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Horn Notes Edition
Preface

In the beginning, there were a lot of different brass instruments in the alto range that were used in community and military bands. In the late 1950s, a new era dawned in terms of alternate instruments in the range of the horn that, right or wrong, has come to be dominated by one instrument: the marching mellophone, or “mello,” as it is commonly called.

When I marched as an undergraduate at Emporia State University in the early 1980s, we used our concert double horns in marching band, so there was no problem transitioning between the marching field and the concert hall. It was good chop time as a horn player. I also marched with a double horn in high school, but it is a different world today.

Mellophones are a topic that horn teachers don’t talk about much, especially in print. It is not that we don’t have thoughts on the subject, but rather that our thoughts are not necessarily publishable. While marching band and drum corps can be great outlets musically and socially for our students, mellophone playing is often viewed as being an issue that has to be dealt with in such a way as to minimize the damage to “real” horn playing.

While there are marching band positions for horn players other than mellophone (percussion, guard, or drum major), a hornist can still have a strong experience physically and musically on the instrument if it is approached correctly. With a comfortable mouthpiece the mellophone is very responsive, has a pleasant sound, and can actually be fun to play. In this volume I hope to present information that will contribute to the most positive of marching experiences.

If you have come to middle (alto) range brass playing via the mellophone from another instrument, consider learning the horn as well! We could always use a few more good horn players and we have great literature to play. As an alternative, play tenor horn in a brass band to expand your repertoire and musical experiences. Welcome to the middle range!

John Ericson
Section One:
About the Instruments

What is a mellophone?

The answer is not as obvious as one might think.

To start off, a mellophone is not an overgrown trumpet or cornet. It is an alto range brass instrument frequently used in marching ensembles. Its roots are in the nineteenth century.

While at first glance it might appear to be a precursor to the horn, the most direct ancestor at least in spirit is what is commonly referred to today as a “classic” mellophone. These were manufactured in large numbers starting around the end of the nineteenth century; many survive today. Typically, they were constructed to lay in F alto (an octave shorter than a horn) with an $E_b$ crook to facilitate reading of $E_b$ parts (with other crooks included in the more deluxe models). They look very much like a small piston valve horn but the bell faces to the left and the pistons are fingered with the right hand, the opposite of horn, and the mouthpiece is larger. The rotary valve visible on the main slide of the example above, manufactured by King, connects to a crook used to re-pitch the instrument in $E_b$. While mellophone enthusiasts would argue that this instrument stands on its own merits, having its own unique voice and some advantage over the horn in technical passage work, practical reality is that the “classic”
mellophone was, in its era, often used as a substitute for the horn in amateur groups. (For more information on this topic, please refer to the historical footnote on page 22).

The other major ancestor is the tenor horn, which is also referred to as an alto horn in the United States. This E\textsubscript{b} instrument visually looks like a baby Euphonium. While uncommon today, it still remains a standard instrument in British style brass bands. The mouthpiece of this instrument is midway in size between that of a cornet and a baritone, roughly the same as the type of mouthpiece for which a “classic” mellophone was also designed, but with a larger, trumpet size shank. The E\textsubscript{b} tenor horn was, in the United States, the standard substitute for the horn in marching groups prior to the introduction of the marching mellophone and was, from the perspective of a player of the “classic” mellophone, a very easy instrument to double on.

While the bell points up on the standard concert version of this instrument (the above example is by Buescher), bell front models were produced in large quantities for use in marching bands on the same pattern as “American-style” bell front Euphoniums. Solo altos were also constructed in a bell front shape not unlike that of today’s marching mellophones.

Depending on the maker, modern mellophones in their initial forms looked very much like classic mellophones, but with the bell forward, or were more squared off in the manner of bell forward alto horns with a larger bell. Over time the design has become more compact and easier to hold. The following is a typical modern marching mellophone, manufactured by Jupiter.