

Balance and The Natural Process of Horn Playing

One time a guitar player met Buddha and asked for instruction on how to meditate. Since Buddha knew that he was a guitar player, Buddha asked, “Is the sound of the guitar best when the string is too tight?” The guitarist answered, “No.” And Buddha asked, “Is the sound best when the string is very loose?” “No.” Buddha then asked, “How is the best sound produced from the guitar?” The guitar player said, “Not too tight, not too loose, just right.” Then Buddha said, “You should meditate like that. Not too tight, not too loose, just right.” Whatever is necessary for each individual.

This is a wonderful example of a simple, almost obvious answer to a question that seems to beg for deeper analysis. While the answer could be expanded, the truth that is exposed here gives light to the essence of the solution. I love getting to the essence of things. I love getting my students to look for their own truths. This is the kind of teaching process you will find in this book.

The idea that we can find simple, elegant solutions in life is not new. Many great minds have extolled this virtue from ancient times to the present day in all fields of endeavor. Einstein said, “When the answer is simple, God is answering.” Let’s be clear though, not everything has a simple answer. It certainly doesn’t hurt to look, though.

Simple answers have a power all their own. Not only can they work, but their simplicity makes them easy to understand, put to use and teach to others. You will notice that in this book I make reference to one of my own terms, “*the natural process of horn playing*.” This term comes up when I present relatively simple but elegant solutions, often related to the fundamental nature of the horn itself or to the workings of the human body. This is when we say “aha!” Or “eureka!” The light bulb goes on in our head! Let’s agree right now: the more simple solutions the better.

We must, however, make a distinction between simple solutions and simplistic ones. To me, simplistic solutions often take a shortcut in logic or evidence of success somewhere along the line. An example of a simplistic statement is what is often taught about diaphragmatic breathing. This is an idea that *seems* to have some element of credibility, but it runs in the face of basic physiology. Another is the “rule” of the 2/3 upper lip and 1/3 lower lip embouchure setting, which is a coincidental result rather than usable methodology. These things will be taken up later, but they represent simplistic ideas that have done little or nothing to advance the pedagogy, and, in fact, get people stuck and eventually frustrated in their attempts to succeed.

Solutions involving *the natural process of horn playing* derive from the nature of the horn itself, like the harmonic (or overtone) series. The fact that we have these wonderful modern instruments with valves and multiple horns of varying lengths does not change the fact that what we do on the horn to play well still relates directly to the understanding and use of the valveless horn of old. It is very easy for us to get preoccupied with our fingerings while forgetting what makes the horn, in its most fundamental sense, work. Learning to work with the harmonic series is a key part of the *process*.

Another example is the simplicity of finding the starting point for a good embouchure. Instead of formulas or measurements, the answer is actually sketched out on our faces. How about the simplicity of good breathing? Do we need to try to control muscles and push from here or there? No, we don’t. A simple breathing device can point us in the right direction if we can’t just figure it out from simple instructions and exercises that are based on the actual natural function of the body.

So as you use this book, notice how things are simple and interrelated. I hope this isn’t a disappointment to anyone seeking more complicated, technical solutions. It may even seem repetitive at times, but I have no qualms about this. As you will ascertain, I am a big fan of repetition as long as it is constructive. After all, if you are going to become a great tennis player, aren’t you going to go out and hit about a million balls while working on your stroke? Will your coach tell you more than once about where your feet should be? More on that later. In the meantime, let’s remember that doing something well most often means doing something easily and efficiently— without struggle. If we *can* do things by going with the natural tendencies of our bodies and the tools we use with skill and grace,

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let's do it that way.

Another concept, a relatively simple but divine one that goes well with the "*natural process*," is the concept of **balance**. As we learn, sometimes we tend to latch on to one theory or aspect of playing, hoping that it will provide us with a solution for everything. If blowing is good, then blowing harder will be even better. If we just work more and harder, everything will be fine. If three hours of practice a day is good, then five is much better. If a little tension is okay, then a "little" more won't hurt. However, that is not what is going on if you watch a great horn player or a great athlete. If as musicians we are more like athletes than anything else, one has to consider that even athletics are not just about sheer power and speed. Great athletes have a sense of the balance of power and finesse that takes their activities to a higher level. They also must be aware of the danger of fatigue or of being "muscle bound." Athletes have problems when they get "out of balance." There is also the **calm** of a great athlete— the ability to stay balanced under pressure. These are skills and concepts we can and do use. There is a fine balance that will elevate our "game."

For us there is the basic balance of lip and body tension with relaxation and air speed. Even though I often advocate "relaxation," you can't just relax all your muscles and still play. There is always some tension. But how do we find that perfect balance? In this technical age we tend to seek formulas and technical treatises. This often leads to endless speculation, magic exercises to practice and the search for "better equipment." Most of the time this is more confusing than helpful. Fortunately we have great natural indicators like tone and resonance to help guide us in the right direction. When we play a tone with a good "balance of elements," we find the note resonates and has a wonderful "live" quality. By taking in a great breath and listening to our sound we let our body find the right way to get to that sound or balance. This is also part of the "*natural process of horn playing*."

The balancing elements are relatively few and easy to manage. Most of the time we are just balancing air flow with lip tension or lip adjustment. Take two aspects of playing that generate a lot of conversation and debate— playing loud and mastering the upper register. Often words like "effort," "strength," "tension," "force" and even "pain" are mentioned in these discussions. Let's take a slightly different approach.

Consider, instead, the amount of effort that it **doesn't** take to play beautifully in any range and at any volume. To play loud, is it brute force of air or is it the perfect balance of air speed and the lip relaxation in the center of the embouchure that actually produces the volume? Amplitude (size) of vibration equals volume. Air speed supports the amplitude. Forcing the air without relaxing the lip for amplitude creates an ugly sound that will go sharper as you blow harder. Balancing these two elements rather than forcing will produce the best results, including the loudest notes you will ever get. Magically, this balance also produces the best sound for high volumes and keeps the notes from going sharp as you get louder! So if you listen to your pitch (and use a tuner) as you practice making crescendos and diminuendos, you can find the answer simply and intuitively. This is far more effective than trying to figure it all out as some kind of formula. It just comes "naturally" from simple actions based on logical principles.

The same is true of the high register. Success there is a fine balance of elements. Playing up high is *not* about strength at all. It is also *not* about too much tension, undo effort, brute force and certainly should not involve pain. It is about doing the right things and developing a touch, a balance. In the "Warming-Up" section on page 50, I talk about the "Glissando Principle." This simple way of finding the right **balance of lip tension and air speed** is a real key to playing up high.

Strength is actually about endurance. Supple strength creates the opportunity for great playing. We create this kind of strength by warming-up well and building endurance through planned practice routines and ensemble playing— always maintaining an efficient balance of air and tension. Simply playing hard for hours on end, especially without an adequate warm-up or true air support, only produces strength without suppleness at best and often degenerates into fatigue. We have upset the balance.

Attacks, especially first attacks, are also a major area of concern. Lack of accuracy and hesitation are two things that can create tension and develop into outright fear. These two attack issues are often linked with other problems like holding the pitch and tone steady, especially on soft notes, often in the upper register. This is an area where using air attacks (without the tongue) and just holding notes out while feeling the air speed can be of great value. By taking the tongue out of the mix we can relieve some tension in many players, and it gets the focus on the **lip and air balance**. It also forces us to get the air up to speed right away and not rely on the tongue for the attack. This is critical. How do we know when the balance is right? When the note responds quickly and easily and the sound is free and vibrant. How do we keep it that way? By keeping the air moving like a bow on a string. Simple.

Great **sounding** string players have great bow technique. They feel their instrument through their bow and coax and cajole the sound from their instrument. You can't just crank up the force on a string instrument. It will sound horrible. Great tone is a very subtle, balanced interaction between bow and violin. The air is *our* bow. We feed and manipulate the air at all times like a great string player works the bow. We should have a subtle, *balanced* interaction with our horns.

Many people, including myself, like to use a comparison of singing with brass playing. This is so true. Everything said in previous the paragraphs supports this concept. Our vocal chords are our lips. Everything is just moved forward in the body. The perfect balance of air flow and tension of the vocal chords is exactly the same as what we are trying to achieve with our playing. How does a singer find the perfect resonance? The same way we do: by listening to their tone, feeding in air and letting the body find the most efficient, elegant way to achieve the sound. Singers, like us, must also know exactly how much they can sing each day. They respect the limits of their body in order to be at their best.

This becomes kind of a meditation. We sit and balance our tone like we would sit and balance our mind through meditation. Over analyzing is on the other end of the scale from indifference to knowledge. Neither extreme works. Where is the balance? Try finding the balance through action, sensitivity and knowledge. Learn to love the sensual feeling of playing a beautiful note. Enjoy how "easy" it is, how wonderful it sounds. Bring all of this to your regular playing. This starts with the warm-up and continues throughout the day.

Realize that the answers to most of your questions are interrelated and can be discovered through intuitive but logical action. The answers also reflect and utilize the nature of the instrument, our bodies and the nature of music itself. This is the "*natural process of horn playing*." It is a **balance** of mind, body and machine. Does a calm, "beautiful" mind bring about a beautiful tone? Can we have fun playing the horn? Let us proceed to find out.