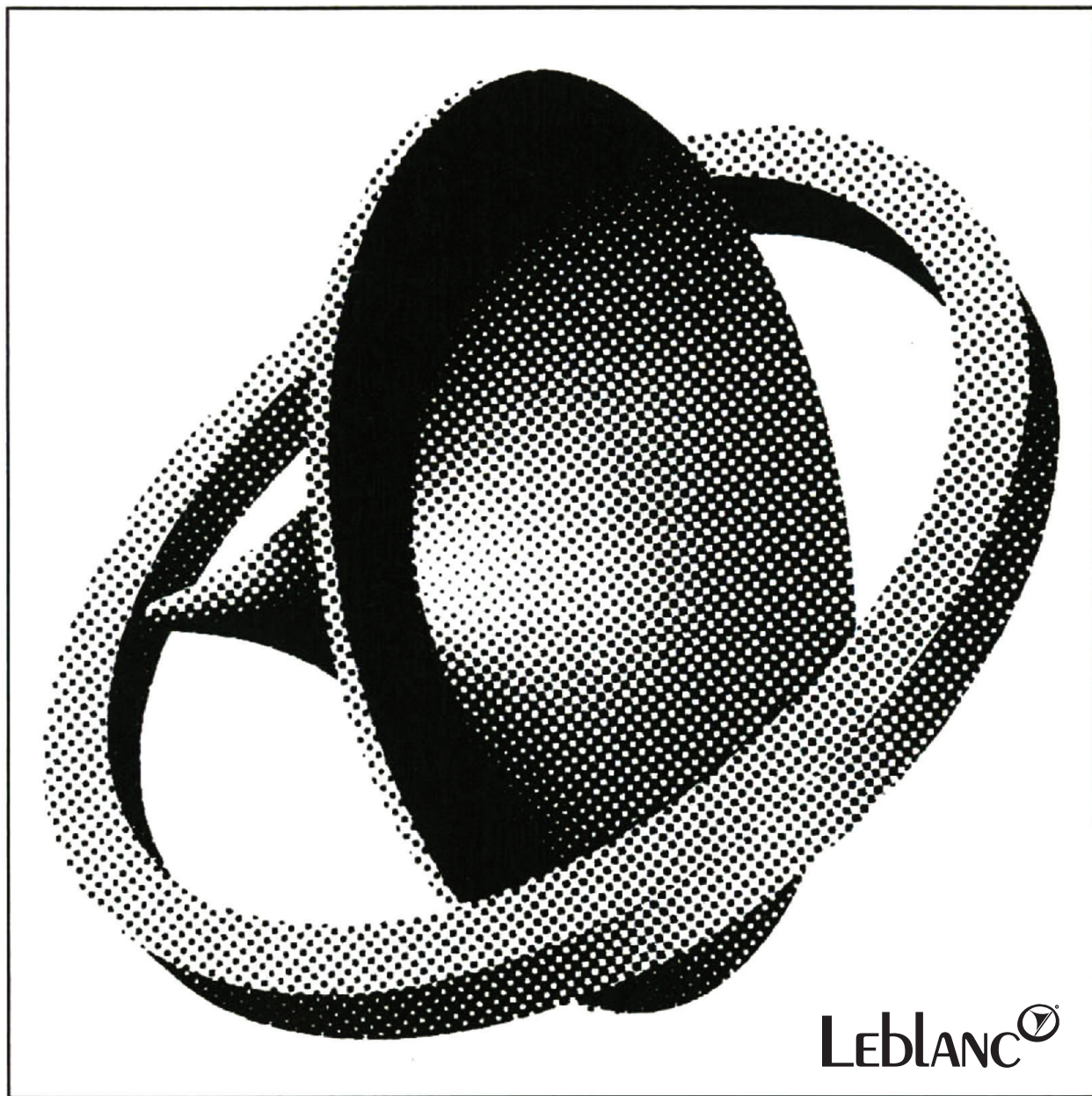


# Teaching the French Horn – Why All the Mystery?

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Frequent comments by Instrumental Music teachers who are not French horn players lead one to believe there is a great deal of “mystery” involved in teaching or playing the horn. Many of these “mysteries” stem from a lack of clearly understanding a few basic fundamentals in the approach to horn teaching. This veil of “mysteries” can be lifted only through the understanding of a clear, concise, logical explanation of teaching and playing procedures.

*For the sake of clarity, the procedure will be explained in eight sections:*

- 1. Embouchure Establishment**
- 2. Tone Production**
- 3. Breath Support and Use of the Tongue**
- 4. Holding Position of the Instrument and Left Hand Position**
- 5. Right Hand Position**
- 6. Use of the Double Horn**
- 7. Upper and Lower Range Development**
- 8. Concentration in Practice**

## **1. Embouchure Establishment**

A few basic facts, if thoroughly understood by the student, can set him on the road toward the development of a good embouchure and the establishment of a sound foundation for horn playing.

First, the lips must be “even” or “parallel” and must vibrate “evenly.” The lower lip must not slip behind the upper lip—this will cause a pinched sound and will seriously handicap the lower jaw forward slightly. The student can blow an air column and check it with his hand in front of the aperture to see if the air column moves straight out or down. If it moves in a downward direction it is a likely assumption that the lips are not even and that the lower lip will slip behind the upper one in the high register.

Next, the student should develop a free, unforced vibration of the lips. There must be a “controlled relaxation” in the corners of the lips, and the “buzz” must be free and not forced or squeezed. This can be practiced with a mouthpiece rim (or visualizer) as well as with the mouthpiece.

It is generally agreed that the mouthpiece should be placed  $\frac{2}{3}$  on the upper lip and  $\frac{1}{3}$  on the lower. This may have to be varied slightly for very young students with very small lips, but usually the bottom rim of the mouthpiece is placed so that it will not be lower than the lower edge of the lower lip. The student should be careful, however, that the placement of the mouthpiece allows enough of the lower lip to be inside the cup. There must be enough lower lip for aperture control—too little will not allow the embouchure to function properly. (It should generally not be in a relationship of  $\frac{7}{8}$  to  $\frac{1}{8}$ .)

The student must understand that pitches can be controlled by the size of the aperture and that the lip muscles control this size, not by mouthpiece pressure. When the student can produce different pitches on the mouthpiece in a free, unforced manner he can also play those same tones on the horn with a relaxed, unforced tone.

## **2. Tone Production**

After the embouchure is established and is functioning properly, the student should strive to play through the embouchure, not with the embouchure. The breath does the work of producing the tone. If the embouchure is properly set it will not hinder the working of the breath. The embouchure must always maintain the “controlled relaxation,” and the student must always use a minimum amount of lip tension. Since the tendency will always be toward the use of too much lip tension, the student should try to use only enough tension to maintain tone control. The tone must have a “core” or “center” and should never have a “fluffy,” “dead” quality. If the tone has a solid, compact quality, it will “ring” and carry to the back of the concert hall, even at soft dynamic levels.

## **3. Breath Support and Use of the Tongue**

Without the proper use of breath, the tone cannot have life. The development of breath support has been described in many ways; sometimes in terms that have meaning to one student but not to another. However, once the student discovers the “feeling” of using the breath to create sound he will be well on the way to learning the correct use of the breath. Breath support may be thought of as “breath pressure.” If the student thinks of “breath pressure,” he can accomplish the technique of “moving” the air column. If he can keep the air column moving through every tone he plays he can develop a vibrant, ringing tone. While proper setting of the breath pressure will create certain necessary tensions in the muscles around the middle of the body, this must not be allowed to create tension on other parts of the body, such as the shoulders, arms, throat and neck.

Proper use of the tongue is most important in conjunction with the breath. The tongue “releases” the air; it should not “pound.” The tip of the tongue should move as short a distance from the point of contact as possible—just enough to release the air. The tip of the tongue is usually placed against the back of the upper teeth; the higher it is placed, the more legato the attack. But there must always be the feeling of “releasing” the air by moving the tip of the tongue. The tongue motion should be across the air column, not forward and back against the flow of air.

The tongue, embouchure and breath must work “independently.” The act of tonguing and the act of changing the size of the aperture must not affect the movement of the air column or the breath pressure. When the student can maintain steady breath pressure and keep the tongue and embouchure functioning properly he will be on the road to correct, relaxed playing with a minimum of mouthpiece pressure. For every attack the student should concentrate on using a fast stream of air.

#### **4. Holding Position of the Instrument and Left Hand Position**

Because of its unusual shape the horn is a very awkward instrument to hold. *There are three things to keep in mind:*

- (1) The position of the instrument must not upset the embouchure by changing the angle of the mouthpiece.
- (2) The bell must not be pointed in toward the body, thus deadening or muffling the sound.
- (3) The holding position must allow the left hand to remain relaxed so that the fingers can work properly.

*This four-step procedure can simplify the holding position:*

- (1) Sit in a position with the body turned at about a 45-degree angle to the right.
- (2) Face the front from the waist up, without changing the sitting position.
- (3) Bring the bell of the horn to rest on the right leg. It should fit easily at this angle so that the bell will not point toward the stomach. The mouthpiece should not point to one side or the other, but should go straight forward, at a slightly downward angle from horizontal.
- (4) Lean forward slightly, bringing the head down a little to meet the mouthpiece so that the angle at which the mouthpiece meets the embouchure will be correct. Care should be exercised so that the embouchure will not be upset by the mouthpiece position.

The fingers of the left hand should be gently curved so that they touch the valve levers in a “relaxed but firm” manner. The fingers should always maintain contact with the valve lever—they should never rise above the lever. The fingering should be part of the attack; the finger should not move before the attack. Concentrated practice on this point will result in a clean, precise technique.

#### **5. Right Hand Position**

The right hand must be in a comfortable position, must cover the tone just enough to give the desired “sheen” to the tone, but must not distort or muffle the sound.

*Here is an accepted procedure:*

- (1) Keep the fingers together and straight; let the thumb touch the first finger at about the second knuckle, or between the first and second knuckles. This will cause a slight cupping of the palm.
- (2) Place the hand in the bell of the horn in a vertical position, with the back of the fingers against the side of the bell opposite the body.
- (3) Do not cup the hand to the point where the sound will be muffled or distorted.

#### **6. Use of the Double Horn**

Herein lies a “mystery.” Many teachers have asked: “How do you teach a student to transpose when he starts to learn to play on the Bb side of the double horn?” The answer is, of course, that you don’t teach the student to transpose. When playing the double horn you are playing one instrument. Certain tones are played with the thumb valve depressed and certain tones with the thumb valve not depressed. Historically speaking, the F horn has always been the instrument that produced the most characteristic quality of French horn tone. Therefore it seems logical to try to produce the “F horn tone quality” in all ranges of the horn. For this reason it is advisable to start beginners on the single F horn or on the F side of the double horn. The single Bb horn can be used of course, but care must be exercised so that the tone does not become thin, sharp and piercing. It is not a difficult task for a young student to learn the F horn fingerings, even if he has changed from the cornet. Much more complicated fingerings are learned on many woodwind instruments without too much difficulty.

Assuming that the student starts his study on the F horn and is ready to begin the study of the double horn, where should he change to the Bb horn? (Where should he depress the thumb valve?) As a general rule, it seems logical to play the low range on the larger horn (F horn) and the upper range on the smaller horn (Bb horn). There is some difference of opinion concerning the specific point of change from one horn to the other, but there is a logical general range—the area between G# and C#: The tone in this range generally match very well in tone quality and intonation on both F and Bb horns. The fingerings for G#, A, Bb, B and C are the same for both horns. Above this range the tone quality, intonation and certainly the reliability of attacks seems better on the Bb horn. Therefore, it would seem the student could change from the F to the Bb horn anywhere from G# to C#. The tones at the bottom of the treble staff—E, Eb, D, Db and C are thin and sharp on the Bb horn and should certainly not be played on the Bb horn except in rare cases where technical advantages outweigh the tonal and tuning disadvantages.

Some players use the Bb horn in the low range for the tones between F and Db: while this practice may have merit from the standpoint of technical agility, the student should remember that the tone quality does change noticeably and should realize that these tones can be mastered on the F horn.

## 7. Upper and Lower Range Development

One very important factor in the development of the upper range is the use of lip tension. Most students automatically use too much lip tension. The problem seems to lie in learning to use a minimum amount of lip tension. Here is an effective method for developing tone control with minimum lip tension.

In regular daily practice (particularly in the first minutes of the practice session) the student should try to establish tone production using almost no lip tension. Very little tension is necessary to play middle “C”; the student should try to develop the “C” one octave higher with the same lip relaxation through controlling the size of the aperture and letting the breath “carry” the tone. When less tension is used more breath is necessary. The student who learns to play this octave with almost no lip tension will find that he has moved his range up almost an octave—and will have enhanced the ease of playing in the upper range tremendously. The student must remember that the use of too much lip tension is almost sure to creep into his playing. The development of relaxation requires his constant concentration. The student should understand that as lip tension is lessened the breath must be increased. That upper range development will be hindered greatly if too much mouthpiece pressure is used.

*These four points should be remembered and concentrated upon during practice:*

- (1) Control of the aperture
- (2) Adequate breath
- (3) Minimum of lip tension and mouthpiece pressure
- (4) “Letting” the lips vibrate freely

Tones in the low range, particularly in the middle-low range, often create difficulties: When playing low tones the jaw should be lowered and the mouthpiece placement maintained, thus enabling the student to play the entire range smoothly, with uniform tone quality. This cannot be done if the mouthpiece setting is shifted on the lips. It is usually difficult to “break through” the volume barrier in the middle-low range. A few minutes of loud practice in this range each day is probably the best method by which to “break through” this barrier. Each tone of the complete low octave should be practiced as loudly as possible, that is without forcing the embouchure. When this is done for a few minutes each day, greater control of this weaker part of the range will be brought about in a reasonably short time.

It is important that the range be extended in each direction in a consistent manner until the student has control of the complete range. The complete range should then be practiced thoroughly each day.

## 8. Concentration in Practice

The student should develop an organized routine of practice that encompasses all the points necessary to give him physical control of the instrument. All practice should have purpose:

### *Long tones:*

- Keep the same pitch at all dynamic levels.
- Keep the core or center of the tone.
- Maintain the breath pressure and keep the air column moving.

### *Scales:*

- Discipline the fingers and gain control of the instrument in all keys.
- Keep the breath pressure constant and the air column moving while the fingers develop technique and the embouchure develops control.

### *Arpeggio slurs:*

- Teach the embouchure the correct aperture control for each pitch.
- Develop flexibility and range control.

### *Lip trills:*

- Develop flexibility in the over-all playing
- Develop “liquid” quality in the playing
- Develop the technique of lip trills
- Tone production without use of the tongue—

*This tends to do these things:*

- 1) Makes the embouchure relax.
- 2) Makes the lips more sensitive to response.
- 3) Helps the breath to work.

This kind of practice demands concentration. Practice without concentration leads to “aimless noodling” and accomplishes very little.



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