

# FIRST LESSONS ON HORN

By Dale Clevenger and Alice Render

The horn is a frustrating instrument to learn. Beginning piano students can make beautiful sounds right away. Violin students may start on a half-size instrument, but there is no half-size horn. Many young horn students have to cope with physical limits in much the same way that some young trombonists cannot reach the 6th or 7th position. Students who have played the flute for six months may brag about the newest piece they have learned, while a horn student struggles to produce a good basic tone and cope with the overtone series. There are only three or four valves to operate, but the concept of how a scale can be played with overtones is not explained to many beginners. One of the main problems teachers of beginning horn students have to contend with is the frustration factor. The horn is a difficult instrument to play.

The instrument feels awkward because the left arm is higher than the right, and the right hand feels constricted. You have to use one aperture for high notes and another for low ones. It helps to explain at the outset that the horn is an F-pitched instrument. When a student plays a C on the horn, he cannot go to the piano and plunk a C. It is surprising how many students come to us and do not



understand this basic concept because their director never explained it.

## EMBOUCHURE

There are no absolutes on embouchure placement, but  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the rim on the upper lip and  $\frac{1}{3}$  on the lower is a good target. Another way to think of this is to put the bottom of the rim just inside the fleshy, pink rim of the lower lip, letting the top of the rim touch wherever it may. For most students this will put about  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the rim on the upper lip, but lips, teeth, and jaws come in various sizes and call for different solutions.

It is important for a beginning horn student to buzz with the mouthpiece alone right from the outset, especially given the bulkiness of the instrument. The air is the most important thing to work on. Young children are usually uncomfortable taking in a full amount of air. I

often use Arnold Jacobs's fight or fright image. The kind of breath you need every time you play the horn is the kind you would take if there were a guy behind you with a big knife. Don't worry about whether the shoulders, stomach, or chest move. Any kind of movement is fine. Don't even bother talking about the form of breathing, just the fact that it has to happen naturally and there has to be a big breath taken in every time.

The buzzing sensation will seem foreign to beginners, so encourage them to make any noise at first. It helps to buzz along with them; start in the middle register and move to lower notes. Play a glissando for them to match, moving over the full range to find out where they are most comfortable. Explain that by making the aperture smaller and closing the jaw up a little the notes will go higher, while a wider aperture and lowering the jaw slightly is the way to get a lower note. If a student puffs out his cheeks like Dizzy Gillespie, correct this at once. Explain that the fleshy part of the chin should be firm, to act as an anchor, and that the lips are tiny muscles to alter the tone. In addition to perfecting all of the physical aspects of



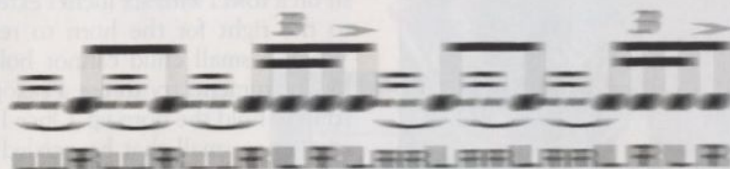
playing horn, it is crucial to be sure that air, or wind, is always passing through the horn. The intake and outflow of air is absolutely crucial because in the grand scheme of things the simplicity of the statement "wind and song" should be the main focus.

Watch for any shifting or movement of the mouthpiece in anticipation of playing a note after breathing. Some beginners use almost no pressure between the lips and mouthpiece. They play with flaccid lips and sometimes blow their lips right out of the mouthpiece because there is too little pressure. Very few beginners will use too much pressure at first, except perhaps a macho boy who wants to play high notes right away. You have to tell students to press a little more, but demonstration and experimentation is so important.

Most small children have a lung capacity of only 1-1½ liters of air, so the object is to get them to use the maximum they can push out. Students rarely breathe too much, so it often helps to suggest wasting more air and taking another breath. Point out how much better the sound is if they use more air. When they can get a good sound on a home base note, such as a C, try using this as a reference point throughout the lesson. Then add a G and use these both as reference points from which to gradually develop an octave of good notes.

It is so important for a beginning horn student to see how someone else plays a note and have an example to copy. Even if the teacher only studied horn for a few weeks in college while learning to play all the instruments, it helps to demonstrate everything for a beginner. An alternative is to bring in an advanced student from high school or college. Every beginner should have a mirror on the music stand to observe where the mouthpiece meets the lips. If a beginner can see how a good position looks, he will be able to match this during practice sessions at home and relate how it looks to a beautiful tone.

It is unfortunate that 50% of entering college freshmen have bad embouchures to correct. Either they did not receive good instruction at the outset or developed bad habits, but it is very difficult to change embouchure at this stage. A beginner should not use a mouthpiece with a very deep cup. A middle-of-the-road mouthpiece works best, such as a Bach 12, a Schilke 27, or a Farkas model.



## Percussion methods class a bit foggy?

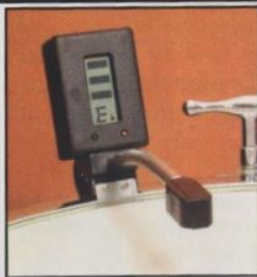
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The cleanest and clearest articulation is produced when the tongue meets the bottom of the upper teeth. This position always provides good potential for varying the articulation. The attack (the initial articulation or the start of the note in the case of non-tongued notes) is fuzzy if the tongue contacts higher up on the upper teeth or the roof of the mouth, which may also interfere with the flow of air. That does not mean that double or triple tonguing can't be done on the roof of the mouth. Arnold Jacobs recommends practicing without tonguing at all because it forces a player to move the air, which is what produces the tone in the first place. This is a good technique for starting solos and can be practiced on the mouthpiece alone. Beginners can quickly hear and sense the value of playing and performing without tongued attacks.

#### **Holding the Horn**

To play the French horn, students have to put the mouthpiece on their face while holding one hand inside the bell. Many beginners are simply too small to do both, but it is far more important to put the mouthpiece on the face correctly than to worry about the hand. Sometimes a child is too small to hold the bell on his leg because his torso is so short that the mouthpiece will hit him in the middle of the forehead. The best solution is to rest the horn on the chair instead of the leg, using a towel or a book to cushion and raise the horn to the correct level. Most people put the horn on their leg because this is where they think it belongs. They do this even if it means craning their neck to reach the mouthpiece. The opposite should be the case. Put the mouthpiece where it has to be to form a good embouchure and let the

bell sit wherever it can. Embouchure problems are much trickier to correct later on than the hand position in the bell. Little kids take up only half of a chair anyway, so it often works just fine for the horn to rest on the chair to the right of the right leg. The child should sit on a towel with six inches extending to the right for the horn to rest on. When a small child cannot hold this big instrument, try to use a saxophone strap to hold the horn up. Once I had a student so small that he needed to sit on a telephone book. The solution will vary with every child, but do whatever is reasonable and logical, not what is written in some book you have read. Find a way to get the mouthpiece to meet the lips in a good position. If the horn still seems too unwieldy, there is nothing wrong with starting a student on another instrument and switching to horn. Frank Brouk started on trombone, and I started on trumpet. A cornet is the most likely choice for a small student, but it doesn't matter.

#### **FIRST HORN NOTES**

After buzzing only the mouthpiece for about five to ten minutes, a beginner should put the mouthpiece in the horn and play a whole note. The note

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*Prior to joining the Chicago Symphony Orchestra in 1966, principal hornist Dale Clevenger played with the American Symphony Orchestra and the Kansas City Philharmonic. He currently teaches at Roosevelt University, where he is professor of horn.*

can be a C, E, G, or even a low G (horn pitch), whatever comes out most readily. Watch that the mouthpiece does not slide downward; this is the natural effect of gravity on the horn in the hands of a small child. When a student appears for the second lesson, the embouchure will probably have moved down from  $\frac{2}{3}$  upper lip to half upper and half lower lip. Move it back up and emphasize the importance of practicing in front of a mirror to verify that the mouthpiece is where it should be. If a student knows this is likely to happen and looks out for it, the odds are improved that a good embouchure placement will emerge.

When adding the horn to the mouthpiece, a student should hold the horn with the left hand while the right hand holds the bell. If a student can reach around to put the right hand into the bell, the fingers should be fairly stiff and nearly flat in the bell, not curved. The shape should look like a handshake or a soft karate chop. The top of the thumb should touch the top of the bell as the bottom of the hand rests on the bottom of the bell. A good reminder is to put two or three pieces of tape on top of each other inside the bell to form a ridge the student can feel. The objective is to line up the top part of the tape with the thumb touching inside the bell. This way the student can feel if the right hand is inserted too far inside the bell. Phil Farkas has said that a player has the best hand position if when he moves inward a half inch it will be too far and give a closed sound while if the hand is moved out a half inch it will not affect the sound at all. It is better for the hand to be too far out than too far in. The hand position is less important than a good embouchure during the early stages of horn study. A very small student should just put the right hand on the outside of the bell to hold the instrument steady.

As a player gets better a good right-hand technique becomes ever more important, but during the first few months most directors worry too much about this refinement. Bad hand position is an easy fix later, but a bad embouchure or poor breathing habits are critical to early progress and are difficult, however not impossible, to change later.

For the first year try to end every lesson on an upbeat mood because learning the horn is so frustrating. Horn students get little moral support in band because so much of the music is just a



bunch of oom-pahs. A horn teacher should strive to make lessons a source of encouragement as well as information. A private teacher usually sees a student once a week, but a school director sees him daily and should try to find music with interesting horn parts that will be a source of encouragement. We always try to work on students' band or orchestra music because they want to play well in front of their peers. Horn players usually make more mistakes than most of the others in the ensemble, and because of this they often get teased or made fun of. Patience, encouragement, and good fundamentals are extremely important for all young music students, and their teachers as well. □

### Woody Herman Workshop

The University of Wisconsin Milwaukee will host its second annual Woody Herman Educational Jazz workshop on November 13-15, 2008. Open to bands from middle school through college, the workshop includes instrument clinics with guest clinicians, improvisation sessions, and a big band reading session for directors. The final performance will feature Woody Herman alumni including Steve Houghton and Jim Pugh. Graduating senior high school students can compete for the prestigious Woody Herman-Sister Fabian Scholarship Award. In 2007 four students were selected to receive the award. For additional information and to add our name to the e-list for updates on the festival, contact Curt Hanrahan, director of UWM jazz ensembles at 414-229-2451 or hanraha6@uwm.edu.

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