



## Fearless Horning and Performing: “Magic in Music”

by Jeff Nelsen

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I spent a week with Michael Thompson this summer at our TransAtlantic Horn Quartet seminar, and we had many discussions about music, and more specifically, about the horn. When we finished our discussions, we were always in agreement. Well, there was that issue about whether the name of the best horn-making company starts with a ‘Ya’ or a ‘Pa’. We did, however, passionately agree that the mental aspects of playing horn are as important, if not more, than the physical aspects. We knew this was not a new idea, and we also agreed that physical fundamentals are not to be neglected. But we just kept saying that more public discussion is needed about connecting horn playing with making music, growing as a person, and even living life to the fullest. At the end of our week together Michael asked me if I’d like to share some of my ideas about how I combine horn, music and life. I am delighted to do this here in a column we’ve decided to call “Fearless Horning and Performing.”

A large part of my life has been spent in the pursuit of magic. I am an enthusiastic magician, and I’m always ready to do a card trick. The other day, my study of magic mingled with my study and teaching of horn and music. Herein lies the reason why this premiere article is called “Magic in Music.”

As musicians, we spend a lot of time learning how to do things like play lyrically or quickly, high or low, loud or soft. We also strive to play only the best compositions, and only on the best instruments possible. Let’s call these factors ‘technical’ aspects to music. Technical things are all vital elements of music making, but if only those elements were on display somewhere, I’m not sure I’d go see them. What is the missing element that makes all these things become something that audiences pack auditoriums to see, to hear...to experience? Great music making is an *experience* that audiences enjoy. They will always return for another good experience, especially when the performer turns technique, melody, and hardware into something more than its parts - something magical.

There are many different technical tools of music making that need to be successfully transcended in order to progress along the path to making great musical *experiences*. The technical aspect I’ll use as an example now is breath placement. Keep in mind that we’re trying to make *all technical parts* of music making vanish from the consciousness of our listeners.

Recently I was teaching a couple of hornists from Spain. We were nearing the end of the lesson, and I asked if there was anything else they wanted to talk about. One of the players had

been working on the first page of Strauss 2 with me. He commented, “I am always wondering where to breathe during this opening page!”

My response came in two parts.

The first part came in the form of words. I attempted to explain that it doesn’t matter where one breathes. After seeing his face change to confusion, I changed one word in my response. I said, “It *shouldn’t* matter where one breathes.” His face didn’t change to the “ah haaaahhh!” expression I was hoping for. I began to feel the language barrier a little bit more than I had earlier in the lesson. I tried to elaborate.

I explained that as long as our audience experiences interesting music leading up to, and immediately following each and every breath we take, the breath itself will go unnoticed. He nodded, dutifully...but still no, “ah haaaahhh!” Since I do not speak Spanish, I began to need ways to explain my response to his “where do I breathe?” question without the limitation of words.

I remembered Dale Clevenger (Chicago Symphony Orchestra Principal Horn – 1966 to present) telling me that he respects the C.S.O.’s musical director Daniel Barenboim because Barenboim is never interested in anything technical. “It bores him,” Dale said. “All he’s interested in is fantasy, storytelling, wonder, and magic!”

How do I elevate the performance of this student above this technical worry of where to breathe? How do I inspire this student, without using words, to tell a musical story interesting enough to outshine any technical thoughts? How can I get him to tell a musical story...a magical story that is----ah haaa!!!

And thus emerged the second part of my response. I took out a coin and displayed it in my left hand. I told the students to watch very

carefully. I took the coin out of my left hand with my right hand, and then put my closed right hand above his open hands. I slowly opened my hand over his and magically the coin *had* vanished. There were some big smiles, widening of the eyes, and raising of the eyebrows.

I then opened my other hand, and still there was no sign of the coin. Now the smiles and laughter began to grow. I snapped with my left hand while I moved my very obviously empty right hand into his horn’s bell, and revealed the missing coin between my fingers from out his bell.

“Ta daaaaaa!!!” So what does magic have in common with music? *Misdirection!*

Misdirection is what magicians use to distract their audience away from seeing the technical ‘trickery’ they use to vanish a coin. When we make enough music, and tell an interesting enough story, we create enough misdirection away from our technique. In this example, our breaths were the things from which we were being misdirected. The magical musical lines are always the things to which we’re directing our listeners. Our audiences will then walk away having *only* noticed the story we told. Our ultimate goal of engaging our audience is achieved by enhancing the real story...the music!

“I have to take a breath. How do I make it go unnoticed? Hey!! Look over here! There’s *music* happening!!”

We use tools to channel our technique in order to tell a story. In magic, it’s said to be done with smoke and mirrors. In this case, the tools are our fingers and a coin. In music, the tools are our fingers, our valves, our air, and our lips, reeds, or bows. These tools are just things, like a paintbrush or chisel, that are exciting only because of their potential. To most of you, and to me, looking at a horn is exciting for many reasons, but it is most exciting because of the

potential for sound that it holds. A musical instrument manifests its full potential only when the magic of <insert your name here> is added to the equation.

One of my favorite sayings is “Most people don’t aim too high and miss. They aim too low and hit.” If we aim for getting all the notes and dynamics and we nail those goals, then that’s *all* we’ve done. If we shoot for the most fantastic magical musical experience an audience has ever heard and fall short a bit, at least we may still have played all the notes and dynamics, plus a few magical moments as well. And even if we miss some notes while aiming too high, so to speak, the notes have been played with less fear, and will have told a much more interesting story.

I do not mean to say that we should strive to throw in all the tricks and showy things we can do during a performance. Taste, authenticity, and simplicity are also important. Even though Bach’s music is relatively simple, it is completely magical if performed well. It is in Bach’s simplicity that lies its magic. After any beautifully performed Bach cello suite, I feel like cellists could slowly and calmly stand up and quietly say, “Ta Daaaaa,” and they would be giving a fitting end to the magic show they have just performed.

Making beautiful music sing in a way that touches our hearts is nothing short of magic. Every time an instrument is grasped with the intent of making music, the opportunity for magic exists. We could say, “Abracadabra” before each time we play to help conjure a magical experience for ourselves, and our audiences.

Audiences come to a concert to enjoy their experience. They want to connect with their performers, and be engaged with the experience... with their experience. As musicians, we’re not just trying to get them in the seats, but we’re trying to have them want to return to their seats next week. How do we do

this? When we create misdirection away from our breaths, we end up spinning more magic into our performances. This is a vital part of “aiming high.”

The next time you enter a stage, try saying some magic words to help you remember that making music is the most important aspect of playing your instrument. Just before the curtain opens, say “Open Sesame!” If something doesn’t go perfectly, say “Hocus pocus.” It will make you immediately and immensely impervious to imperfection. It’s true!

Don’t forget after your last note, to try saying a nice hushed “Ta daaaa!”

If nothing else, it will help you smile while you bow. ...and this alone will cause a wave of smiles in your audience.

See you at the magic show!

I really enjoy investigating how to combine the concepts of music with magic. In the next “Fearless Horning and Performing” article, I’ll continue along this magical path and describe what I call “The Magic Line Theory.”

Until then...Ta daaaaa!! Jeff

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