

Right-Hand Position, Stopped, and Muted Horn

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1. Right-Hand Position on the Horn

The basic idea to communicate in teaching the proper right hand position for the horn is to cup the hand slightly, as though to hold water in it, and place it inside the bell so that the backs of the fingers touch the bell throat and there is an opening of approximately two inches between the heel of the hand and the opposite side of the bell. A basically correct hand position can vary, but there are several issues to consider:

A correct hand position is very closely related to that which would be used on the natural horn. You should be able to open and close the throat of the bell by simply “shutting the door” with the heel of the hand. The hand should not “float” in the bell, and it should not need to be moved “in and out” of the bell to go from an open to a closed position.

One may wish to place the hand so that the thumb and first finger can support the bell when playing standing.

How open or closed the heel of the hand needs to be must ultimately be gauged by the ear. The tone should not sound like one has something stuffed into the bell (too closed), and should not sound like a trombone either (too open).

Pitch level is affected by how open or closed the bell is—an open position sharpens the horn and a closed position flattens the horn. Hand position must be consistent.

Above all, to place the hand in the bell with the palm against the inside of the throat of the bell, as is seen all too frequently in beginners, is totally incorrect. Besides having a poor, sharp tone, the playing qualities of the horn actually suffer because of the improper hand position, especially in the upper range of the instrument.

2. Stopped and Muted Horn

Stopped notes are an effect unique to the horn. A basic rule for fingering stopped notes on the horn is to finger the note a half step below the note you want to play, and play only on the F horn.

As you *slowly* close the hand in the bell the pitch will get lower. However, once the bell is *TIGHTLY* closed, the pitch will rise by approximately a half step. There is some controversy as to exactly what is really happening acoustically, but a good way to think of it is that you are shortening the horn by “cutting off” the end of the bell with the hand. To repeat, the pitch will rise by approximately a half step after the bell is closed tightly. If you play stopped on the F horn, the notes are about right and will be close to being in tune. If you play stopped on the B-flat horn though, the notes will be nearly 3/4 of a step higher—in other words, badly out of tune.

So again, as a basic rule I suggest that on the horn one should finger the note a half step below the note you want to play, and play on the F horn.

Muting for the horn is however the same as on any other brass instrument. Straight mutes are made by a number of manufacturers, and these only need inserting in the bell to get the proper effect—no transposition is required. Transposing brass stopping mutes are also made to be used as a substitute for hand stopping. Both types of mute are illustrated above.

There is one final effect that should be noted—“half-stopped” notes. Sometimes called echo horn, these notes are performed by closing the bell nearly totally and fingering the notes a half step above what the note you want to sound. This effect is specifically requested by some composers (such as Dukas in the well-known horn solo *Villanelle*) to obtain a very distant sound, like an echo. This is the type of hand stopping used on the natural horn.

3. Terms in German and French

Knowledge of these terms in particular is expected of horn techniques students at Crane (and horn majors!) Don't just guess at what important foreign musical terms mean!

French

- à plein son: a full sound
- au mouvt: with movement/A tempo
- *avec sourdine: muted
- cèdez: go slower
- comme un echo lointain: like a distant echo
- *cuivrés: brassy
- *enlevez sourd.: remove mute
- legerement: lightly
- legerement retenu: slightly slower
- lent: slow
- *mettez sourd.: insert mute
- moins vif: less lively
- *ouvert: open
- plus lent: more slowly
- retenu: ritard
- revenez: gradually faster
- *sons bouchés: stopped
- *sons naturels: open
- très: very
- très marque: very markedly
- très modere: very moderately
- très vif: very lively

German

- allmählich: gradually
- bewegt: moved, agitated
- breit(er): (more) broadly
- *Dämpfer: mute
- erstez Zeitmass: first tempo
- etwas breiter: somewhat more broadly
- etwas lebhafter: somewhat faster
- etwas zurückhaltend: holding back (tempo) somewhat
- frisch: fresh
- *gedämpft: muted
- *gestopft: stopped
- Hauptzeitmass (haupttempo): Tempo of the beginning (Tempo I)
- immer: still (continuing)
- langsam: slowly
- lebhaft(er): (more) lively [Allegro]
- mässig: moderately
- Mit grossem Ton: with a big tone
- *offen: open
- ohne: without
- *ohne Dampfer: without mute
- ruhig: calmly
- sehr: very
- Volles Zeitmass: full tempo
- wie vorher: as before
- wieder: again
- Zeitmass: tempo q

John Ericson joined the faculty of The Crane School of Music, State University of New York (SUNY) College at Potsdam, as assistant professor of horn in the fall of 1998 (succeeding Roy Schaberg), where he teaches horn, conducts the Crane Horn Ensemble, coaches chamber music, and performs in the Potsdam Brass Quintet, the Potsdam Woodwind Quintet, and is co-principal horn in the Orchestra of Northern New York. He also serves as the International Horn Society area representative for upstate New York and performs and teaches in the summer at Crane Youth Music and at the Brevard Music Center in North Carolina.

This article was extracted from Dr. Ericson's Horn Articles Online website.

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