MaestroMeet

Horn in the orchestra: the stand sheet

Six things to remember when you sit down in the section.

1 Your sound arrives late and from behind

The bell faces the wall behind you. What reaches the conductor is softer, rounder and later than what you hear. Play with more core than feels polite, and place entries a fraction ahead of where they feel comfortable. Judge by the result in the room, not by the attack under your hand.

2 Where the pitch goes

Louder goes sharp, softer goes flat, and the top of the horn runs naturally sharp. The cupped right hand is a second tuning slide: easing it further in draws the pitch down, easing it out lifts it, and a gently cupped hand steadies the top so notes speak where you aim them. On a double, the F side is warmer and steadier low down, the B flat side cleaner and more secure up high. Stopped notes with F fingerings sound a semitone sharp: finger a semitone lower.

3 Placing the entry

Accuracy is a hearing problem before it is a lip problem: hear the exact note in your head before you play it, because a horn cannot find a pitch on the way in. Raise your instrument during the last bars of the rest, breathe on the beat, and start the note with air rather than tongue alone. Soft high entries after long rests are the whole job; practise them against a drone more than anything else.

4 The passages that are harder than they look

Quiet sustained chorales, where endurance runs out before the phrase does. Second and fourth horn low register, which carries the section's bass and is heard more than it seems. Fast tongued passages below the stave. Any mute or stopped change in the middle of a phrase. Transposition in old parts, which will ambush you in the same bar every time.

5 Listen down, match across

Chords in the section tune upwards from the bottom horn, and everything else matches the principal. Copy the principal's note lengths and releases exactly; a section that releases together sounds twice as good as one that merely plays in tune. Blend with the woodwind in quiet passages and with the trombones in loud ones.

6 The habit that marks an orchestral player

Counting rests as carefully as you play notes. A horn part is mostly silence with a few moments that everyone remembers; both halves deserve the same attention.