

### Thoughts on How I Approach the Horn

The basic idea that I gleaned over the last few years, most dramatically clarified in Vienna during my two weeks of study on the Vienna horn with Roland Berger was that the technique of horn playing that is necessary for the type of sound, style, and efficiency I seek is as simple and natural as I had always hoped. But because of its "simplicity" it can become convoluted if not approached with a consistent concentration that seems to flow naturally when all the parts are in balance but seems often dumbfounding when any one element gets out of line. The following thoughts are my own words, a partial summary of where my experiences have led me.

The basic elements of playing are:

- 1) Alignment
- 2) Relaxed muscles
- 3) Necessary pressure
- 4) Even air flow

#### Alignment

Alignment is the understanding, acceptance and practice of some basic laws of physiology and physics.

In the area of embouchure we are dealing with three basic components. One is malleable and two are mostly static. The mouthpiece and teeth (i.e. teeth/jaw structure) are static; that is they have their own inherent shapes that do not change as we play. The muscles obviously are capable of a great deal of change. Problems start to arise because the muscles are really a "go between" in the set-up of the embouchure. If the two statics (the mouthpiece and teeth) are not meeting in the most compatible way

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(alignment) the muscles are the only element left that almost automatically try to equalize or "align" the entire structure to operate as the most efficient vibrating machine necessary for optimum sound production. The muscles should not be burdened with this task; to try and balance two stubborn sandwiching elements when its priority is meant to mainly be the instigator of clear vibrations. The complete diameter of the mouthpiece should be considered and supported evenly on the teeth as much as possible.

Relaxed Muscles

If alignment is a priority then a great amount of the stress and tension of the lip muscles can be released. They are free to vibrate in a rounder, flexible, and more responsive state because they are actually "supporting" less; that element is being coped with much more efficiently by the two elements best suited for that task. The mouthpiece/teeth alignment create a strong natural bond between the horn and player.

With a state of alignment followed by relaxation the muscles can remain more in their natural shape (perhaps a lightly rolled in lower lip but not rolled out). They are firm, only enough to cope with the air flow related to dynamic and range considerations. Tension is only what is needed and no more. The embouchure muscles are going to be most efficient the closer they can stay to their natural state; i.e. the way they look in a mirror no where near a mouthpiece with no expression on the face. The aperture tends to be somewhat rounder in the mouthpiece creating a more dimensional sound.

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Pressure

Pressure is a key element in the alchemy of alignment and relaxation. It lets the nature of these more natural states stay more effective. It acts like a fine thread that melds the elements into a flexible whole fabric that in essence is stronger than the imagined sum of the isolated parts. Again, only the necessary pressure for the sufficient interaction of all the elements is used. If alignment and relaxation are correct pressure will stay in the proper proportion. What we often conceive of as "pressure" is really only a automatic effort to align with tension and pressing a lack of alignment and balance between the three key elements (mouthpiece, lips, and teeth).

Air Flow

Last, and in many ways I consider least, is air flow. If all the above are working air flow, the most natural and accessible component of playing, will want to flow evenly with no extremely excessive pushing. It creates an air column that has a wider core and greater resiliency because it is meeting only necessary resistance at the horn level. There is an easy sense of air quality more than air quantity.

Tongue placement (the position of the tongue while holding a note) is critical. A stance of "up and back" opens the throat and helps immensely to focus the air, actually aiming the air more accurately towards the aperture. Since the tongue is a muscle with no skeletal form it can go back into itself. This action actually opens the throat cavity. The bend at the top of the throat is most critical. The air seems to flow with much less resistance with this "up and back" tongue stance. This tongue position helps to focus the air as it comes over the back of the throat.

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The air column is solidified and aimed more directly to the center of the aperture. If the tongue tends to have a stance of being too forward and/or too low in the mouth the air that is hitting the embouchure - no matter how well delivered from the lower body - tends to be diffused and lacking sufficient core near the aperture where the most energy is needed. This results in a response of "blowing" harder to try and overcome the lack of air quality at the embouchure. This simply creates more tension overall and adds an unnecessary resistance to playing. Certainly air quantity is an important consideration to the player but if air quality is given priority the horn becomes much more efficient to any request be it "big", "light", "loud", or "soft".

There is some variation in tongue placement and shape depending on the register being entered, speed of articulation needed, etc. but suffice to say that the basic stance should be as outlined above. The tongue mutations from the basic up/back stance are mostly natural and need no conscious effort save awareness to the sound.

A sense of balance is the prime objective. If all elements are correct and even a sense of effortlessness will result. No one part is more important than another. An overawareness to one may simply imply a lack in another. Experiment. Practice going to extremes sometimes in order to find the perimeters of each component then rely on a retreat to moderation. The sum of all the correct parts in a balanced moderate technique is always stronger than any one element taken to an extreme.

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Conclusion

I would prefer if you use any of these promulgations to keep them all together as I have written them down. They are not without areas of enlargement or debate but as a small synopsis of my approach (which is also open to enlargement and debate) they, "it", stands on its own when viewed as an entire unit. I am the first to realize that what I have to say is not totally original: it has been said before but can always bear repetition. While I make no presumptions to be a expert on any of these technical or stylistic topics I do hope that we all can benefit somewhat from the stimulation, comparison, and exploration of what I consider a more holistic approach and concept of playing. I hope you find my thoughts of interest.

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