

Tone

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“Tone is a basic fundamental of horn playing.”
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The horn is known for its beautiful tone. No other brass instrument can match the horn’s variety of timbres from velvety softness to heroic power. Unrefined tones will cut through or dominate other players, creating an unbalanced and unstable ensemble section.

Tone exercises do not necessarily have to be the first thing you play every day, but a focused daily routine of at least one exercise can make a difference in your sound.

If your sound is weak, it is time to go back to basics. Break everything down to the beginning, as if you do not know how to play the horn. The next six steps should get you started again.

1. Make sure you have the correct embouchure formation and mouthpiece placement. This is a **MUST** for good tone throughout the entire range of the horn; otherwise you will struggle to improve your tone quality beyond a certain level or range. If your embouchure is incorrect, seek help from a professional player before continuing.
2. Without the mouthpiece, inhale a deep easy breath with the word ‘oh’ and exhale with the word ‘ho’. Practice this a few times until you feel no tension in your throat on either the inhale or exhale.
3. With the mouthpiece, hold it at the end of the backbore with your thumb and ring finger and repeat what you did without the mouthpiece. Do not buzz. Inhale deeply and blow a continuous airstream into the mouthpiece using the same words as above. Practice this a few times until you feel no tension on either the inhale or exhale.
4. Repeat step 3 but this time gradually brings your lips closer together until you achieve a buzzing sound. Strive for an “airy” buzz rather than a “buzzy” buzz by keeping the aperture as relaxed as possible. Remember to continue keeping your throat relaxed with the word ‘ho’ and by blowing warm air; the type of air that would fog up a mirror or window pane. The pitch you will play should be between a horn E4.
5. As you repeat step 4, pay attention to two things; mouthpiece pressure and upper lip tension.
 - a. The mouthpiece angle is downward creating more pressure on bottom lip rather than the top.
 - b. There should be no tension in the muscles between the nose and the upper lip.
6. Transfer what you learned on the mouthpiece to the horn. This can be one of the hardest things to do and will take immense concentration. Old habits can and will return when you return to the horn. Stay focused during this step.

The biggest mistake in tone work is not practicing exercises in all ranges of the horn. Literature requires a horn range of E2 to C6 (with a few exceptions down to C2 and up to E6). If the notes C2-E6 are out of your range, you should work both downward and upward by half steps, gradually expanding the range incrementally. Do not rush the process and make

sure you are approaching the low range and high range properly. Seek help from a professional if you are struggling to produce the notes easily.

There exist numerous tone exercises and every horn player has favorites. Keep in mind that there is no magic exercise to develop a fabulous sound. The magic is in how you approach the exercises. The following five concepts should get you on your way to discovering a better tone.

1. Begin notes with an air attack (no tongue). This will teach you to begin the note with immediate air. After that feels easy and natural, then begin notes with the tongue while keeping the same air as in air attacks.
2. The airstream should be continuous and directional from the beginning to the end of the notes. If the pitch wavers during the duration of the note, it is due to poor airflow. Continuous and directional airstream can be achieved by pushing down and outward with the lower abdomen. Some people refer to this as supporting the airstream with your diaphragm. The common misconception in diaphragm support is the actual movement of the diaphragm. It does not move upward as you blow, but downward. Therefore, pushing down and out is the proper technique.
3. End notes by simply stopping the air. This may be easier said than done. So instead of stopping the airstream, think about “lifting” the airstream. This concept works to keep the airstream supported all the way to the end of the note.
4. Tapered note endings require additional technique and practice. As the note decrescendos, the airstream speeds up and the aperture becomes smaller simultaneously. If the airstream slows, the aperture will collapse and/or the pitch will flatten. Know exactly how long you will hold the note and “lift” the air at the end of the note.
5. Do not rush tone exercises. I refer to tone exercises as horn yoga. You need to execute the exercises thoughtfully and deliberately.

Once you have broken down your approach to sound production and have worked through the mechanics of creating a fabulous sound, it is time to work on the aesthetics of a fabulous tone. Aural imagery is the key. Without it, you will never be able to express joy, sorrow, boldness, sweetness, or any other descriptors of human emotion through your instrument. You must create an aural image of the sound you want to hear and continually strive to reproduce that on your horn. Feel the emotion. Imagine the sound. Radiate the emotion.