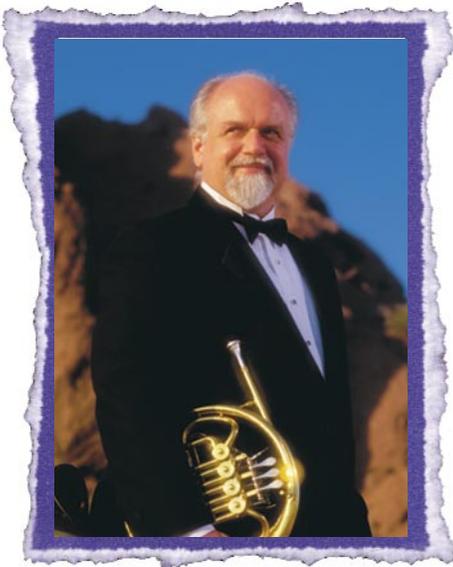




YAMAHA

Educator Series

WIND INSTRUMENTS



Thomas Bacon

Thomas Bacon has held principal horn positions with the Syracuse Symphony, Detroit Symphony, Houston Symphony and the Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestras. He has also performed in "guest" principal positions with the Berlin Philharmonic, Berlin Opera, Pittsburgh Symphony, Milwaukee Symphony, Chicago Symphony, Phoenix Symphony, Fort Worth Symphony, and many other orchestras.

As soloist he has performed in Europe, Africa, Asia, North and South America, and been soloist on international tours with the Amati Ensemble, the Berlin Radio Orchestra, and Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project. He has performed concertos with over a hundred orchestras across the United States, and been guest artist at major music festivals throughout the world.

Mr. Bacon records and concertizes in recital, chamber and orchestral engagements, with around one hundred performances annually. Recent tours have taken him to Japan, Hong Kong, France, Spain, Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Italy, Mexico, Canada and across the U.S. He is a founding member and vice president of Summit Brass, America's Premier Large Brass Ensemble. Mr. Bacon also is a member of the St. Louis Brass Quintet, The Golden Horn, and Opus 90.

Prof. Bacon has served on the faculties of Arizona State University, Rice University, University of Houston, Syracuse University, and Oakland University; and he has given master classes and clinics at hundreds of universities and colleges around the world.

Thomas Bacon is a Yamaha Performing Artist.

The Eliminator:

Why you should know how to read bass clef and transpose on the horn.

by Thomas Bacon

Note: all names have been changed to preserve anonymity

After the horn auditions for Metropolis All-City High School Youth Orchestra, we eavesdrop on the conductor discussing with the brass section coach:

Conductor: Whew, this is going to be difficult, we heard a lot of really good playing today.

Brass Coach: That's for sure. It's amazing how good some of the young players are these days. But I did notice something that is going to help make our decision a lot easier.

Conductor: Easier, how? They all had good sounds, good rhythm, lots of technique...

Brass Coach: Sure, but there was one area where five out of the nine players we heard were weak, and that was in reading the parts in bass clef. And remember, you have scheduled Shostakovich 5th for next season. All of the horn parts have some bass clef in that.

Five out of nine players – Eliminated

In the Southeastern Midwest University band office after the horn seating tryouts for wind ensemble and symphonic band, we overhear the two band directors discussing:

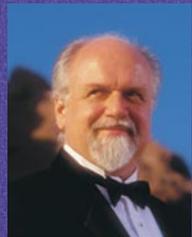
SB director: ...so I need eight, you'll need four, the others get assigned to concert band. And I know almost everybody wants to be in Wind Ensemble this semester since you're taking them to Europe on spring break.

WE director: Yeah, playing some wonderful repertoire there, including Dvorak's Wind Serenade. I'll need some strong players who can also transpose and read bass clef. I know Shelley has a really nice sound, but she can't transpose, and Kevin has lots of technique but gets thoroughly confused with anything in bass clef. Too bad I won't be able to use either of them in Wind Ensemble this year.

Shelley and Kevin – Eliminated

On the phone, the church music director is talking to the high school band director about the Easter Sunday Service:

Music Director: I need a brass quintet to play a couple of pieces with the choir and all of the hymns with the congregation. And on the hymns we read straight from the hymnal, so they all need to read concert pitch. The trumpets play soprano and alto, the trombone and tuba play the bass line in octaves, and the horn player will be reading the tenor part. The boy you sent me last time on horn wasn't very good at reading from the hymnal, I hope you have someone else who can do it.



Thomas Bacon

Band Director: Yeah, I know, you should have told me sooner about the hymnal part, the other guy I sent you is my strongest player, but really can't transpose or read bass clef, both of which the horn player has to do reading the tenor part out of a hymnal. I got another player, a bit younger, but she should do fine. She maybe doesn't have as much technique as the other guy, but she can read bass clef in C just fine.

The other guy – Eliminated

In the rehearsal room after horn auditions for the Lyric Grand Opera Company, the audition committee discusses:

Personnel manager: Okay, we've heard ten players in the first round this morning, who do we want to ask back for the finals this afternoon?

Conductor: Well, numbers 2, 5 and 8 did pretty well. All had strong rhythm, nice sound, pretty consistent in high and low range, good musical phrasing. Number 5 didn't do too well at sight reading though.

Committee member (a trumpet player): Right, especially on the Tosca excerpt, played so many wrong notes, and didn't even seem to notice it!

Committee member (a horn player): Yeah, and that passage is not especially hard. It had to be the E horn transposition that did it. I noticed problems on the prepared excerpts too – in the Verdi – player Number 5 fumbled with a couple of notes in the section for horn in A flat. They probably had the transposition written out in their practice parts, but playing from our audition book with parts in the original key was more than they could handle.

Conductor: Next year's schedule has Mozart, Puccini, Strauss, Verdi and a new commissioned work...80 per cent of our repertoire calls for transposition. I sure don't want to be teaching notes to the horn section!

Number 5 – Eliminated

Professor Bacon observes:

When we talk about horn technique, often the first thing that comes to mind is playing lots of fast notes. The fact is though, there are many different techniques that we all practice, even from the very beginning stages of learning how to play – tone production, range, and dynamics, to name some of the more basic ones that we start to address as very young players.

The better we get, the more techniques we need to master: articulations of all types including double and triple tonguing, wider range and more dynamics, stopped horn, lip trills and much more. As abilities improve, the difficulty levels of the music we play and the expectations of our teachers and colleagues also escalate. With high school players, and more urgently with college players, the need to address new techniques becomes ever more acute with each tryout, audition, concert, or contest that they play.

In young players' attempts to play louder, faster and higher than anyone else, less obvious techniques, like reading bass clef, and transposition, are often overlooked or avoided. Granted, very young players seldom, if ever, need to read either bass clef or horn in any key other than F. But soon it does become an issue: when they want to play in orchestra, when they get that church gig and the choir director passes out the hymnal and says "play along," when they decide to go to ensemble competition as a horn quartet and the fourth horn part is mostly in bass clef.

It is beyond the scope of this little article to really get into the "how to" of either bass clef or transposition on the horn. But rest assured, if a young player wants to keep getting better on the horn, it is something that they must do, and sooner is better than later. It is something that should be practiced every day until proficiency is achieved. The great thing about it though is that it can be combined with other things in one's practice routine. For example, if you are practicing articulations in a Kopprasch or some other etude, try transposing the etude into a different key when you play it. You'll get the benefit of working on articulations and transposition at the same time!

Young players shouldn't wait until The Eliminator eliminates them in favor of another player who really isn't that much better.

For information on how to transpose or read bass clef, here are some great books for study and practice:

Farkas – The Art of French Horn Playing, publ. Summy Birchard

Hackleman – Characteristic Etudes for Low Horn Playing, publ. Editions BIM

Labar – Hornist's Opera and Ballet Handbook, publ. Phoenix Music Publications

McCoy – 46 Progressive Exercises for Low Horn, publ. McCoy's Horn Library

Thompson – The Orchestral Audition Repertoire for Horn, publ. Thompson Edition, Inc.