



## A View from the Fourth Horn Chair

Thomas N. Gellert – The School Music News Editor

Not too long ago I was teaching a private horn lesson (French horn) and my student seemed a little miffed from the moment we sat down to play. I asked what was wrong and my student begrudgingly reached into the zippered music compartment of his instrument case and produced the fourth horn folder for a well-known outside-of-school performing group here in Long Island. "Look," my student said, and I replied, "So, what's the problem?" "I *only* got fourth horn," my student said. "Wow, that's great!" I said.

Suffice it to say that this kid was not receptive to my enthusiastic reply. My student's mom (who was eavesdropping from another room) chimed in, "Isn't [child's name] better than fourth horn?" "Oh boy," I thought. Here we go.

### Everyone is a winner - maybe

Despite all good intentions, from a very young age many kids are told that they are simply "the best" at everything they do. Parents instinctively want their child to succeed and to feel self-worth, so everyone is, first and foremost, a winner, right? When my own children were growing up, I can recall at a young age that some of their very first soccer team games were "rigged" to purposely end in a tie score. No one loses. The most important thing in life is to be first. Oops. Let's fast forward, shall we?

Once upon a time I was as guilty as the next band or orchestra director when it came to cherry-picking my best students and placing them on the first part in their section. Commonsense aside, I pretty much always bought in to the philosophy that I had to carefully assign instrumental parts to guarantee that my strongest players were covering lead parts. Some will say that this is perfectly normal behavior. In hindsight, perhaps I was a little too unwilling to look at the bigger picture.

There's an old musician's joke about a professional violist who is granted one special wish by a genie to "be the greatest violist playing in the finest orchestra in the world." "Your wish is granted," said the genie and in one great flash and puff of smoke the violist suddenly finds that he is seated last chair, second violin" in a world famous orchestra.

The joke obviously is a slight toward violists in general (though I know quite a few violists who love jokes making fun of them). However, the punch line of the joke about being "last chair, second violin" reflects more of a reality about how folks perceive things in the real world.

Again, only the first part is important. First = winning and THE BEST, right? Wrong!

### Learning to play your part

As a beginning horn player I clearly remember that my very first band experience had all the horns playing the same part; same thing for the other instruments in the band. Then, as each year of playing the horn went by there were new challenges as we learned to play independent lines in band. Ultimately, the horns were split into four distinct parts; flutes, oboes, bassoons, alto and tenor saxes were now in two parts, clarinets, trumpets and trombones in three. Complexity surely added interest to the music and "new" problems.

How does one explain to a child that playing anything but a first part isn't a demotion? I have overheard band and orchestra directors talk about putting their weakest players on second, third or fourth parts in order to "bury them" in the mix of band or orchestra. I grant you that this is common practice when you need your strongest kids on lead parts but it also sends the absolutely wrong message about the importance of all the instrumental parts in the score.

Who among us has not intoned this line, "There are no small parts, only small people," at one point or another during our time in the classroom? We use this quote with kids in an effort to rationalize why it's just as important to be assigned anything but first parts (regardless of how big or small they may be) to some as it is to give out major part assignments. Someone has to play the "other" part.

Another often forgotten concern with music educators is that there are some important musical issues that come into play here that, unfortunately, are overlooked when assigning parts. Let's talk about instrument range, shall we?

... dispel the notion that anything less than a first part is a demotion.

### Appreciating 'anchor' parts

From a totally personal perspective, I think fourth horn is one of the most exciting and rewarding parts to play in a wind band or symphony orchestra. Yet, why is it that you will often find the weakest student horn players playing the fourth horn part? The same holds true for that real "pariah," the third trombone part! Uh oh!

Closer examination of the fourth horn and third trombone parts reveal that these specific parts are the "anchor" or bass parts of their respective instrument sections and often in a larger context, covering the foundation parts of the entire brass section and/or occasionally, the full band/orchestra! So, by relegating your weakest student musicians to these parts, a well-meaning teacher could, in effect, be losing a strong foundation in the section if not the entire ensemble.

Look at those low parts. The average student tenor trombonist might not be able to cover a third trombone part due to the limits of a tenor trombone range (especially those lacking an F attachment/trigger on their instrument).

On numerous occasions, those fourth horn parts in orchestra and sometimes in upper level concert band scores will visit bass clef notation. So, think about the difficulty your weaker player will have hitting the bass and pedal notes on the horn (an acquired skill in and of itself

for horn players, regardless of age) let alone just being able to read bass clef!

Each band/orchestra director is going to decide what is best for his or her performing group(s). Rotating part assignments is a highly desirable practice for some student musical organizations so that everyone gets a shot at playing each important and valuable part in the section. It is important to build range skills with your students and to also understand that not all parts are/were created equally. Ask any professional horn player about the fourth horn solo in Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* (sometimes hijacked by the first horn players ... shame on them) and you'll get an earful about how cool it is to be at the other end of the section holding down "the fort" and getting the spotlight too.

So, here's a vote for giving both your strongest and weaker kids a shot at playing a wide variety of parts in band/orchestra this year. There are other obvious fringe benefits to this practice that have the potential to motivate and challenge all of your students. Most of all, consider working a little harder to dispel the notion that anything less than a first part is a demotion.

PS. You might be wondering about the outcome with my private student? He's turned into a 'monster' low horn player these days, and guess what? He likes it. In his words: "playing fourth horn is pretty awesome!"

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