

Transposition

The horn frequently finds orchestra parts and solo literature written for horns pitched in other keys than F. This is due to historical factors and to the development of the valve. From the early 18th and for much of the 19th century, the horn was played using the hand to change notes. This allowed the horn to play scale passages throughout most of its range. Thus the horn became very useful to composers of orchestra, opera, and chamber literature.

Unlike our modern horns, the hand horn has a simple design and could change keys with a crooks. Crooks are simply specific lengths of tubing that when added to the horn would change the overall key of the instrument. Solo horn players carried around F, E, Eb, and D crooks. Orchestra and opera horn players, however, carried around many more crooks due to the more varietal tonalities of these genres. With the invention of the valve and the gradual increase in acceptance of the valve horn, the necessity to use crooks was eliminated. However, even with the invention of the valves, the elimination of crooks, and the design of the horn pitched in F, horn players still read the music written in the original key and not in F. While some publishers have transposed and printed horn parts in F, many have not. Also, horn players prefer the parts written in the original key because of many errors in the published transposition. Therefore, modern horn players must learn to transpose at sight.

How to Transpose

Learning to transpose is a gradual process. Through time and practice, transposition becomes easier to do. Get started by using a two-step process. Transpose both the notes and the key signature. Here is how:

- **Transpose the notes** – The modern horn is pitched in F. When transposing, think about the distance and direction of the key you are going to. For example:

Horn in Eb – Ask yourself how far away is Eb from F. It is a M2 down. Therefore play a M2 down from the written notes.

Horn in D – Ask yourself how far is D from F. It is a m3 down. Therefore play a m3 down from the written notes.

- **Transpose the key signature** – Most transposed parts are written in C. However, some are not. Here are a couple examples with how to transpose the key signature:

Horn in Eb and the key signature is CM – Transpose the key sig down M2. Therefore the new key signature of BbM.

Horn in Eb and the key signature is Bb – Transpose the key sig down M2 Therefore the new key signature of AbM