

# - HOT TIPS FOR HORN-PLAYERS –

Christopher M. Smith  
Texas Tech University

**1. PERFORMANCE IS 90% MENTAL!** Learn how to think! If you can hear it, you can play it. Expose yourself to great music and music making. Listen to great horn players. Experience live, professional music making. Listen to recordings of world-class ensembles. Experience various mediums and styles of music. Become a musical sponge and take everything in. Every musical experience goes into your memory bank and this is the source from which you draw.

**2. MAKE GOALS FOR YOURSELF!** Make three types of goals, long-term, medium term, short term. Where do you see yourself 10 years from now? What do you need to do to get there? What intermediate goal will help you achieve your long-term goal? What do you need to accomplish in your collegiate career to help you toward your ideal? What can you do today or tomorrow to help you toward your future? What habits can you establish that will help your long-term improvement?

**3. PRACTICE CONSISTENTLY!** Get regular time in EVERY DAY! Small regular doses are better than 1 or 2 longer sessions per week. You need to get chop-time in every day. If you only have 15-20 minutes per day, then stick to basic fundamentals to help build your chops and open your windway. Don't waste time practicing material you can play. Strive to iron out those shortcomings you wish to address. Practice is the price you must pay for achievement!

**4. LEARN SOMETHING NEW EVERY DAY!** This can be an etude, scale, solo piece, or excerpt. If you can't practice, then make it a point to listen to a recording, even a movement of a particular piece. Get music in your head as often and as much as possible. Experience is your best teacher. The more music to which you are exposed, the more music you can reference by your memory.

**5. BE PERSISTENT! WORK HARD AND DON'T BE DISCOURAGED!** We don't have a 100% success rate every day. Sometimes we have a bad day, that's life. Suck it up and move on. Remember every player was at one time where you are today. Learning is filled with plateaus. At times these barriers seem insurmountable. However, keep at it because this barrier will eventually be passed. Remember that the Horn is a tough instrument. Expect failures and take them in stride. Keep putting in those essential daily dues of practice and maintenance.

**6. LEARN TO HEAR DETAILS IN YOUR PLAYING!** Don't succumb to the trap of falling in love with your playing. Develop a critical ear. When you think something is polished, record yourself. You will be amazed at what you hear. Keep stock of what you can do well and what you need to accomplish. Don't waste time doing things that are not a problem. Great players work out and solve their playing deficiencies. Eliminate weaknesses in your playing. While this may prove to be mentally painful, this is a sure-fire method of gaining success in your performance.

**7. FOCUS YOUR PHYSICAL AND MENTAL ENERGY WHEN YOU PLAY!** Concentrate and be aware of all aspects in your performance. Hear the 'perfect' performance in your head before you play. Do not practice when you are not in top physical condition and top mental sharpness. This will cause careless playing habits, plus allowing you the choice of making excuses for faulty playing.

**8. PREPARE FOR EACH PERFORMANCE TO THE BEST OF YOUR ABILITY!** Know your stuff cold. Be able to play every note accurately in the tempo with good rhythmic precision and style. Have the ability to hear the performance in your head as you play. You will mimic this ideal performance with every subtle nuance and phrase shape. Knowing your material cold will help alleviate stage nerves.

**9. BE HONEST, DEPENDABLE AND DEAL WITH YOUR COLLEAGUES IN A KIND AND SUPPORTIVE WAY!** No one likes a jerk. Having an egotistical person in their group is counter-productive for good music making and creates undue friction in the ensemble with inhibits good music making. If you are a section leader, learn to be supportive and be willing to help. Even if you are not at the top of the section, learn to set a fine example. Set high standards for yourself so as to not only motivate yourself but your fellow musicians.

**10. TANK UP AND BREATHE OUT!** Air is fuel for your tone. Use copious amounts of air. Develop the ability to take a full-relaxed breath and let the tone you generate ride on the wind. Practice the basics to achieve this: Long Tones, Overtone Slurs, Scales, and Arpeggios. Develop your middle range first, and then start expanding the low range. Learn to live in the low register for 1/2 of your practice time. Only by doing this will you gain enough chop strength and air supply to control the upper register. Blow, Blow, Blow! Get a gorgeous, big, fat sound and fall in love with the sound of the instrument!

**11. DO SOMETHING NICE FOR YOURSELF!** As we strive to excel in our musical skills, it is often that we tend to beat up on ourselves. End every session on a positive note. Play something fun, a musical selection just for you. Learn to fall in love with the art of playing the horn, just for the fun of it. This will also put you in a better frame of mind for your next practice session.

**12. PRACTICE 'OUTSIDE THE BOX'** Musicianship is not the same as horn playing. Create a musical experience when you play. To this end, we must free ourselves from the instrument. Learn to sing! Singing is the ideal medium for establishing musical flow and the identification of logical breathing spots. Identify the natural flow of the solo line. Is the phrase asking a question or making a statement? As you sing, are you aware of the various emotional content of the various passages/sections? Practice singing and phrasing different ways. Identify those phrasings that have promise and then experiment on your instrument. When learning a solo, don't neglect learning, and being able to sing, all interludes between solo entrances.

**13. FALL IN LOVE WITH PLAYING, BUT DON'T FALL IN LOVE WITH YOURSELF.** Too often we are not very honest with ourselves on how we are doing. Record yourself often and listen to how you are playing. Pretend that you are giving a lesson to the person on the tape. What are the areas of improvement that can be done? Be brutally honest with yourself. This will help identify those specific needs.

**14. CREATE AN INTELLIGENT WARM UP REGIMEN.** Warm ups not only help waken the lip, but should also sharpen ones awareness. Use good warm ups to address any particular areas of deficiency. Be intelligent about your practice; make sure that you are covering all your bases (tone development, flexibility, range, articulation studies, flow studies, scales). This regimen should be your daily dues. Don't be afraid to vary your routine. This helps keep things from getting stale.

**15. PERFORM MORE AND PRACTICE LESS.** Once you learn the notes of a solo, you need to get beyond the notes. Too often young musicians get into a terminal practice mode. To that end you should get into a performance mode by allowing yourself to imagine a solo performance when you play. To help with this process, I recommend playing along with a variety of recordings so you may identify breathing points and alternative ways of phrasing. Better yet, get a friend to come in and listen to you! The more you perform, the easier your performances become.

16. **DON'T BE A BRASS JOCK!** Learn to play with sensitivity and finesse. It is fun to play loud, but it is often more enjoyable to play soft! Even at our most full volumes, our sound needs to be wonderful. Avoid sounding like ripping sheet metal! Don't give critics of brass players any more ammunition to use against us. Competent players are aware of intervallic and melodic intonation. Be aware of the natural and mechanical intonation problems of valved brass instruments. In spite of what our critics say, it is possible to play a brass instrument in tune, with finesse.

17. **BE CAREFUL THAT YOU DON'T BECOME A MUSICAL SNOB!** There is musical worth in all genres. Learn to appreciate good art music, as well as good jazz and commercial music. An appreciation of jazz and improvisation will come in handy when working on cadenzas! If you are not listening to art music, you should. For the novice, Romantic music is the most accessible. However explore art music in all styles, just as you should appreciate contemporary music in all styles.

18. **BE PROUD THAT YOU ARE A HORN PLAYER.** The first order of business is that we take care of our instrument. Whether you use a personal instrument or a school owned instrument, it is our personal duty to make sure all valves are oiled and all slides are kept in working order. Poorly maintained valves and frozen slides drastically affect a hornist's performance. Keeping your instrument in superior working order should be a matter of one's personal pride.

If you take these tips to heart, you will end up with a greater appreciation and enjoyment of the art of brass playing in general and horn playing in particular!