Teacher Talk

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The Art of Mellophone Playing

by Kate Warren

Though horn players are often not considered doublers, many of us have held (and played) a mellophone. The misbegotten alto voice of the marching band, mellophone is given to most with the guise that it's "essentially just a single F horn" and, in a matter of seconds, a horn player has magically become a mellophone player ... a statement that could not be farther from the truth.

A Brief History

The modern-day marching mellophone is an American tradition that evolved from G bugles, as popularized by drum and bugle corps in the latter half of the 20th century.

The marching mellophone, originally named the Imperial Mellophone to refer to its corps-style wrap, was first produced by the Whaley Royce Company in 1963 as a response to the popular use of C.G. Conn's Mellophonium in the Stan Kenton Orchestra. The Imperial Mellophone, pitched in G, quickly joined the ranks of other mid-voice instruments in the drum and bugle corps, including alto bugles, French horn bugles, flugelhorn bugles, and flugabones.[1]

In an effort to achieve a more unified sound, many drum corps began to thin their mid-voice lines down to only mellophones in the 1980s. The G mellophone was re-pitched to F in the mid-1990s to match the manufacturing demand for high school marching band instruments and increase the likelihood for drum and bugle corps to resell their used instruments to high school programs.

Though the key of the mellophone was adjusted to appeal to high school horn players, the instrument itself comes from a very different background – all this is to say: *the mellophone is not a horn*. It did not evolve from a horn and has little in common with it; thus, the approach to playing it must reflect that.

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Why the Mellophone Won't Destroy Horn Players

A common misconception with mellophone playing is that it destroys the embouchure and sound of horn players; not only is this untrue, but, when played correctly, the mellophone can be a powerful tool for developing versatile musicians!

In the introduction, I referred to mellophone playing as doubling, and it should be approached this way; when traditional doublers switch between instruments (think saxophone and clarinet) they bring what they can from one set of pedagogy but understand that the fundamental approach between instruments may be different. When playing mellophone, horn players must understand that while mellophone is a brass instrument, almost every aspect of its construction is closer to a trumpet than to a horn.

The mellophone is not a horn, but when performers try to play it like one, problems in their horn playing begin to pop up. Horn players who begin to transfer mellophone technique to their horn playing often suffer from bright tone, harsh articulations, and sometimes embouchure issues. Mellophone players who transfer too much horn technique to their mellophone playing can suffer from a tight and airy sound, difficultly in the high register, and endurance problems. Both scenarios can be partially prevented by remembering that the mellophone and horn are completely different instruments, and that the techniques used on one instrument are not always translatable to the other.

An additional way to prevent incorrect playing habits from transferring between instruments is by using the proper equipment. When playing on a mellophone mouthpiece, it is easier to compartmentalize what needs to happen on mellophone versus what you should feel playing on a horn mouthpiece, since the gear will feel so different on the face. For performers using a horn mouthpiece and adapter on a mellophone, it can become easy to mix up techniques that are successful for mellophone playing with what should be experienced while playing horn in a concert setting.

Between mellophone and horn, the most striking playing difference is the flat-to-the-face leadpipe angle on mellophone, contrasting the traditional 45-degree downturn of concert horn playing. With the mellophone leadpipe slightly above parallel to the ground, you should place the mouthpiece flat/flush to the lips, like a trumpet player would, instead of tilting the head farther back to keep the 45-degree angle familiar to horn players. Though this will feel awkward at first, it will further cement the different playing approaches between instruments.

Mouthpieces

The question of which mouthpiece to use on a mellophone is asked all the time. The simplest answer is that mellophones are designed to take a mellophone mouthpiece.

Some argue that by using a horn mouthpiece and adapter you can "preserve" a horn player's embouchure, but this can contribute to confusing playing techniques between instruments, and cause other issues in playability and intonation. When using a horn mouthpiece with an adapter, the integrity of the leadpipe taper is broken by the sudden shift in diameter to match the horn mouthpiece shank. This uneven taper changes where the notes sit/resonate throughout the horn and causes tuning issues. In addition, the small rim of a horn mouthpiece is not conducive to marching, often creating other embouchure issues as the performer attempts to stabilize what they feel on their face while moving and playing.

Others opt to use a deep cup trumpet mouthpiece, which is easier and often cheaper to obtain than a mellophone mouthpiece; however, most trumpet mouthpieces have too long of a shank for the taper of the mellophone, causing tuning and brightness issues because of the inadequate cup depth and bore size. If a trumpet mouthpiece must be used, look for bore sizes around #19 or #20, a deep cup, and a short shank.

All mellophone players should play on a mellophone mouthpiece. When it comes to picking a mellophone mouthpiece, the options are limited but the gold standard is a Hammond 6MP. Most DCI corps use this mouthpiece or a copy of some kind. Other good choices are the Hammond 5MP, Blessing MPC6, or Kanstul M6. Be wary of other mouthpieces branded as mellophone mouthpieces, as this terminology is interchangeable with E-flat alto horn mouthpieces, which are very different. E-flat alto horn mouthpieces are often described as "old style mellophone models" while the modern marching mellophone may be referred to as "trumpet style."[2]

Sound Production

Sound production on the mellophone can be difficult for horn players. Because the mellophone is a high F instrument and has a tubing length half that of a single F horn, it can be easy to overplay; however, instead of a louder sound, overplaying results in a searing and brighter tone quality.[3] While playing mellophone, it is paramount to consider air stream density and control rather than quantity. Horn players should be mindful of how much air they use at peak dynamic levels as the necessary air will be less than they are used to using on a double horn.

Another common sound production issue is a lack of inner embouchure control. For horn players accustomed to the wide diameter and small rim thickness of a horn mouthpiece, the mellophone mouthpiece provides a deceptive level of embouchure comfort that can lead to an under-supported aperture. Without proper aperture control, the airstream will become less dense, causing a diffuse tone quality. Players with an airy or unfocused sound on the mellophone are likely using an aperture that is too large, or too round, for the smaller mellophone mouthpiece. Although they may have fine support in the corners of the embouchure, the aperture is likely out-turned and spread, rather than controlled and supported.

Horn players will also need to recalibrate their articulation strength to compliment the cylindrical and bell-front wrap of the mellophone. With a more direct path from bell to audience, mellophone players coming from a horn background will need to lighten their articulation strength considerably.

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The mellophone requires less finesse to play than the horn, a feature that comes in handy while moving and playing; however, it also leaves a much larger space for error. Performers whose playing habits become lackadaisical on mellophone – through overplaying, lack of proper embouchure support, or articulation strength – risk translating these habits to their horn playing. In these cases, playing the mellophone has not made them a worse horn player, their horn playing simply lacks the necessary attention to detail that the mellophone does not require.

Tuning

Mellophones are notorious for their tuning issues, but improvements in manufacturing and design have made significant strides in the past decade. Ensuring that all mellophone players are using mellophone mouthpieces will do the most to aid intonation across the line.

The second greatest help to intonation will be knowing the tuning tendencies of each note and utilizing the first-valve kick-slide to adjust accordingly when applicable. Horn players are not used to using a slide to adjust pitch, but just like trumpeters, this manual adjustment is something the instrument's playability is designed around and should be utilized.

The last step to mellophone intonation is alternate fingerings. Most notes sit well on their standard fingering, but others, such as a' should almost always be played on an alternate fingering (in this case just 3rd valve). Other notes that may require alternate fingerings are e'' (12) and a'' (3). Despite its bad reputation, the use of proper equipment and tuning adjustments make good mellophone intonation a very achievable task.

Conclusions

The mellophone is not a horn, but when approached as its own instrument with its own playing pedagogy, it can be a powerful tool for developing versatility and musicianship. By taking a playing approach closer to that of the trumpet – adjusting to the demands of the instrument that differ from horn, and compartmentalizing their technique – horn players can make excellent mellophone players and often strengthen their horn playing in the process.

The horn world frequently tries to fit the mellophone into a box of French horn "adjacentness" when in reality, it should be celebrated for the unique instrument that it is!

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[1]Scooter Pirtle, "Chapter 2: The Evolution of the Bugle," *A History of Drum and Bugle Corps*, pp. 63–90.

[2]Conn & Selmer, *Vincent Bach Mouthpiece Catalog*, Steinway Musical Instruments, Inc., Elkhart, IN, 2007.

[3]"The Structure of the Horn," *Musical Instrument Guide: The Structure of the Horn*, The Yamaha Corporation.