

Getting it (to the) Right With the Horns

Dr. Howard Hilliard

Do you seat them to the right?

Do you seat them to the left?

*Would you switch them
without a fight?*

Do you think that you are right?

The question to be considered is whether to seat the section to the right or the left of the first horn and the consequences of that decision. If the first horn's bell faces toward the second horn, you've got it right. If, on the other hand, the section plays into the first horn's ear, this article is for you!

I know of no other practice that makes less sense and can be remedied so easily as the improper seating of the horn section. Seating the horn section backwards in public schools has become an epidemic. I am not a band director. I am a performer who teaches private lessons and am writing this article out of frustration. I will occasionally suggest gently, in the spirit of improving the results of the horn section, that the traditional seating is best. More often than not, I am not in a position to explain why this is imperative.

The most commonly held reason for switching the traditional order of the horns is the advantage gained by seating the first horn player on the edge of the stage,

left of the conductor with the bell pointed into the audience. Before weighing the merits of this practice, consider some of the unique characteristics of the horn. The horn is the only instrument that projects sound both asymmetrically to the side and to the back. Since the bell points backwards, the sound of the horn is by construction intended to be indirect not direct. The traditional positioning in the back of the orchestra, close to the rear wall keeps the sound indirect while enhancing projection.

Unfortunately, most schools do not have functional sound shells, so putting the horns in the back of the band means losing volume or clarity unless there is a hard wall within ten to fifteen feet and open stage wings that aren't too wide. Of all the instruments in the band or orchestra, none is as dependent on stage acoustics as the horn. Having the sound go sideways means that left/right orientation

is more critical for the horns than for any other instrument. Because of the band instrumentation, the horns are typically outnumbered by the other brass. Even a good reflecting surface behind the horns may be insufficient. That is why even strong horn players in



professional bands find themselves at the front to the conductor's left. A notable exception is when there are more than five horn players. At that point, the horns tend to be in the back when a good shell is available.

I began playing the horn in the orchestra as I was learning the instrument; therefore I am sympathetic to the traditions and solutions of the orchestra that have stood the test of time. Furthermore, I know of no

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professional or even university band or orchestra that reverses the order of the horns. There are many reasons for this, the majority related to ensemble considerations. One of the most damaging results of reversed ordering is that the weaker player always plays in the ear of the better player. This damages not just timing and intonation but dynamics, balance and articulation as well as general horn playing style. That alone, would be more than enough reason to never reverse the order. Pulling the section down to its weakest link is not a good practice.

Balance also suffers when the first horn is placed closer to the audience than the section. The sound of the presumptively stronger first is strengthened by playing higher notes. Another consideration makes the balance still worse. The first horn needs to lead the section and should typically play louder (even on the unisons.) By putting the first horn on the end, the section will struggle to follow the first—no matter how loud the first plays. Putting the first at the end eliminates the possibility that leadership can develop. If the section is weak compared to the principal and the principal's bell is closest to the audience, you now have the weaker players having more impact throwing off the principal than being heard in the audience. The balance is completely compromised by making the hard-to-project low notes even weaker. You have tacitly told the lower horns that they're not

as important and that you don't expect them to pull their own weight.

Seating the horns in two rows (which is common in Europe) is also an excellent alternative to a single row. This seating is best for the horn ensemble because no horn player is more than four feet away from the first horn's bell, and they are either to the back or the right of the first's bell. In this configuration, a superior first can monitor the horns at the end of the section. Professional principals are expected to fix problems within the section because of limited rehearsal time. Especially at the high school level, it is advantageous that leadership, commonly demanded of the section leader on the marching field, might make its way into the concert hall.

A final reason for the traditional seating is the resulting proximity of the principals. Having the principal brass players together as well as the woodwinds in the center develops and encourages chamber music skills inside a large ensemble. The relative benefits of burying weak players on the inside and featuring stronger players at the front of the stage are not without high costs to the horn section, the band as a whole and the education process itself. Whether you remember it with a rhyme or do it in two lines, seating the horns to the right of the first will contribute to better balance, uniformity of style and leadership in your band.

Dr. Howard Hilliard is a fifth generation Californian who received his Bachelor and Master of Music degrees from the University of Southern California. At the invitation of principal conductor Zubin Mehta, he played principal horn in L'Orchestra del Maggio Musicale Fiorentino (Florence, Italy's main orchestra) for six years. As part of that orchestra he recorded on many of the major classical labels. He was also a part of the recording of the original "Three Tenors" concert from Rome which was the biggest selling classical CD of all time. After returning to the United States, Dr. Hilliard received his doctoral degree from the University of North Texas College of Music. He has performed as principal horn in numerous symphonies and wind ensembles throughout the U.S., Europe, and Latin America. He is currently the principal horn of the Garland, Las Colinas, San Angelo, and New Symphony of Arlington orchestras in which he has also performed as a soloist. He teaches french horn both privately and in master class in the DFW Metroplex area. Dr. Hilliard has also been a voting member of the National Academy of Recording Arts and Science, which selects the Grammy Awards each year.