

Horn in the orchestra: the stand sheet

Seven 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

Know which way your own pitch moves with volume. Many horn players drift flat at fortissimo as the embouchure opens and sharp at pianissimo as it pinches, though overblowing pushes the other way, and the top of the horn tends to run sharp. The cupped right hand is a second tuning slide: easing it further in draws the pitch down and easing it out lifts it, and it also steadies the upper register so notes speak where you aim them instead of splitting. A good deal of what gets blamed on lip or nerve up there is hand position. On a double, the F side is warmer and steadier low down, the B flat side cleaner and more secure up high.

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. The second and fourth horn low register carries the section's bass and is heard more than it seems. Fast tongued passages below the stave.

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 merely playing in tune. Blend with the woodwind in quiet passages and the trombones in loud.

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 everyone remembers; both halves deserve the same attention.

7 Stopped notes are not muted notes

Sealing the hand in the bell raises the pitch: with F side fingerings a stopped note sounds a semitone sharp, so finger a semitone lower. The B flat side shifts by nearer three quarters of a tone, so most players stop on the F side or use a stopping valve. Play it open first so you know the pitches, then stop it and give it full air. Jamming the hand deeper only pushes it sharper; a firm, angled seal does the work. None of it applies to a mute: con sordino asks for a straight mute, which does not shift the pitch this way.

