

Performance Considerations of the Second Horn Role in Selected Works by Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven

by Randy C. Gardner

Each position in a horn section has an artistic and technical role that is unique in many aspects. This article focuses on the second horn position in a section by examining a variety of excerpts that present diverse demands. An ideal second hornist is the chameleon of a section — changing colors and making instant adjustments of pitch, balance, articulation, phrasing, breathing, and more (primarily with one or two principal players) while performing the full dynamic spectrum from the low range to the high range. Superior listening habits along with musical and personal flexibility are the most important qualities a second hornist can possess. A skilled second hornist enhances the quality of a section leader and a horn section by fulfilling several basic musical requirements that will be discussed briefly before moving on to selected repertoire.

Excellent “just” intonation is a requirement for all orchestral musicians.¹ Every note that a musician produces needs to be monitored for pitch, demanding intense concentration. Just intonation follows laws of physics that place pitches within their harmonic context. An *e* that is the root of a chord will sound best at a distinctly different pitch level than an *e* that functions as the third of a major triad. Horns also have pitches that are inherently in-tune, sharp, or flat. These pitch tendencies result from specific placement in a harmonic series, and aspects of instrumental construction. No musician, or instrument, plays perfectly in tune, as much as all musicians must constantly strive to do so. Resources listed in endnote 1 address these issues clearly.

Every horn player has individual intonation tendencies. Sensitive second hornists know their principal players’ tendencies so well that it is easy to follow them, like returning to a geographical location via a global positioning system. Horn sections, and ensembles, achieve good intonation through highly developed aural acuity on the part of each individual, intense concentration, personal flexibility, and group consensus. Inflexible personalities create painful intonation! Outstanding ensemble musicians listen intently and adjust instantly.

Allied with good intonation is optimal balance. In the context of a unison passage, multiple hornists perform ideally with identical pitch and strength so that an audience hears the sound of only one, albeit large, instrument. This is as true with the passage from Mozart’s Symphony No. 29 that follows as it is with the opening of Mahler’s Symphony no. 3 or Schubert’s C-Major Symphony, “The Great.” The human ear perceives low frequencies as being weaker than high frequencies. Consequently, optimal balance between two horns performing at the octave is achieved by boosting the level of the low horn. When divided into separate pitches of varying intervals, desirable resultant tones that occur as a by-product of correct just intonation are strengthened when the balance

of parts is optimal, enriching the overall sound quality and projection.

With the assistance of a colleague, tune two pitches at the interval of a major third so that they sound perfectly, without beats. Have each player in turn play their pitch at a *mf* dynamic while the colleague plays their pitch through a slow dynamic swell, from *pp* to *ff* and returning to *pp*. Notice the point at which these pitches create the most resonant quality. This is the ideal balance of two equal voices. Practice this exercise using all intervals, including the unison and octave. Extend this exercise to four horns playing chords, with three horns playing in equal balance and one making a swell.

Deep listening extends to styles of articulation and note lengths. To be a sensitive second hornist, listen and follow the subtleties of your principal player’s note beginnings and endings. Move in tandem as one instrument that is divided in parts. Also, understand the musical context of each passage to determine the artistic role of the second part, from subordinate to dominant. Understand which notes need to be brought to the fore for expressive purposes and which need to be underplayed to allow other voices to be musically prominent. Second horn players are called upon to be virtuoso listeners.

In 1765, Joseph Haydn composed his Symphony No. 31, “With the Hornsignal.” This symphony calls for an unusual complement of four horn players, employing classic *cor alto* and *cor basse* technique.² Second horn parts of this era typically make extensive use of arpeggios, employing available open tones of the harmonic series in the horn’s lower register. These arpeggios often accompany more lyrical melodic lines in the first horn part, melodic lines that take advantage of the greater number of available open tones in the higher register.

Classical period repertoire is generally performed with a leaner sound and somewhat crisper articulation than later Romantic period repertoire. A Haydn *forte* and a Richard Strauss *forte* are performed at entirely different decibel levels. Of course, these statements are simply broad generalizations of style.

In the first example from this symphony, the second horn line is similar to one that would be written for a cellist to perform pizzicato while accompanying a higher melodic voice.³ Articulate this passage with a clear pizzicato character, and melodic direction. As the last bar descends in 32nd notes, increase both the crispness and loudness of these pitches to compensate for the fact that lower pitches are perceived as both weaker and less clear. Maintain a steady airflow through

Horn in F 1

Horn in F 2



this descending arpeggio. Tune the final arpeggio to a concert D drone.

In this second "Hornsignal" Symphony excerpt, follow the *cantabile* line of the first hornist. A cello-like accompanying quality discussed above fits the first five bars of this passage well. However, change character and perform the final three bars with a singing *legato* quality that coordinates stylistically with the first part.

Classical period composers cleverly designated horns in two separate keys, tonic and relative major, when composing works in minor keys, increasing the number of available open tones of the minor scale. This example from the Symphony no. 25 in G minor, K. 183 of W. A. Mozart demonstrates how Mozart used this scoring technique to allow horns to share thematic material with the rest of the orchestra. Coincidentally, this is another Classical period symphony that is scored atypically for four horns. Pairs of horns in B^b alto and G perform discreet components of the thematic line in unison. Each pair of horns must sound as one. When performing this passage, horn players need to meld their individual lines into a single melody that fits the ensemble style. Perfectly matched articulation, volume, note length, and melodic contour are musical goals.

The fourth staff is a concert pitch composite of the two horn parts

Classical period composers commonly wrote passages for two horns that move between unison and divisi, often in the high register where the harmonics are close. This example comes from one of Mozart's most popular symphonies, Symphony No. 29, K. 201, and is often found on audition lists. When in unison, both parts need to sound like one instrument. When divided, these parts share an equal balance, like a keyboard sounding two pitches simultaneously. Stylistic alignment with the orchestra, perfect intonation, equal dynamics, and unified articulation and note length create the ideal performance. Convey a sense of melodic motion at all

times, even when a single pitch is repeated. It is helpful to practice tuning both lines to a concert A drone.

The final example from the music of Mozart is taken from his Symphony No. 40, K. 550. Two horns in G perform this beautiful duet passage at the end of the Trio section in the Menuetto. Another common audition excerpt, these bars are in the style of an elegant dance. Maintain this elegance through the dynamic range from *p* to *f*. The two horn parts move together within a narrow range of pitches. The second horn part is a virtually equal partner, supporting the melodic line in the first 5 bars, taking a subordinate role of harmonic support in bars 6 and 7, then returning to the stronger role from the upbeat to bar 8. Both horns are secondary to first violins and flute in the final two bars. Conclude this passage with an unaccented, tapered final downbeat. The second hornist must perform with the same metric sense, style of articulation, note length, and dynamic contour as the principal player. Both players need to be in tune with the underlying tonality.

Ludwig van Beethoven gave second hornists a treasure chest of gratifying orchestral passages. Choosing just a couple examples from this body of repertoire was a challenge. Excerpts cited below from his symphonies 7 and 8, both completed in 1812, appear for the special musical and technical skills they require.

Richard Wagner once called Beethoven's Symphony No. 7 "the Apotheosis of the Dance in its highest aspect..."⁴ In the third movement, where a dancing sense is certainly present, Beethoven scores the second horn to perform a "solo" counter-thematic element in the low register with thematic material that is presented by one flute, one oboe, two clarinets, and two bassoons in rhythmic unison. The example below combines solo flute and horn lines.

Because of the difference in tessitura between these instruments, the second hornist needs to play with a robust *p dolce* sound. Six woodwind instruments project very easily in comparison with a single horn in the low register. As is typical of Beethoven, he wrote the same dynamic level for all



instruments at a given time. The overall sound of this group of instruments is to be *p dolce*.

Rhythmic precision is of paramount importance, in order to fit precisely with the woodwind figure. Practice this brief figure by subdividing it into constant eighth-notes. Once these subdivisions are internalized, perform the music as printed while hearing the subdivisions. Because of its brevity, the written F# must be played substantially stronger than the longer G, in order to be heard clearly by an audience. My personal preference is to perform bars 19 and following with a triple feeling, rather than a duple feeling. To me, this is much more artistically satisfying. Emphasize the downbeat of each bar subtly. When this fragment appears later as a true solo, most conductors will allow the horn player to make a *rallentando* and *grand diminuendo*.

Beethoven's Symphony No. 8 contains a wonderful trio for two horns and a solo clarinet that is full of expressive nuances. The musical sophistication required by this excerpt makes it a common passage for both high and low horn auditions. Excellent intonation between the two horns and clarinet is a high priority. Observe dynamic markings precisely, particularly the numerous *subito piani*, achieve balances that are appropriate for the relative importance of each line within the musical context, and match articulations and note lengths. Understand each voice of this trio.

To coordinate perfectly with the first horn part in the first four full bars of this passage, a second horn player needs to tune carefully, perform identical note lengths at the end of each bar, produce an amount of sound that supports the first line, follow the principal player's *crescendo* and *subito p* precisely, and play legato articulations in bar 4 that complement the legato first horn part. Bars 5 - 7 become more soloistic in the second horn part, while being secondary to the florid clar-

inet line. Some rubato may be employed in the first three eighth-notes of bar 6. Observe the varied articulations and dynamics in bar 7. Match both horn parts in bars 10 - 13 in every respect. The second hornist may take some soloistic freedom and perform with a substantial *crescendo* in bar 16. This bar is frequently stretched, preparing the *f* in bar 17. Through the next 6 bars, make *crescendi* and *subito piani* in tandem with the first hornist. Play the eighth-note passage in bars 24-26 with a slightly bouncy *staccato*, and a steady *crescendo* up to the next *subito p* in bar 27. Bring out the four-note motive in bars 28 - 31 as important thematic material. Observe the varied articulations in the final four bars and anticipate a slight *rallentando* to conclude this trio.

Although the scope of this article is narrow historically, the artistic and technical considerations presented here can enhance the performance of music from every period. Second horn players have inherited a wealth of great repertoire from the Baroque era into the twenty-first century. This variety of musical styles and artistic demands makes the role of a second hornist one of the most fascinating artistic experiences possible.

1 For a thorough investigation of just intonation theory and practice, I suggest the following four resources: Christopher Leuba, *A Study of Musical Intonation*, Prospect Publications, Seattle, Washington, 1993; Verne Reynolds, *Intonation Exercises for Two Horns*, Wimbledon Music, Century City, California, 1980; Stephen Colley, *Tuneup CD-Based Intonation Training System* (available at www.tuneupsystems.com); an electronic tuner that is equipped with both a meter and pitch producer.

2 For a comprehensive treatise on this subject, see Louis-François Dauprat, *Method for Cor Alto and Cor Basse*, ed. Viola Roth, Birdalone Music, Bloomington, Indiana, 1994.

3 Detailed study of these two excerpts from Haydn's Hornsignal Symphony is found in Randy C. Gardner, *Mastering the Horn's Low Register*, International Opus, Richmond, Virginia, 2002.

4 Richard Freed, jacket notes for Beethoven, Symphony No. 7 in A, Op.92 The Philadelphia Orchestra, Riccardo Muti conducting, EMI Angel S-37538.

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