

Placing Pitch "In the Pocket"

Dr. John Ericson

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Proper pitch placement is certainly an issue of concern for horn players. Many less experienced players play high on the pitch, and as a result need to pull their main tuning slides out a great deal. Most fine players, however, don't need to pull their horns down nearly so far. In reflection I realize that over the course of my own studies my pitch certainly dropped; I needed to pull my horn out less as I advanced in my playing abilities. This was not something that I intentionally set out to do and no teacher told me that I needed to pull out less, but I did over the years learn how to place the pitch better. To play well with the best possible tone you need to place pitch correctly. Two keys to learning how to describe and achieve proper pitch placement recently fell into place for me while working on a recital.

The first key was realized when performing a sonata (Danzi, E-flat) on the natural horn, my first performance with fortissimo at A=435. I came to realize that when I practiced on the natural horn without the fortissimo reinforcing the low pitch I had a very, very difficult time keeping the pitch down. My ears wanted to hear pitch at A=440 and were, despite the horn being tuned correctly for A=435, guiding my embouchure back up to A=440. As a result, I was playing very high

on the pitch on the natural horn and this transferred over to the valved horn as well; I was not keeping the pitch down where it needed to be. Thus, I had to consciously re-learn how to place the pitch again, something that had previously happened for me in a very natural way during my studies.

The second key involved a realization about practicing with a practice mute frequently. We have small children and these past few years, during which I have been teaching full time, I have frequently had to practice in the evenings with a practice mute. I finally realized that I was playing very high on the pitch on the mute and I also discovered that my personal sense of pitch placement is very much tied up with tonal color. The feedback of tone I was used to relying upon was basically lost on the practice mute. (I now practice inside our walk-in closet when the kids are asleep, to avoid using the mute.)

On any horn, you have some freedom to bend the pitch, some horns more, some horns less. There is a range of motion over which you can bend the pitch sharp or flat without it breaking or jumping to another note. The upper limit is somewhat firm; on the downward side you can normally bend the pitch somewhat further, especially in the lower range. Within the

range that you can bend each pitch there is a central portion of the range of motion that is more stable, that is to say, there is a boundary at which you cannot bend the pitch easily down or up but you can pass this point if you force the pitch hard. The location you want to place the pitch in is at the lower end of this central, more stable area of the pitch for any given note on the horn. This location can be found either by "feel" or by listening to the tone. There is a "sweet spot" where the tone is the most resonant and beautiful that is a stable location you can place any note in. It feels to me the most like a "pocket."

The type of exercises I use to find and define this pocket are pitch-bending exercises. These can take many forms; I currently frequently use "The first beautiful tones on the horn" exercise found in Frøydis Ree Wekre, *Thoughts on Playing the Horn Well* (2nd ed., 1994), which works the downward bend well, and I then follow this with several pitches played in the manner of the exercise on page 16 ["Sustained tones with pitch variation"] of William C. Robinson, *An Illustrated Advanced Method for French Horn Playing* (Wind Music, 1971), which calls for upward and downward bends of a held long tone. There are many possibilities for what to play. I am not really

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looking at playing in tune the upper or lower neighbor notes in these bending exercises. The point is that you bend the note beyond the pocket in both directions and end up in the pocket. Don't use a tuner; rely on feel and tone alone. Pitches must be bent with a muscular movement of the embouchure, not by air support variation or by mouthpiece pressure. I now practice these bending exercises at the beginning of my practice sessions to reinforce the memory of where the pocket is, after an initial buzzing routine which I will describe shortly.

Besides the better tone you will find in the pocket, you may also discover that you play more accurately when hitting the pocket consistently. One way to describe the pocket is with numbers. If the number "one" is a pitch placement that is as low as it is possible to play a note without cracking to the next pitch and "ten" is as high as you can possibly place a pitch, the best tone will be found generally in the range around four or five. If your pitch placement is normally around seven it probably needs some attention. Focus on the tone; you can usually hear the best placement when you focus on this element.

Other physical elements of pitch placement should be noted as well. Tongue placement in the mouth certainly exerts an influence on the issue of pitch placement. A lower tongue placement will cause the pitch to drop. Choice of mouthpiece also certainly exerts an impact, as with a larger cup volume the overall pitch level of the horn will drop.

Another element that has to be noted is that for this system of playing in the pocket to work, your horn must be in tune with itself. In particular I feel that the upper range can't be tuned sharp. Many horn players find themselves sharp in the high range and, of course, one issue certainly can be pitch placement. Especially in ascending passages it is not uncommon for horn players to hit the pocket a bit high. But first be certain

that the F and B-flat sides of the horn are actually in tune with each other before blaming sharpness in the high range on any other potential issue. It is a curious fact that many horn players seem to know that the B-flat side of their double horn is tuned sharp but they don't seem to know what to do about it. Often, they simply need to think of the problem in the other direction; the F horn is flat relative to the B-flat horn, so pitch has to be raised on the F-side to meet that of the B-flat side. After the two sides match, then use the main slide to lower pitch of the entire instrument. This will allow for better pitch with better accuracy through consistent pitch placement.

A final issue that has to be noted with respect to pitch placement is the ear. You can pull out a horn almost indefinitely and still be sharp if you are simply used to hearing the notes sharp and are using your ear to guide the embouchure to place the notes sharp. A tuner is a great investment. Use it often as it really doesn't lie; it can be a great tool to retrain your ear. Besides that, it is likely that someone on almost every audition committee is sitting there with a tuner and you simply must be in tune! I find it interesting that players will tend to drift up in pitch level when playing by themselves as opposed to playing in an ensemble. Holding pitch level well is an important skill to master.

I recently started doing a short mouthpiece-buzzing routine with a drone (either a piano or a tuner set to sound the pitches) to begin my playing day to address both of these related issues, pitch placement and the ear, and I recommend a routine of this type to my students. The idea is that you will place your pitch in the middle of the pocket on the mouthpiece alone and you are also fixing your ear at A=440 right from the start. This initial exercise is followed by bending exercises and, when tone and placement feels correct, I turn the tuner back on, tune the horn, and hold that pitch placement for the rest of the warm-up.

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There are many issues that can be considered relating to tuning, but consistent pitch placement can be a key to solving many of them. Don't just stubbornly believe that you have good pitch; use your tuner and be sure that your belief is in fact based on reality. You will play better and those around you will make better music for it as well.

Dr. Ericson wishes to thank his colleagues at ASU David Hickman and J. Samuel Pilafian for their input in solidifying these concepts. This and other articles by Dr. Ericson have their roots in course notes written originally for use in a two-semester brass pedagogy class taught at Tunghai University in Taiwan during the 1995-96 academic year. These notes were expanded considerably during 1998-2001 as course notes for the horn techniques classes that he taught to music education students at the Crane School of Music, State University of New York College at Potsdam. They were also used for his horn students in horn repertoire and horn pedagogy classes there and also now at ASU.

Dr. Ericson is currently revising and expanding all his notes into a manuscript for a book.

*Dr. Ericson balances an active career as a performer, teacher, and scholar. He has served since 2001 on the faculty at Arizona State University and also serves in the summers as Artist-Faculty at the Brevard Music Center in North Carolina. At ASU Ericson teaches horn, performs regularly with groups including the Arizona State University Faculty Woodwind Quintet and The Phoenix Symphony, and is an active recitalist. At Brevard, Ericson teaches horn, performs Principal Horn in the Brevard Music Center Orchestra, and is an active chamber musician. He also serves as Website Editor for The IHS Online, the website of the International Horn Society. His first solo project, *Les Adeiux* (music of Franz Strauss and others) was released in 2003 on the Summit label and was hailed by The Horn Call for "fantastic playing ... the level of musicality, nuance and artistry is not to be missed." Equally at home in music of all periods, Ericson has made recordings with The Potsdam Brass Quintet, The Nashville Symphony, and other ensembles, including with Native American flutist R. Carlos Nakai on *Fourth World*, which was nominated for a Grammy Award in 2002.*