper and Lower Range Development

One very important factor in the development of the upper range is the use of lip tension. Most students automatically use too much lip tension. The problem seems to lie in learning to use a *minimum* amount of lip tension. Here is an effective method for developing tone control with minimum lip tension.

In regular daily practice (particularly in the first minutes of the practice session) the student should try to establish tone production using almost no lip tension. Very little tension is necessary to play middle "C";

the student should try to develop the "C" one octave higher



with the same lip relaxation through controlling the size of the aperture and letting the breath "carry" the tone. When less tension is used more

breath is necessary. The student who learns to play this octave



with almost no lip tension will find that he has moved his range up almost one octave—and will have enhanced the ease of playing in the upper range tremendously. The student must remember that the use of too much lip tension is almost sure to creep into his playing. The development of relaxation requires his constant concentration. The student should understand that as lip tension is lessened the breath must be increased. That upper range development will be hindered greatly if too much mouthpiece pressure is used. These four points should be remembered and concentrated upon during practice:

- (1) Control of the aperture
- (2) Adequate breath
- (3) Minimum of lip tension and mouthpiece pressure
- (4) "Letting" the lips vibrate freely

Tones in the low range, particularly in the middle-low range, often

create difficulties:



When playing low tones the

jaw should be lowered and the mouthpiece placement maintained, thus enabling the student to play the entire range smoothly, with uniform tone quality. This cannot be done if the mouthpiece setting is shifted on the lips. It is usually difficult to "break through" the volume barrier in the middle-low range. A few minutes of loud practice in this range each day is probably

break through" this barrier. Each tone of the
practiced as loudly as possible, that is with-
in this is done for a few minutes each day,
out of the range will be brought about in a

range be extended in each direction in a con-
sistent control of the complete range. The com-
pleted thoroughly each day.

Illustration in Practice

an organized routine of practice which
necessary to give him physical control of the
have purpose:

- pitch at all dynamic levels.
- control center of the tone.
- breath pressure and keep the air column

and gain control of the instrument in all

pressure constant and the air column moving
develop technique and the embouchure develops

embouchure the correct aperture control for
flexibility and range control.

- quality in the over-all playing.
- quality in the playing.
- technique of lip trills.

- position of the tongue—
- things:

- embouchure relax.
- more sensitive to response.
- no work.

needs concentration. Practice without con-
centrating" and accomplishes very little.