

FRENCH HORN FAQ's



[How Do You Play It?](#)



History

The modern horn evolved from 16th century hunting horns, which look like today's French horns with out the valves, tuning slides and other tubing. These horns were used to let foxhunters know which way the foxes had gone in the forest. In fact the shape allowed the hunters to carry the instrument over their shoulders! Originally made from actual animal tusks or horns (hence the name), these instruments could only play a few notes. Whereas they did not have valves, the player alternated between their limited note repertoire by stopping the horn at various degrees (i) or using various crooks (additional tubing or "slides"). In fact, most horn players had to perform with several crooks by them that allowed them to play the correct notes; thus, if a musical piece changed keys, the player had to reassemble the instrument!

In 1660, the trompe was introduced in France and was dubbed a "French" horn. Despite this label, it was actually German instrument makers who perfected the modern French horn. To wit, Stolzel and Bluhmel added valves to the horn in 1818, which eliminated the need for those annoying crooks. In 1853, rotary valves were introduced and today are standard on French Horns (most other brass instruments use piston valves). Beginners usually (but don't have to) use "Single" horns in F which have 3 valves, while "professionals" primarily play on "double" horns in F/Bb which have 4 valves (3 valves and a thumb key).

Some current facts about the French horn:

The French horn is most common in concert bands, brass bands and woodwind quintets. However, it is the only true resident brass member of the symphony orchestra (trumpets, trombones and tubas often "sit out" many pieces) as it blends in well with woodwinds, strings as well as other brass. It is also very popular in Pop and R&B background orchestras.

It is interesting to note that if one were to unbend all the tubing of the French horn into one long tube, it would stretch over 12 feet!

Composers:

Famous composers who have written music for the French horn include John Williams, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Henry Mancini, Ludwig Van Beethoven, Gustav Mahler, Quincy Jones, Richard Strauss, Richard Wagner and David Foster.

Musical Pieces featuring the French horn:

*The following pieces feature prominent French horn parts: Theme from "Star Wars", Mendelssohn's Nocturne (from A Midsummer Night's Dream), Theme from "M*A*S*H", Theme from "Little House on the Prairie", Love Theme from Romeo & Juliet, Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun, 1812 Overture, Mozart's Horn Concerti and Handel's Water Music.*



Musicians:

Some famous French horn performers are Barry Tuckwell, Thomas Bacon, Julius Watkins, John Clark, Jim

Buffington, Sharon Moe, Maggie Reill, Joseph Mayer, Mason Jones, Bob Carlise, Philip Farkas. I know, I've never heard of them either.

That's nice, but about some people we've heard of?

Despite that, the French horn can be found in popular groups such as The Canadian Brass, The Nashville String Machine (check your CD's, they're everywhere!) and the Boston Pops Orchestra. Mariah Carey, Harry Connick, Jr., B.B. King, Tracy Chapman, Gladys Knight and the Pips, Luther Vandross, Tramaine Hawkins and Madonna have all used French horns in some of their popular recordings.

They also play:

French horn players may play either a single or double French horn.

Disgruntled players:

While the fingerings for the trumpet and French horn are similar, most students that choose French horn tend to really want to play it, though teachers sometimes will begin a French horn player on trumpet (ii). However if absolutely necessary, the French horn player may be able to switch to the trumpet or euphonium (iii) with some effort. It's funny though, French horn players seem to adapt well to string instruments...

It should be noted that the French horn is very difficult and only the dedicated student with an extremely good ear should attempt to play it. Many junior high and elementary schools with tight budgets won't even consider using the French horn as it is also expensive and difficult to maintain.



- i. Stopping - Placing the hand inside the bell and thus cutting the bell size 1/4, 1/2 or 3/4. Today "stopping" is used primarily for special effects.
- ii. This is not recommended however, as becoming proficient on the French horn requires many years. Thus if the budget permits, the student should begin immediately on the instrument.

iii. *When I was in the "Educational Brass" class at the Aaron Copland School of Music, I noticed that the trumpet players adapted much quicker to the French horn than did the French horn players did to the trumpet.*

- [Yeah, But How Do You Play The French Horn?](#) 



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Web Author: Student 1128 (GWU)

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