

HOW TO BY A FRENCH HORN

By Deborah Schmidt

Composers write for the French horn to show heroics (The Star Wars theme), exude melancholy introspection (Saving Private Ryan), portray the prankster (Till Eulenspiegel), and evoke the outdoors through, for example, the frolic of the hunt (Cesar Franck's *Le Chasseur Maudit*), the motion of the river (Smetana's *The Moldau*), and the rush of the open air (Beethoven's *Pastoral Symphony*). The French horn has also been given a starring role by popular artists as diverse as the Beatles, the Who, Duke Ellington, Harry Connick Jr. and Stan Kenton. The regularly played orchestral literature requires the hornist to have a range of four octaves, the same range as a chorus of mixed voices, and to be able to play with the finger dexterity of a cellist, the agility of a clarinetist, the volume and brightness of a trumpet, and the soft whisper of a flute. Dennis Brain was the first modern-day French horn virtuoso, bringing the horn back to prominence as a solo instrument in the 1940s and 50s. Not only did he revive concertos by Mozart, Haydn, and Strauss, he commissioned many new works for the instrument. This solo tradition continued with artists such as Barry Tuckwell and Hermann Baumann. In the United States, Myron Bloom, Dale Clevenger, James Chambers, Mason Jones and Julie Landsman, among others, have raised the bar for orchestral horn playing.



BACKGROUND

Brass instruments evolved from hollowed out animal horns. In the 1600s, horns and trumpets were basically the same instrument. These instruments came in a variety of different lengths, used cupped mouthpieces, had bells which were forward-facing, were cylindrical and could be played with one hand. In the 1700s, the French started making larger two handed hunting horns. These "French horns" were conical instruments with a backward facing bell and a funnel-shaped mouthpiece which evolved into the modern-day horn. The horns were pitched in a variety of keys, and thus come in a variety of tube lengths. They were called French horns to distinguish them from the smaller, one-handed horns used in England.

These changes helped to create the mellow sound that is the trademark of the French horn. Today, most if not all of the non-English -speaking countries use the designation horn, not French horn, to describe the instrument. (To add even more confusion, the English horn is a double-reed instrument in the oboe family.) Valves on horns began to appear in the early part of the 1800s, taking us to the valved horn we know today.

THE HORN FAMILY

While there are many types of modern horns, today's players use the double horn the majority of the time. This horn is actually two horns in one with a common bell, leadpipe and some additional tubing that is shared. One horn is pitched in F (about 12 feet in length) and one pitched in Bb (about eight feet in length) to make a double horn. There are single F horns (rarely used in this country except by beginners) and single Bb horns (sometimes used for chamber and solo work.) Many principal horn players also own a descant horn pitched in Bb and high F (the Bb side is the same as the double horn but the F side is pitched one octave higher). We also see triple horns which have all three of these horns in one instrument. As with other brass instruments, different manufacturers make different bore sizes and tapers and use a variety of alloys. Mellophones are marching versions of French horns.



HOW HARD IS IT TO PLAY?

The French horn is often considered to be more difficult to play than the trumpet or trombone. The size of the mouthpiece and the closeness of the notes require that a horn player have very good pitch-recognition. But, with the assistance of an experienced teacher and about a half-hour of practice a day, a new student can learn to play several notes in the first lesson and simple melodies by the second or third lessons.

SINGLE VERSUS DOUBLE

Some may find it controversial, but this writer recommends a double horn as a first purchase. Single F horns are often recommended to new players because some believe that a new student needs to develop the true F horn sound from the start, and that single horns are easier to play since they are smaller, lighter, and require less complex fingerings. The single F horn has only three valves to master rather than the four of the

double horn. It is easier to learn the fingerings associated with three valves, but it's worth noting that beginning clarinet and flute players have to learn many more fingering combinations. When a beginning student switches from a single horn to a double, typically after one year, they must then learn a whole new set of fingerings. The fact that the double horn is bigger and heavier is not very important since hornists balance the horn on their thighs when they play it. Because the Bb side of the double horn is shorter (the same length as the trombone) the notes are farther apart and actually easier to hit with more accuracy than on the single F horn. With a competent teacher, the beginning student can learn to achieve the characteristic horn sound on a full double horn without much difficulty.

In cases where the student may in fact be too small to hold the double horn, the new tight-wrapped single horns may be the best way to get started.

BUYING YOUR FIRST HORN

When a student is ready to buy their first horn, besides understanding how to evaluate a horn, there are many questions to answer. Single or double? Rent or buy? New or used? Student or professional? Let's run through the questions quickly. While I have already indicated my bias, if size of the horn or initial price is important, buy a single. A single F student horn should cost under \$1000. Just realize that if the student continues to play the horn, this horn will have to be replaced relatively soon.

RENT OR BUY?

In an informal survey of music stores in New York city, I was surprised to find that many did not have double horns available to rent. If a new rental horn is available, it may cost as much as a third of the purchase price for the first year of rental. Good used horns can cost almost as much as new horns. A student can find a good value in a used horn. When considering a used horn, be wary of:

- worn, thin and patched bells
- leaking valves
- noisy valves
- slides that are worn unevenly or which move too freely or not freely enough
- broken solder joints or braces.

While most of these problems can be fixed, leaking valves can be a very expensive repair. Unless the student is looking for a particular horn or money is an issue, new horns are a much more reliable option. If a student decides to buy a used horn, make sure that a professional looks at the used horn prior to purchase and that the seller allows for an evaluation period to make your decision when your money is still refundable.

STUDENT OR PROFESSIONAL?

There are two general categories of double horns - factory production horns and custom horns. The major manufacturers of factory horns produce sturdy student-level horns as well as professional horns. The student horns will withstand more wear and tear and should cost around \$1,400. The professional horns should cost in the \$2,000 to \$4,000 range. Custom horns, which cost in the \$4,000 to 9,000-plus range, typically require long waits, can be more delicate to handle, can be heavy and can be more difficult to play for the early student.

To evaluate the quality of a horn, the student should make sure that the horn:

- allows notes to be centered easily
- does not break up at loud volume levels
- responds easily at all volume levels of attack
- plays evenly throughout all the registers
- has a pleasing over tone quality
- plays in tune
- is comfortable to hold.

A student should get help from a horn teacher or band director to perform this evaluation.

WHERE TO BUY YOUR INSTRUMENT

Students can buy horns from individuals and retailers. In either case, make sure there is clear information about the warranty, the return policy, and the availability of repair services.

A visit to the local retailer provides the easiest way to try different models and makes of horns at one time. A retailer will often have both new and used horns. Buying through a mail-order retailer is also an option. With the advent of the Internet, used and new horns are available on ebay and amazon.com, and other Web sites. These are "buyer-beware" places. If you use an on-line auction service, be sure to escrow your money and get a trial period so that you can have the horn inspected and played by a professional. Remember you might have difficulty returning this horn and are usually responsible for shipping regardless of the outcome of the transaction. The seller might not be able to play the horn, so advertised descriptions can be inaccurate. Even with pictures, the true condition of the horn can be different than described.

MOUTHPIECES

If your budget allows it, go to a retailer and try mouthpieces. A new horn will come with a mouthpiece but each set of lips and teeth structure (embouchure) is different and the choice of a mouthpiece is extremely personal. Pick a cup and bore size that is moderate (the retailer can guide you) and a rim that is comfortable. A one-piece silver mouthpiece is fine for the beginner (and many professionals) and less expensive than the two-piece gold plated models.

CARE AND MAINTENANCE

With proper maintenance, your horn will give you years of playing pleasure. Keep all slides well-greased, use a light oil on the internal valve mechanism, and a medium-weight oil on the external valve linkage. Make sure you purchase oils which will not leave a gummy residue. It is also advisable to push all of the slides in at the end of each day to prevent internal corrosion.

You can learn to play the horn, have fun, enjoy the challenges of this instrument, and participate in musical activities of all kinds for a long time to come!

Deborah Schmidt is an active free-lance musician and teacher in the New York area. She was principal horn with the Filharmonica de la Ciudad de Mexico and has performed with the Albany Symphony, Hudson Valley Philharmonic, New Jersey Symphony, Opera Northeast, Westchester Hudson Opera, and the Modern Brass Quintet.

Editor's Note: How to Buy a French Horn continues our series articles on the history and use of musical instruments. School Band and Orchestra grants permission to photocopy and distribute this article to both students and parents.