

# Horn Playing in the New Millennium: The Triple Horn

by John Cerminaro

As I sit at my desk writing this now, dusk has given way to dawn and an old millennium has yielded to a new. At such a moment, one wonders across the vast expanse of time how a fellow horn player, centuries ago, must have felt with the dawning of the valve horn age upon him. History tells us that many eighteenth century players persisted in clinging to their hand horns even until the turn of the nineteenth century, though keyed horns had already existed for nearly fifty years. Brahms wrote his famous horn trio for the natural horn although Clara Schumann and others tried to convince him it would sound better on one of the new valve horns. It is reminiscent of the end of the Silent Era of movie making: so many great actors, so many great films. Yet all, finally, in the end, succumbed to the inevitability of "talkies."

When I first began to play the horn, as a child of ten, the double horn had just completed its triumph over the long established supremacy of single horn playing. Now, as we carry the noble art of horn playing into the new millennium, I believe that the triple horn will soon establish its supremacy over all the other instruments of the past.

There will, of course, always be scoffers. As with the early double horn, there has already been stiff resistance to the triple. The same arguments against the double horn — weight factor, intonation, unevenness of scale, etc. — are again being thrown up as grounds for opposition to the triple, while the simplicity of lighter instruments is extolled.

I have a great fondness for the 1946 Ford Coupe. It is a classic, with a great look and a superb engine. Even so, I prefer to drive my family around in a modern sedan with the comfort and security of one of today's modern vehicles. Something is lost; something is gained. And we must say the same of double versus triple horn playing. Though there are some remaining difficulties, the biggest hurdles are behind us now, and ahead are the kind of playing refinements and player-comforts that are giving horn players everywhere cause for rejoicing.

The advantages of triple horn playing are many and varied, and not merely confined to security in the high register. I can assure the novice hornist of increased artistic merit on all fronts. Phrasing with triple horns transforms fluid vocal ideas into confident musical realities. One is not "just trying to get the high note safely." That becomes a given, and loftier musical values may be reliably sought.

As with any brass innovation, success does not begin with the introduction of the instrument itself; but, instead, begins with a well-known artist championing it. In the case of the double horn in America, Anton Horner of The Philadelphia Orchestra was its original champion.

With triple horn playing, until I debuted one with the New York Philharmonic in 1975 (designed for me by Dick Merewether of Paxman's in London), few people took them seriously, even though they had been around for nearly a decade. To be sure, I was thoroughly ridiculed by nearly

everyone for trying — especially by the Philharmonic horn section of that era. Another hornist and colleague, Tony Miranda, began importing the new Paxman triples into New York City around the same time, but the horn community did not take them seriously for another dozen years.

After the release of my early solo recordings for Crystal records, whose distribution is worldwide, interest in triple horns finally became profound. In 1989, my manuscript, *The Greater Glory* first appeared, was referenced in *The Horn Call* and, for the first time explained and extolled the advantages of triple horn playing.

Today, coast to coast in America, young hornists are winning auditions using triples. Professionals of no less a magnitude than Philip Myers of the New York Philharmonic and William Lane of the Los Angeles Philharmonic are leading triple horn experts, as are the distinguished members of The American Horn Quartet, and the stigma, even laughability, of using one in public is gone forever. Granted, we are still in the relative infancy of these horns, but nascent results speak for themselves.

New truths are the fruits of new experiences and of old truths combined and mutually transforming one another. You may rinse the bottle out, but you cannot entirely get rid of the taste of the medicine or the wine that once filled it. With horn playing, a certain sound defines us and always has. Again, using the motion picture analogy, great acting underwent various changes as it passed from stage, to silent film, and finally to talking film. Yet, all through these processes, along with the new, something of the old — something of the best — was retained and continues to define what makes great acting and fine film. What was good about Ignaz Leutgeb's playing, Dennis Brain's, or Eric Ruske's, remains the same and has been the musical through-line in horn playing for every generation, regardless of equipment.

As things stand now, there exists no "Stradivarius" of triple horns that we can all go purchase "off-the-rack" and expect sensational results. In fact, most triple horns are still not yet very refined. But every major brand of triple I have tried has had potential, and, with a few modifications, each has become very playable indeed.

I understand that my ideas will not be popular or well received — especially by those horn makers and music store owners with warehouses and shelves full of double horns yet to sell. My own triple horn playing system is a hypermodern approach and contradicts every popular playing and teaching method known to me. I expect this essay to be dismissed by most professionals set in their ways and by the majority of college and conservatory instructors who now teach what I call "the venerated schools."

In order to help these skeptics reject my ideas more quickly, let me now state that in my teaching I do not advocate the use of double horns, etudes of any kind, reasonable mouth-pieces, or any "inner games" to calm oneself; that I do advo-



cate triple horn playing, large bore mouthpieces with narrow rims, a problem-solving approach to practicing, and use of anti-anxiety medications for performing. If you have not yet thrown this essay away, let me try a little harder to make you do so.

I do not believe that professional horn playing is a happy occupation. Nor do I think it is a particularly lucrative one. It is a little like being a chess master or prizefighter: very tough on the mind and body, with little to show for it at the end of the day — except glory. If you are good enough, you can have glory. You can also have fleeting mastery over one of the most difficult things to do in this world. And if you become one of the very best, you might even be remembered for it after you have departed this “vale of tears.” But, for the majority of aspirants, I cannot recommend the field at all. Better it should remain a lifelong hobby.

Now, if you are still reading, you are probably wondering why I would bother to write this article at all, considering the way I feel. My only answer is: I love horn playing, I love my horn students, and I feel strongly compelled to bequeath them benefit of my experience lest they stumble, perhaps severely, along their way. Many are the paths that lead to discouragement. I have been down most of them and would like to spare you, dear reader, a few of them if I can.

Times are most definitely different now. We have witnessed a dramatic sea change in the music business over the last couple of decades. Horn players are now expected to be stronger, more accurate, and more versatile than ever before. They must compete with greater numbers of applicants for fewer jobs. The concept of high or low horn players is extinct. Players must do it all. The notion of using a double horn with one mouthpiece is over. No one today working in a busy symphony orchestra, playing in a recording studio, or performing chamber music or concertos, would ever be caught flat footed without at least a descant horn back-up and one or two extra mouthpieces ready to go. In fact, I believe a good customized triple horn is an absolute necessity now and that this horn will be the horn of the future — a future that is already here. Those of us on the cutting edge of playing already know this to be true. In the same sense that the viola-sized tennis racket convincingly replaced the traditional smaller version, the triple horn will surely replace the double. It is inevitable and, most of all, it is needed.

After talent, horn playing is largely a question of problem solving. The problems are set by the music, and one must have an answer for every one of them. If you do not have an answer to a certain music’s difficulty, to a certain composer’s challenges, you will, sooner or later, be found out.

I will not give anyone false hope. The job market remains rather bleak. There are many worthy players who will never gain an orchestral post and many others who will win a post quite beneath their capabilities, causing them long-term discouragement. Thomas Graves expressed it best for our generation: “Full many a gem of purest ray serene, the dark unfathomed caves of ocean bear; Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, and waste its sweetness on the desert air.”

In spite of this, some of you have the unquenchable passion to go forward with the professional horn player’s life

and will do so no matter what the odds. There is also a player among you reading this now who wants to be the best there ever was. I write now for all you brave souls and especially for that one among you who will advance horn playing beyond anything yet imagined.

As Thomas Hardy so aptly put it, “If a way to the better be, it lies in taking a full look at the worst.” We must, therefore, look honestly at the music business as it is currently and prepare ourselves the best we can to cope with it. I have found that, from the simplicity of Brahms’ Second Symphony to the complexity of Berg’s Chamber Concerto, the triple horn reduces the traditional “nightmare” difficulties of these works down to manageable size.

All true adventure begins with running away from home — yet carrying a knapsack with us of the things we truly value. I am by no means advocating wholesale destruction of our former ways of playing the horn; on the contrary, we will carry the best with us over into the new system of playing. My challenge to you, dear reader, especially if you have never given a triple horn a chance, is to find yourself a decent instrument and discover just what it is that has drawn some of today’s finest artists to the new system. Do not be afraid of the newness. Do not be afraid to make the leap into the unknown. Remember this instead: that our beloved Dennis Brain went from playing a single F horn, to trying a single C, and lastly to his trusty single Bb. He relearned all the new fingerings each time he changed. And each step of the way, he got better and better. And so will you!

*A Texas native, John Cerminaro made his solo debut at age sixteen with the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. He studied at the Juilliard School, where he was a recipient of the Naumberg Award. His teachers included Alfred Resch, Philip Farkas, and James Chambers. He served as principal horn of the New York Philharmonic from 1969 to 1979, when he joined the Los Angeles Philharmonic in the same capacity, serving there seven seasons. In the fall of 1998 he was appointed principal horn of the Seattle Symphony Orchestra.. He has recorded four solo albums on the Crystal label: “Screamers,” “The Solo Horn,” “A New-Slain Knight,” and “Evening Voluntaries.” In addition, he recorded the Brahms Trio on Angel/EMI records and his recording of the four Mozart concerti with the Seattle Symphony is scheduled for release. Also soon to be available, produced by Hans Pizka, are his live performances of the Gliere Concerto, Mozart Concerto No. 2, Strauss Concerto No. 2, and Amram’s Concerto.*

