

BEGINNING HORN

David Brandon

RECRUITING

Before the process of selecting instruments begins the fifth graders have already had all of the beginning band instruments demonstrated to them at least three times: Twice by the first chair middle school players at concerts performed in the winter and spring at the fifth grade school and again by one of the directors immediately after a portion of the Selmer Music Survey is given to each class in February.

At each of these demonstrations I emphasize the importance of high grades in all their current classes and let them know that they must be at least be an A/B student to play one of the school-owned instruments. This attracts the “right” type of kid to these very important instruments and prevents most eligibility problems over the next seven years.

At no time is the horn described as the “most difficult” or “hardest” brass instrument to play so as not to scare off any students who might otherwise be interested in playing it.

INSTRUMENT INTERVIEW

The ideal beginner hornist should be outgoing, self confident and not afraid to make mistakes. They should also be able to recognize differences in pitches and be able to match pitch with their voice. I can get a good feel for a student’s personality and pitch ability by how they respond when singing back pitches I’ve either sung myself, played on the piano, or on the horn. I also ask them to identify the higher or lower note of two pitches I either sing or play starting with wide intervals and progressing to half-steps.

I look for the following physical things while giving potential players a quick lesson on embouchure and mouthpiece buzzing:

1. **Top Lip:** Medium to thin, should cover the top teeth, no pronounced “cupid’s bow” when forming the embouchure so a straight line is formed by the top and bottom lips (like flute)
2. **Bottom Lip:** Not overly full
3. **Jaw:** Does not protrude forward. The natural angle of the mouthpiece should be slightly downward.
4. **Chin:** Student can flatten with minimal instruction

If the student can obtain a fairly relaxed sound on the mouthpiece while demonstrating the correct physical characteristics then they have a good chance of being successful playing horn.

BE CAREFUL IN THIS SELECTION PROCESS!!!! Some student’s will be able to produce a relaxed middle register sound no matter what physical characteristics they have and may actually do very well at the beginner and/or intermediate level. Keep in mind that you are also selecting future high school players, too! Problems caused by physical characteristics not particularly suited to horn may not reveal themselves until the student has to perform high school level music (including graduate level all state etudes). Set them up for future success by selecting the right instrument now!

CLASS STRUCTURE

If at all possible teach the horns separate from other instruments. If this is not possible combine them with trumpets. If your beginner text does not have a special horn book then have them use trumpets books with horn fingering charts stapled in. It really isn't that difficult to get your horns used to playing in fourths with other instruments.

I teach my beginners on a "need to know" basis. I try to talk in terms of desired results rather than give them lengthy procedures or explanations. I demonstrate what I want them to do first then have them try it. If some students need more explanation then I may either provide it myself or ask the class guided questions resulting in another explanation of the technique.

I set the classroom up in a half circle and teach from a rolling chair that does not have arms. This allows me to be on their level and to quickly move from student to student.

POSTURE AND BREATHING

The first lessons I teach are basic playing posture and breathing. I review these at the beginning of every class until both become second nature.

Basic posture is very simple yet vital to proper breathing and playing position. The student should sit so that their back does not touch the chair, spine straight, shoulders relaxed and head erect. With their feet on the floor they should be able to easily stand up without any extra effort.

Proper breathing is simply the ability to move lots of air in and out of the body as efficiently as possible. Demonstrate to the class then have them copy. Look for the following things:

- ◆ Breathing through the mouth not the nose—it's a bigger hole
- ◆ Stomach area expands first then the chest—like filling up a glass with water
- ◆ Shoulders may rise slightly but not abnormally
- ◆ Air should move in and out—NO HOLDING IN AIR!!!! Think of a swing
- ◆ Silent air in and out—extra noise means something is getting in the way of the air stream
- ◆ Tension cause by taking in too much air
- ◆ Squeezing abdominal muscles while exhaling and closing off the throat

Breathing Exercises:

- ◆ In ____; Out ____ (always moving the same volume of air each time and blow to a target in the room)
- ◆ Blow up balloons in one breath
- ◆ Blow against a single sheet of paper held about 6 inches from your nose
- ◆ Hold a single sheet of paper against the wall with only your breath
- ◆ "Ripping" Exercise: Place fingers vertically in front of your mouth. Breathe in with energy trying to create the "ripping" sound
- ◆ "OH-UP"—breathe in low thinking "OH" and continue with "UP" to fill up chest

Read **Arnold Jacobs: The Legacy of a Master** Edited and Collected by M. Dee Stewart for a complete understanding of proper breathing for wind players.

EMBOUCHURE

It's very important for each student to have a mirror handy so they can see if they are forming their embouchure correctly. Again, I don't give detailed information unless it's necessary. I show the students my "natural face" and ask them to do the same while looking in the mirror. I then show them my embouchure and ask them to copy it. Most students will come very close to what I want and need only minor corrections. I then have them take a breath and blow air through their embouchure. The following are things I look for in an embouchure:

- ◆ Corners stay in the same place as "natural face"—no pulling back or pushing forward
- ◆ Corners firm up slightly but not tight—tell students having problems to think about spitting something off the tip of their tongue or pronounce a sophisticated "m" or "poo" sound
- ◆ Equal amounts of red showing from top and bottom lips on the sides—this varies due to different lip formations
- ◆ An oval aperture
- ◆ Teeth apart—width of their pinky
- ◆ Tongue out of the way of the air— "whispy" sounds or hiss means tongue is too high

MOUTHPIECE PLACEMENT AND FIRST SOUNDS

When most of the class can demonstrate proper posture, breathing and embouchure formation (and any music reading skills I've taught up to this point) I move on to making sounds on the mouthpieces. I work with one student at a time to make sure the mouthpiece is placed properly and the student learns the correct "feel" from the beginning.

Before starting I demonstrate a good sound on mouthpiece and tell them that I'm going to be asking the class to compare my sound to each individual student's sound. They have to tell me if they like or dislike the sound and if they dislike it they have to tell me why they think the person is making that sound and how to fix it. Students who provide intelligent answers are the next in line to make their first sound. My goal is to get the students to learn to recognize a good sound and how to diagnose and fix a poor sound so they can teach themselves at home (practicing). My procedure is as follows:

1. Sit with good posture—if not I move on to the next student
2. Lick lips so they are very moist
3. Blow air through embouchure—if a shallow breath is taken I move on to the next student
4. I place the mouthpiece on the embouchure—THEY CHANGE NOTHING and no matter what comes out (if anything) they must keep air moving
 - ◆ Place the bottom of mouthpiece on the edge of the bottom lip (if bottom lip is full you may have to place the mouthpiece in the red of the lip)
 - ◆ Swing the mouthpiece upward to the top lip making sure the outside rim of the top lip is inside the mouthpiece
 - ◆ **2/3rds OF THE MOUTHPIECE SHOULD BE ON THE TOP LIP!!!!**
 - ◆ **MAKE SURE THE MOUTHPIECE ANGLE IS SLIGHTLY DOWNWARD SO THAT IT IS NOT PRESSING INTO THE TOP LIP!!!!**

Almost all students will have run out of breath so this is where I teach them to breathe through the corners of their mouth. Make sure the embouchure reforms correctly after breathing and that they don't hold air inside their body. If they do, start the procedure all over again.

Possible Outcomes:

- ◆ No Buzz—this is ok—if air speed is slow have them blow faster, if lips are too far apart bring them slightly more together, if lips are too hard tell them to soften
- ◆ Tight and Pinched Buzz—start all over and ask them to soften lips and try to just blow air through the mouthpiece
- ◆ Tubby “wet” Sounding Buzz—think more pronounced “poo”—keep the inside flesh touching the teeth and gums
- ◆ Relaxed Buzz—great—have them do it again several times and hold it as long as possible

When the student achieves a relaxed buzz have them hold the mouthpiece with the right hand index finger and thumb at the end of the shank and have them repeat the process themselves several times.

After all students can produce a relaxed sound we repeat the procedure as a class several times. At this point I introduce “Echo Playing” (I play-you play) so they hear a good sound before they play and we begin discussing the effect of vowel sounds on our tone. I like to use “oo” or “oh” to create as much resonance in the sound as possible.

HOLDING THE HORN

The most crucial element effected by how the horn is held is the angle of the leadpipe and mouthpiece to the embouchure. The angle must be slightly downward so that excess pressure is not placed on the top lip. The bell should be angled away from the body.

My beginners use single horns and I teach bell off the leg from the beginning. This allows the student to sit with the same posture they’ve already learned and need only to bring the horn to their body without making too many adjustments. The weight of the instrument is balanced between the right and left hands. If my students started on double horns I would still teach bell off the leg unless a particularly small child was having problems.

If you prefer your students to play with the bell on the leg make sure the angles are correct. Adjust where the bell is placed on the thigh, move the right foot in or out/left or right, twist the lower body or turn the head until proper playing angles are achieved.

LEFT HAND: Keep fingers curved and on the ends of the valve keys. Many students move the tips of the fingers too far down the keys creating sloppy technique later on.

RIGHT HAND: Have students reach their right hand out like they are going to shake hands. Bring the thumb alongside the index finger—hand will naturally cup slightly. Keeping the wrist straight place each students’ hand in the bell so the line formed by the thumb and index finger is at the 12:00 position. The rest of the fingers must be against the side of the bell farthest from the body. Adjust how far the hand goes in the bell based on the student’s hand size and tone produced. **Check right hand position several times every day!** I set my chairs up so I can walk behind each student’s bell.

STARTING THE FULL INSTRUMENT

As soon as students can demonstrate a steady relaxed sound on the mouthpiece and proper playing position I move directly to the full instrument. I have the students play individually with the goal of holding a note for a long time with a steady relaxed sound. At first I don’t worry about what note they play but I quickly try to get the entire class on first line E. I Echo Play back and forth with individuals and the full class until we get pretty close to all playing the same pitch then add D, C, F and G in that order.

SIRENS OR “ROLLER COASTERS”

I introduce sirens after we've played a few successful notes on the full instrument. I call them “roller coasters” so I can refer to different levels in a way they easily understand.

As always, I demonstrate first then ask them to try it themselves. We start off with the “kiddy coasters” beginning on a comfortable note and moving down and up slightly and gradually over the course of the year we build up to the “Texas Giant” or “Cyclone” levels.

The goal is to move from low to high smoothly without any weird changes in the embouchure or tone. Look for the following things and address as needed:

- ◆ Head and face stay still—no bobbing up and down or raising/lowering eyebrows!
- ◆ Bottom Lip—should not disappear under the top lip when going higher or pooch out when going lower
- ◆ Sound pinches when going up—caused by pressing the center of the lips together or over tightening—make the aperture rounder, keep center of lips soft
- ◆ Chin bunches when going up—watch themselves in a mirror

TONGUING

When students can consistently play the first two or three notes I introduce tonguing. Have the students first blow air through the embouchure. Emphasize the continuous forward motion of the air stream. Demonstrate tonguing four quarter notes on air using a “too” or “doo” syllable then have the students echo back. Check each student individually and look for the following things:

- ◆ Do they keep the air moving? Some students will try coughing the notes with the throat or huff spurts of air—go back to blowing air on whole notes.
- ◆ Does the jaw stay motionless?
- ◆ Is there extra motion below the chin? If so they are moving too much tongue—only the tip moves up and down—the back of the tongue stays inactive.
- ◆ Do you hear “whispy” sounds? If so their tongue is too high in the mouth or the teeth are too close together. Shape the tongue like a spoon or remind them to keep the “oo” syllable when tonguing.
- ◆ Do you hear a “thud” at the end of each note? Either the tongue is moving too slowly, they are stopping the air with the tongue or they are tonguing between the teeth.

Next move to the mouthpiece then the full horn while watching and listening to each student. Try to hear each student individually every day for the next few weeks. Bad habits can quickly develop and are very hard to correct later on.

THE NEXT STEPS

When the students can produce steady sounds from middle C up to G, tongue properly and have successfully performed the first few real tunes in our beginner book they are ready to start scales and lip slurs.

SCALES

I introduce the chromatic scale within the range they can play then add notes lower and higher when they can play them successfully on mouthpiece “roller coasters”. When an octave is achieved I introduce the first major scale—usually concert C or Bb—and continue adding as their range develops.

LIP SLURS

Simple lip slurs are very important at the beginning level. I look and listen for the same things on lip slurs as I do on “roller coasters”. Start off with two note slurs from C to E; B to D#; etc. Continue adding more notes of the harmonic series as their range increases on the chromatic scale. It’s a good idea for the lip slur range to lag slightly behind the chromatic scale range so that students are secure on the higher notes before they have to slur up to them.

OTHER THOUGHTS

THE INSTRUMENT

It’s a good idea to periodically have all beginner instruments play tested by someone who actually plays horn to make sure they are in good playing condition. I’ve tried playing an instrument a student has been trying to learn on for months only to discover it was unplayable! Just because it looks good doesn’t mean it still plays well. Valves must be in alignment, slides must be greased and valves well oiled to prevent air leaks and the leadpipe must be structurally sound.

When assigning instruments make sure the student’s left hand can easily reach the thumb valve key or hook and the pinky hook. If the span is too far or too close adjust the thumb valve key or have a repairman move the pinky hook to match the student’s grip. Also check the height of the valve keys and adjust as needed.

I teach a specific routine for opening the case, taking the instrument out and carrying it from place to place. Always open the case while it is lying flat with the bottom side down—NOT UPRIGHT AND NOT UPSIDE DOWN! With the right hand grasp the valve slide cluster and guide the horn out of the case with the left hand on the bell. Swing the bell upward so it ends up over the right shoulder next to the head and the body of the instrument is held securely against the stomach and chest. This frees the left hand to close the case, carry music or grab a stand while keeping the horn protected in a busy band hall.

Never set the horn on the ground or in a chair if possible. Take it with you or put it back in the case. If you do have to put it down set it flat on a flat surface away from other awkward teenagers. Don’t set it on the bell tail first! Most dents are caused by students banging the horn against something while setting it down on the bell tail. Constantly repairing dents weakens the metal and shortens the life of the instrument.

NEVER EVER USE THE CASE AS A CHAIR! Severe damage can occur to both the case and the horn!

THE MOUTHPIECE

I have my beginner students use the Holton Farkas MC mouthpiece. I’ve used other mouthpieces in the past for various reasons but have come to the conclusion that the MC works the best. It’s almost always in stock at music stores, the past problems with poor plating have been fixed and its “middle of the road” cup and rim are suitable for most levels of playing.

BRACES

Braces are a fact of life. Some students have little or no problems with them while others are temporarily destroyed by them. The main problems seem to be pain caused by the mouthpiece resting on top of a brace and/or the lips getting “caught” on the braces preventing them from changing shape from note to note. Without even realizing they are doing it students tend to gradually move the mouthpiece to a more comfortable setting—**usually too low. Make them aware of this and keep an eye on their mouthpiece placement so this doesn’t happen.**

I keep a supply of Morgan Bumper guards that I give to students when they first get braces. These plastic guards fit over most braces and provide a cushion for the lips. This has helped my students to maintain the correct mouthpiece placement and smooth out the rugged edges that “catch” the lip.

Morgan Bumper Company
3011 Maine · Quincy, IL 62301
1-800-453-7846 · 217-223-7846 · Fax 217-223-7851
www.morgan-bumper.com

PRIVATE LESSONS

The best thing your students can do to improve their playing (besides practicing) is to take lessons from a qualified private instructor. Since most school districts are providing the instrument basically free of charge it only makes sense to encourage parents to use money saved by not having to rent an instrument on private lessons.

OTHER SOURCES FOR INFORMATION

Internet Sites

International Horn Society www.hornsociety.org

Osmun Music, Inc www.osmun.com
(Horn specialists with a great Links page for all brass instruments)

Books

Arnold Jacobs—The Legacy of a Master, edited and collected by M. Dee Stewart, publ. The Instrumentalist Publishing Co.

The Art of French Horn Playing, by Philip Farkas, publ. Summy-Birchard Inc.

Pamphlets

The Double Horn: Care, Maintenance and Minor Repair—Holton Company

How To Tune Conn Double French Horns—Conn Corporation

A Horn Player's Study Guide by Thomas Bacon—Southern Music Company

Beginner Instruction Series: Horn, by Leland Sharrock
TBA Web Site—www.txband.com

Intermediate Instruction Series: Horn, by Richard Lambrecht
TBA Web Site—www.txband.com