Introducing the Horn

Essentials for New Hornists and Their Teachers

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Preface

*Introducing the Horn* is intended to serve as a handbook and guide for new horn players.

One thing I have noted as a horn teacher is that the students who have achieved the most were given a good start on the horn. I was lucky; my high school band director was a horn player and gave me that good start (I switched from the trumpet to the horn in ninth grade). This was augmented about two years later by a reading of the classic text by Philip Farkas, *The Art of French Horn Playing* (Summy Birchard, 1956) and private lessons with a local university professor.

A good start is imperative to good horn playing. A player with a good start has the potential to make great progress. This does not always happen as the horn has a number of very specific, unique technical issues, unlike other brass instruments. My hope for this publication is to briefly cover, in one volume, the range of performance-related topics that are most essential for giving a new hornist a good start so that we may see more and better horn players in our schools and communities.

*Introducing the Horn* is also meant to serve as a handy resource for music educators who teach young hornists and may also very effectively serve as a supplemental text for a horn methods or techniques class for undergraduate music education students.

I have many people to thank, including my parents, students, and colleagues past and present, but in particular, I would like to sincerely thank all of my horn teachers, especially the first, my high school band director who gave me my good start on the horn, David Hodges, who greatly impacted both my teaching and performance.

John Ericson
Welcome to the horn!

As I often tell students, in choosing the horn, you have made a wise decision! The horn has some of the most important parts in band and orchestral literature (“the sound of the horn is the soul of the orchestra”—Robert Schumann) and arguably the best quality of solo works of all the brass instruments.

In my teaching, I have noted close to a 50/50 split between players who actually started on the horn and players who came to the horn from other instruments. Some band directors actually shy away from starting students on the horn. While the horn can be difficult to manage for young students, due mostly to the size of the instrument, if a student wants to start on the horn, I say by all means start on the horn. All a new horn player really requires is a decent ear for music and the desire to play. Every band benefits from having more horn players.

Most frequently, those switching to the horn will have come from either the trumpet or from woodwind instruments, and often today, through the marching mellophone. The mellophone (“mello”) is a bell front substitute for the horn used in marching bands. Pitched in the key of F, it uses a somewhat different mouthpiece than a horn (typically very similar to a trumpet mouthpiece--many players use, as an alternative, a horn mouthpiece with an adapter, which would be my recommendation) and the fingerings are the same as on the trumpet (and thus are somewhat different than horn fingerings). Also, articulations feel somewhat different because the instrument is half as long as the horn. In spite of these issues, it can be an effective bridge to playing horn in concert ensembles, as it begins to get the embouchure set for the range of the horn and accustoms the ear to hearing pitches in F.

Types of Horns

By far and away, the most popular type of horn among amateurs and professionals worldwide is the double horn. This type of horn combines the advantages of single F and B♭ horns into one instrument. The lower range is performed on the F horn for its superior tone quality, but the B♭ horn is superior for performance in the upper range of the horn. From the player’s perspective, however, it is really not “two horns in one,” as standard fingerings take you automatically between the F and B♭ horns (“thumb up or thumb down”) as is appropriate.
Double Horn

The above instrument is a full double horn. Different models of this type of horn can look fairly different, but all have the same pairings of long and short valve slides on the three main valves and work on the same acoustical principles. It should be noted that while most double horns are set up to “stand” in F, some players (especially in Europe) prefer instruments that stand in B♭. It makes no difference in terms of tone if the instrument stands in F or B♭.

Horns are also made as single horns in either the key of F or in B♭. While the single F horn is currently only used by beginners in school situations (the Vienna Philharmonic being the lone exception to this rule, where nineteenth century style “Vienna horns” with crooks are still used), the single B♭ horn is preferred over the double horn by a fair number of amateur and professional players, particularly in Europe.

Single F Horn and Single B♭ Horn