

# The Horn Embouchure

by Dr. John Q. Ericson, Arizona State University

**1. Dynamics Soft to Loud:** We must play dynamics! There is nothing worse than hearing a brass player who plays everything at a dynamic level of roughly mp/mf. Many of those players who are guilty of this are not really aware that they are doing it—often they think that they in fact are playing dynamics, but the fact is that nobody can actually hear them. Dynamics must be exaggerated!

It takes both air and setting the embouchure correctly to play loud and in tune. Very frequently the player who has limited loud dynamics does not realize that they have to open the embouchure very slightly at loud dynamics in relation to the position used at soft dynamics. This should be addressed on a daily basis in the warm-up.

When I play loudly I use a slightly larger, more open lip aperture than that used to play the same note softly. Another way of thinking of this is to imagine the lips being very slightly more relaxed when playing loud. Practice and experimentation will help in feeling this transition between soft and loud. It is especially important to practice crescendos and diminuendos on long tones, giving attention to the lip aperture and that the diminuendo sounds like a mirror image of the crescendo—and that pitch does not waver. This is my first warm-up exercise every day.

On the soft end, try to think of keeping the embouchure firm with a steady air stream.

The air is of course an element. Use LOTS of air to play loud, and support the air column well while playing both loud and soft. Some students certainly are blowing hard but getting very little result. The embouchure is often clamped tight, not allowing the air to flow. Thinking instead of a round, open embouchure can have very dramatic results.

## 2. Does the Mouthpiece Have to be Centered Left to Right?

The short answer is no. The face and teeth may dictate an off center placement, but this is of no real concern if the player feels comfortable and natural with the placement. There are many fine professional players who have *slightly* off-center embouchures. But I would add that if you play off-center with dry lips you may in fact be forcing the placement into an unnatural placement.

## 3. Mouthpiece Angle

The angle of the mouthpiece has a distinct relation to the jaw position. As a general rule you should feel that the mouthpiece pressure is basically the same on the upper and lower lips. A little more pressure on the lower lip is of no real concern and can be a part of a well-formed embouchure (some sources even recommend this), but more pressure on the upper lip could be a real problem—it will cut your endurance, and is a sign of improper jaw position.

Mouthpiece angle is also of special concern if you change the position of your jaw from a receded to a more correct position—the mouthpiece angle may also need to be changed somewhat as well.

## 4. Thick or Thin Lips?

In the past it was felt strongly by some brass experts that only thin lipped people should play the trumpet and horn, and thicker lipped people were more suited for the trombone and tuba. There is perhaps some small element of truth to this, but successful players with all thicknesses of lips may be found on every brass instrument. I have rather heavy lips myself and do not feel that it has caused any significant problems in my playing.

## 5. Lateral Pressure

This is basically only an issue for horn and tuba players, as these instruments (typically) rest on the lap. Lateral pressure is mouthpiece pressure which forces the mouthpiece up, down, or to the side. This is undesirable because it cuts endurance and thins the tone by forcing the lip aperture out of its proper, natural shape.

For hornists a good way to work on a lateral pressure problem is to practice standing, as it is more difficult to apply lateral pressure with the horn off the leg. Lateral pressure can be very obvious when trying a new

leadpipe that is only taped to the horn—practicing with a taped on leadpipe is a good exercise to at least be more aware of the problem.

#### **6. A Questionable Embouchure Point Seen in a Few Texts**

A few horn texts would tell the student to form a horn embouchure by rolling the lower lip under the upper lip and over the teeth to make the basic “buzz” to play the horn. In other words, if the lips are “buzzed” without a mouthpiece the air stream will go almost directly down the chin.

While it is probably true that this basic embouchure set up is not unusual on the lower brasses, it is quite uncommon in the higher brasses, at least among fine professional players. It would take a long, detailed explanation to answer the question of why this is the case (if you are interested in this answer, please read pages 7-10 of Farkas, *The Art of Brass Playing*) but suffice to say that this sort of embouchure is problematic, certainly not the ideal on the horn or trumpet, and not one to recommend to a beginner. The basic ideals are outlined above.

General note: Portions of the above notes related to the embouchure owe a debt to Philip Farkas, *The Art of Brass Playing* (Rochester, NY: Wind Music, 1962), which I recommend *very* highly as the best single source of information on the topic of brass instrument embouchures and technical basics.

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