

# Thoughts on Holding the Horn

*by Ellen Campbell, University of Oregon*

Teaching the horn is an intimidating responsibility to many instructors. Understandably, when you consider that the “simple” matter of how to hold the instrument can start a bitterly fought war among horn players. Should the horn be held free or set on the leg? There are many issues to consider before making a decision.

Tradition throughout much of this country has been to set the instrument on the leg. This has changed over the past twenty years. Many players now hold the horn free and students are holding the horn up from the beginning stages. Proponents of this playing position offer numerous reasons for this technique.

The angle of the leadpipe while the student is playing is critical for proper embouchure function. For a small, young beginner, this can be very difficult. The horn leadpipe should angle downward slightly so as not to exert too much pressure on the upper lip. With the horn bell resting on the student’s leg, it can be very difficult for a small student to find a seating position that will allow for this angle. Height of chair, player’s stature, can contribute to making this difficult at any age. Holding the horn free eliminates this worry. Proper angle can be easily achieved.

Many who hold the horn up will also express the benefit of embouchure freedom. Without the horn held on the leg, the player can more easily move as needed, allowing for an ease of flexibility, a critical necessity for the horn player. The horn has one of the widest usable ranges of all wind instruments. Many find it difficult to move in and out of the low register with ease. Holding the horn free can be a big help in approaching this problem. Students who are having difficulty moving into the low notes should try holding the horn free enough to allow the embouchure to move naturally to a position that helps buzz these pitches.

The horn held to the side assists in good sound projection. Those who prefer a more open horn sound find this helpful in producing the quality of sound they desire. It can also help the ability to achieve tone color changes and efficient sound projection.

In attending horn conferences and workshops over the last twenty years, I have seen the tide turn for soloists sitting or standing. It is now a rare sight to see a horn soloist sit while performing. Students across the country are also being taught to stand for solos, whether concerto or recital performances. The student who holds the horn free when sitting will have very few adjustment issues in learning to stand for solo work.

Many players, however, still prefer to hold the horn on the leg while sitting. Those horn players who seek a more covered sound find this position more desirable and helpful. Some find it more comfortable and for some young students, the weight of the instrument can be taxing. (For those students, it can be useful to stress balancing the horn between both hands, with some of the weight on the right hand.) The technique of stopped horn is also considered by many to be more easily maneuvered with the horn on the leg as well as juggling the muted sections. Players who hold the horn free have found ways to manage these situations without too much difficulty, and many of them will use a combination of off and on the leg for these passages.

I am one of those horn players who was taught to hold the horn on the leg but changed later. I am now very uncomfortable with the horn on the knee, but will do so at times when it helps achieve the playing demands of a passage. As a teacher, I strongly advise my students to hold the horn free and most adopt this position after realizing its many benefits. It is very important that a teacher not be too dogmatic in this matter. We all need to remember that not every person functions and succeeds in exactly the same way. Every student must be approached as an individual, and care needs to be taken to help that person find the best answer for himself. This applies to every aspect of playing the instrument whether it be playing position, embouchure, or equipment. Be willing to give something a try it may be a breakthrough!

*Ellen Campbell received her Bachelor of Arts degree from Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, and her Master of Music degree from Michigan State University in East Lansing. She joined the University of Oregon music faculty in 1994 as an assistant professor of horn. She is a former faculty member and regular guest artist/clinician at the Interlochen Arts Camp at Interlochen, Michigan. As a soloist, She has appeared with orchestras in Michigan, Texas, New Mexico, Iowa, and Pennsylvania, has presented solo recitals throughout the United States, and has been an invited performer at several regional and international workshops of the International Horn Society.*