

Playing High Horn



*A Handbook for High Register Playing,
Descant Horns, and Triple Horns*

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Horn Notes Edition
674 East Maria Lane
Tempe, AZ 85284 USA
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ISBN 978-0-9801030-0-7

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Chapter 1.

Developing the High Range of the Horn

High range development is a topic that comes up with every horn student. Advanced horn players need to easily negotiate a range of four octaves with the characteristic warm sound that is a hallmark of the instrument. Facility and accuracy of tone production in the high register is the result of a combination of many factors working smoothly together.

While today there is a general division between high and low horn players, jumping backward in horn history, in the early nineteenth century there was a very distinct division, much more distinct than that seen among modern hornists, more along the lines of the division between tenor and bass trombone players. Judging from method books of the period, high horn players rarely played below written middle C and low horn players rarely played above G above the staff. As a thought experiment, imagine if you never practiced below written middle C. What would high C feel like? What would G above that feel like? What would C in the staff sound like? Low C?

The embouchure formation all horn players use today is a version of the low horn model of the past. Focusing too much on high horn creates a danger of developing a trumpet-like embouchure of the type that high horn players of the early nineteenth century must have employed. This is one reason why some teachers shy away from teaching high horn. Balance between registers in your playing is very important to developing a solid modern high horn embouchure with a characteristic tone quality.

High notes are produced primarily by your vibrating lips and by air flowing with appropriate speed and intensity. The balance between these elements is often askew on the side of the “chops” or vibrating lips. For example, if you could quantify a note as being comprised of 50% air and 50% buzz, that same note can also be produced by the equation of 60% air and 40% buzz and will sound best when air is kept at the highest possible end of the equation. Both elements are important and must be held in good balance.

There are many elements that, combined together, are the basis of fine horn playing. A few of the most important in relation to developing a better high range on any type of horn include a correct right hand position, the warm-up, clean attacks, and developing a correct approach to the middle and low ranges.

Warning! Take it easy! There are no shortcuts to high range development; the embouchure must be developed carefully over time. Take care of your embouchure and be sure to incorporate into your practice at least one day a week where you don't specifically work on the high range.

Chapter 2. Selected Etudes for High Range Development

The high register is not something that gets comfortable 15 minutes before the first rehearsal of a touchy high horn part in an orchestra; a technical foundation must already be laid. For building the necessary basic technical facility and control of articulation and intonation, nothing surpasses working on etudes.

The following are selected etudes given as examples of the type of etudes that may be used to help develop the technical foundation needed for performance in the high range, especially in relation to descant and triple horns.

Kopprasch Etudes for Cor Alto, Op. 5

While the 60 Kopprasch etudes, first published in 1832 or 33, are standards that have been used by generations of horn players, it is a little known fact that Kopprasch actually published a total of 120 etudes--Op. 5 contains 60 etudes for *Cor alto* and Op. 6 contains 60 etudes for *Cor basse*. The Op. 6 etudes are the old standards all horn players know and love. The Op. 5 etudes are similar in character but ascend as high as written F above high C, venturing fearlessly into a range we normally do not associate with Kopprasch. The following are a few representative etudes from this collection of high horn etudes. Until recently, these were long out of print. The complete Op. 5 etudes are available today from Thompson Edition and other sources.

Especially in the high range on descant and triple horns you need to cultivate a lighter approach to articulations than you might typically use when playing the standard Kopprasch etudes on a double horn.

Chapter 3. Descant and Triple Horns

Descant and triple horns are, today more than ever, seen as instruments that advanced horn players will want to have available to them and to know how to play well. The modern professional horn player must master all ranges of the horn, and there are definitely works and passages that are frequently encountered today which can only be effectively performed on horns pitched higher than B^b alto. These often play a critical part in high horn orchestral auditions.

Once among the most expensive and exotic horns on the market, solid, entry-level versions of full double descant horns now have prices that have come down in recent years to the extent that all serious horn players can afford to obtain and use such an instrument. The vast majority of professional high horn players have a descant or triple in their personal arsenal of instruments, sometimes even both types. Additionally, if you are a student serious about taking high horn auditions, a descant horn may be something you would be well advised to buy and master, to have a descant available for certain excerpts. A descant or triple horn can be a great investment.

What is a Descant Horn?

A descant horn is, in a general sense, any valved horn pitched higher than B^b alto. The concept of constructing a horn pitched in high F, half as long as the normal F horn (about 6 feet of tubing instead of 12) is an old one. The reason why some horn players have turned to this instrument is obvious: the acoustical potential for improved accuracy in the high range due to the harmonic series' "rungs" being not so close together as on the longer F horn.

As a brief historical note in this regard, consider this letter dated June 3, 1885 from Sir August Manns to Ladislao Zavertal, leader of the Royal Artillery Band, who had introduced the "Koenig Horn" (in high F) into his ensemble for the solo performer, quoted in the preamble to *Waits Wind Band Horn* (London: Hinrichsen Edition, 1952).

Dear Mr. Zavertal,

I require for the Double Concerto by Handel at the next Handel Festival some instruments of the Horn Family, which can relieve the 1st Horns of some of the almost impossible passages like this one:

Horn in F

The musical score consists of a single staff in 3/4 time, treble clef, and F major (indicated by a key signature of one sharp). The melody begins with eighth-note pairs, followed by a sixteenth-note pattern, and then a sustained note with a fermata. Below the staff, there are two dynamic markings: 'dim.' (diminuendo) and 'p' (pianissimo), separated by a vertical bar. The score ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

Flugelhorns in F, or Saxhorns in F can manage it without causing the greatest of all Horn nuisances, namely: “cracking the high notes in piano phrases,” and I shall feel glad if you have any such instruments in your Band and can thereby relieve me of some anxiety ... I am,

Yours faithfully,
AUGUST MANNS

While playing a descant or triple horn won’t give any player an “instant high range,” it can, as implied above, open a world of possibilities for more secure performance of works and passages that would be at the least insecure and at worst nearly impossible to perform on a standard double horn.



Single F descant horn (Alexander)

Single descant horns in high F were seminal designs and have been in use since the late nineteenth century. While they are still produced and are useful for the performance of very high Baroque literature, this model is not widely used today. Typically, these horns are made with a distinctly smaller throated bell than that used on double descant horns (which, in contrast, are constructed with essentially standard modern horn bells); they do not blend well with other horns as a part of a section. Instruments of this general type are constructed in pitch levels as high as B^b soprano, an octave shorter than the B^b found on a double horn--in other words, the same pitch length as a standard B^b trumpet, about 4 1/2 feet of tubing instead of 9 feet as on the B^b side of a double horn.

Chapter 4. Works and Selected Passages from the Baroque Period

While preferences will vary from player to player as to which works are suitable for performance on a descant or triple horn, there are a number of works that I would certainly prefer to perform on a horn with a high F side. A common thread between all the works discussed in this volume is high, exposed horn writing of a generally light character; these characteristics are frequently encountered in the florid, melodic high tessitura (“clarino”) writing common in the late Baroque period.

Bach: Brandenburg Concerto No. 1

If there is one frequently performed piece of our literature that has made most players run for their descant horns, it is probably the Brandenburg Concerto No. 1 of J. S. Bach. This popular work lies well on the descant horn. Other than the high tessitura, performance on the descant is fairly straightforward. If you use “standard” fingerings and only use the high F side above G# above the staff, tuning problems are few and tonal production is secure. Sometimes the second part is also performed on descant to better match the principal player tonally.

Be careful of your choice of fingering for the G in the staff on the descant, being sure that it is well in tune.

Brandenburg Concerto No. 1

Horn 1 in F

J. S. Bach

I. Allegro non troppo

The musical score consists of ten staves of music for Horn 1 in F. The key signature changes frequently, indicated by various sharps and flats. Measure numbers 1 through 10 are placed above the staves. The music features a mix of eighth and sixteenth-note patterns, with some measures containing rests or silence.

1. Measure 1: Treble clef, common time. Measures 1-2: Rests. Measure 3: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 4: Rest. Measure 5: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 6: Rest. Measure 7: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 8: Rest. Measure 9: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 10: Rest.

2. Measure 1: Treble clef, common time. Measures 1-2: Rests. Measure 3: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 4: Rest. Measure 5: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 6: Rest. Measure 7: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 8: Rest. Measure 9: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 10: Rest.

3. Measure 1: Treble clef, common time. Measures 1-2: Rests. Measure 3: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 4: Rest. Measure 5: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 6: Rest. Measure 7: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 8: Rest. Measure 9: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 10: Rest.

4. Measure 1: Treble clef, common time. Measures 1-2: Rests. Measure 3: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 4: Rest. Measure 5: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 6: Rest. Measure 7: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 8: Rest. Measure 9: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 10: Rest.

5. Measure 1: Treble clef, common time. Measures 1-2: Rests. Measure 3: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 4: Rest. Measure 5: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 6: Rest. Measure 7: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 8: Rest. Measure 9: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 10: Rest.

6. Measure 1: Treble clef, common time. Measures 1-2: Rests. Measure 3: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 4: Rest. Measure 5: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 6: Rest. Measure 7: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 8: Rest. Measure 9: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 10: Rest.

7. Measure 1: Treble clef, common time. Measures 1-2: Rests. Measure 3: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 4: Rest. Measure 5: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 6: Rest. Measure 7: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 8: Rest. Measure 9: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 10: Rest.

8. Measure 1: Treble clef, common time. Measures 1-2: Rests. Measure 3: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 4: Rest. Measure 5: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 6: Rest. Measure 7: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 8: Rest. Measure 9: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 10: Rest.

9. Measure 1: Treble clef, common time. Measures 1-2: Rests. Measure 3: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 4: Rest. Measure 5: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 6: Rest. Measure 7: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 8: Rest. Measure 9: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 10: Rest.

10. Measure 1: Treble clef, common time. Measures 1-2: Rests. Measure 3: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 4: Rest. Measure 5: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 6: Rest. Measure 7: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 8: Rest. Measure 9: Sixteenth-note pattern. Measure 10: Rest.

Berlioz: Queen Mab Scherzo

During the five seasons that I performed third horn in the Nashville Symphony, I received special acknowledgment from our music director in the applause following only one work: the *Queen Mab* scherzo by Berlioz. This is an excerpt that I personally would never, ever play on a standard double if I had a descant available. While the excerpt is playable on a triple, the third horn part in particular on the *Queen Mab* is soft, light, very exposed, and high and in relation to the orchestration and for these reasons is probably best suited to perform on a descant. In my case, the conductor was quite pleased that I was so consistent in execution, and hopefully will be with you as well. This excerpt is a great example of one that makes it worth all the trouble of dragging around a descant horn to auditions--after you win the job.

While the edition I personally have most frequently encountered is in A^b alto, be prepared to see this excerpt printed in B^b alto. Both versions are presented here.

Queen Mab

Horn 3 in A♭ alto

Hector Belioz

Scherzo: Prestissimo

Musical score for Horn 3 in A♭ alto, Scherzo: Prestissimo. The score consists of two staves of music. The first staff starts with a dynamic *p*, followed by measure 1 (labeled I) and measure 3 (labeled 3). Measure 3 ends with a bar line and the word "solo". The second staff begins with measure 3 (labeled 3), followed by measure 2 (labeled 2), and ends with measure 10 (labeled J). The dynamics *pp* and "solo" are indicated below the second staff.

Alternate version in B♭ Alto

Alternate musical score for Horn 3 in B♭ Alto, Scherzo: Prestissimo. This score is identical to the one above, featuring two staves of music. The first staff starts with a dynamic *p*, followed by measure 1 (labeled I) and measure 3 (labeled 3). Measure 3 ends with a bar line and the word "solo". The second staff begins with measure 3 (labeled 3), followed by measure 2 (labeled 2), and ends with measure 10 (labeled J). The dynamics *pp* and "solo" are indicated below the second staff.

Schumann: Concertstück

In the Romantic period, few composers dared to write for the horn so boldly in the high range as did Robert Schumann in his *Concertstück* (Concert piece), Op. 86 for four horns and orchestra. While his manner of writing for the horn was not without contemporary precedent, it was doubtless impractically high for many high horn players of his time (the work was composed in 1849, in a period when single horns in low F were the standard instrument in use). Even for horn players of today, we just don't practice much above written high C and this is one of the few standard works to ascend to the E above that. The high F horn has opened this work to many more players today; while not totally unplayable on a standard double, the highest range notes will certainly come out better on a descant or triple.

Low range passages do not lie well on the descant. The melody in the second movement can be performed on descant if necessary, but modern versions of this work are available which re-write the orchestration of the solo horn parts in such a manner as to split the melodic load between several players and in particular allow another player on a standard double horn to take the melody in these passages. As originally composed, the work is most suited to modern performance on a triple horn.

When checking into any standard or alternate edition of this work also check carefully the version of the score in the complete works of Schumann, on which the following part is based, for dynamics and articulations.

Concertstück

Horn I in F

Robert Schumann

I. Sehr Lebhaft $\text{J} = 152$

ff

10

p

fp

f

p

A

f

f

fp

p

B

cresc.

sf

<>

sf

p

cresc.

f

3

C

ff

6

Epilogue: The Horn of the Future?

What will the horn of the future be like? Almost one hundred years ago, there was an answer proposed to this very question. One of the first published notices in the USA on the double horn is a January 1907 article by Gustav Saenger (1865-1935) in *The Metronome* titled “A New Double French Horn” (p. 12). He reiterated the problem and introduced the solution as follows.

The extraordinary and remarkable accomplishments which modern composers demand from Wind Instrument players has led to many experiments and improvements in the construction of these instruments within recent years....

Occasionally, of course, we still come in contact with the ideal Horn enthusiast who maintains and believes the Natural Horn to be the only and most perfect one; however, for orchestral uses, the success of the Valve Horn has proved beyond a doubt how immeasurably superior it is to the Natural Horn. But we find that even the Valve Horn players are divided into two very decided factions, each of which is stubbornly determined that their own system is the best, one preferring the B flat, and the other the F Horn.

It is a well-known fact that at the present time of writing the majority of high Horn players have adopted the B flat Horn, preferring a secure and easily produced high range, to a round, voluminous tonal quality. However, it cannot be denied that no matter how proficient or artistic a player will perform on a B-flat horn, this instrument will always be recognized at once by cultivated listeners, through its certain stiffness in tonal production and in the noticeable dryness of the intervals of the lower range.

In order to do away with these shortcomings and maintain the desirable qualities of both these instruments, innumerable experiments have been made in order to combine the qualities and technical advantages of a B flat and F Horn into one instrument....

... [The Double Horn] is the talk of modern European Horn players and bids fair to revolutionize the playing of this instrument to a great extent....

While it is prudent not to proclaim any new invention as an absolute success before its practical usefulness has been firmly established, it would seem that this new Double Horn has really come to stay. Mr. Aug. Hubl, the solo Horn player of the Royal Court Orchestra in Stuttgart, after a recent test of these new instruments, said that, in his opinion, their system was the best which had ever been invented, and positively declared it to be the French Horn of the Future.

Other prominent European Horn players who have had occasion to test the new Horn agree with this opinion, declaring it as an immense advancement in the construction and perfection of the French Horn, which, in all probability would be speedily introduced into all larger orchestras and bands.