

Choosing a Non-Transposing Mute

Most horn players have one mute which they use for a majority of the muted passages which they have to play no matter the ensemble be it large or small. There are only a few players who have really special needs for a specialized mute for say a woodwind quintet where a really soft sound is needed. Otherwise most of us can make do with one good mute. Because there are so many different types of horns and mouthpiece combinations which produce so many different sound combinations, there are a number of different mute makers who provide a variety of different variations on a basic design concept which was codified by Eugene Rittich in the 1960's. The player has to be able to make the choice as to what is the best mute for their own playing situation.

Obviously, having the opportunity to play on mutes and to compare them in a situation like we have here at the International Horn Society is a big advantage so long as the player can be free to play on the mute long enough to be able to tell if the mute will fulfill their needs before having to purchase it. Also, knowing how to try out a mute and having a set routine/pattern of excerpts and passages to play in a strict order will also give the player a great idea of a mute's abilities. Let's look for a procedure to find a good all-around mute.

Back in 1980, I finished a doctoral dissertation on horn mutes which had a catalog of what as then currently available. I included a critique of each of these fourteen mutes following a testing procedure which I have used on most of the modern mutes since that time. The tests cover dynamic range, intonation in all ranges, response in all ranges, articulation, slurring, and tonal color as well as any extra features such as adjustability, straps, etc. The following tests were done on each mute:

1. A "c" (horn in f) arpeggio (all parts for horn in f unless otherwise noted)



Was played open and then muted. Mutes having adjustable tuners were tuned using the pitches of this triad as a start. The same triad would be played at a piano dynamic and a forte dynamic, both tongued and slurred. Initial reaction to sound and its change at different dynamic levels, as well as pitch discrepancies, and response were noted at this time.

2. The same arpeggiated figure moving up by half-steps (c#, d, eb, and f) tongued and slurred, soft and loud, was used to initially test the upper register.

3. A chromatic scale from written middle c1 to the pedal C two octaves below was played to initially test the low register. This was done tongued, slurred, and at loud and soft dynamic levels. Consistency of sound and the ability of that low, muted sound to project were observed.

4. The following orchestral excerpts were used to further clarify the performance capabilities of the mutes:



Ex. 1 Muted passage from *Symphony No. 9* by Dvorak

This middle register passage is great for testing a mute’s ability to change color, getting louder in the first two bars and then tapering to a pianissimo in the last bar.



Ex. 2 Muted passage from *La Mer*, by Debussy

This mute is my “acid test for a mute which slurs and responds well in the upper register at the top of the staff. This passage will show just about any flaw in a mute with regard to poor pitch and intonation response in a really “slippery” passage. You want something even higher? Well, try this one below from *Daphnis and Chloe* although to eliminate a mute just because it can’t play this passage perfectly is probably a bit extreme. This passage usually takes a specialized mute just for this passage.



Ex. 3 Muted passage from *Daphnis and Chloe, Suite No. 1* by Ravel

Probably one of the most famous muted solos we have comes from the opening of Richard Strauss’ tone poem *Don Quixote*. This passage has a wide range and takes a mute which will allow the player to really punch out a great deal of loud sound without losing control. In years past, most players had a “loud” mute which was used especially for this passage.

Ex. 4 Muted passage from *Don Quixote*, by Richard Strauss

One of the hardest passages to play in tune for low hornists comes from Respighi's famous tone poem *The Pines of Rome*. This passage is particularly difficult because of its register, an octave below the upper horns. Balance and intonation are critical.

Ex. 5 Muted passage from *The Pines of Rome* by Respighi

The following excerpt from a Barboteu Etude is a good test of the over-all efficiency of a mute.

The image shows a musical score for an "EPILOGUE" section. It is marked with a tempo of quarter note = 80 and the instruction "Sourdine". The score is written on four staves. The first staff is in treble clef, the second and fourth staves are also in treble clef, and the third staff is in bass clef. The music features various dynamics including *p*, *pp*, *mp*, *mf*, *f*, and *sf*. There are also articulation marks such as slurs and accents throughout the piece.

Ex. 6 Excerpt from Etude No. 13 from *Vingt Etudes Concertantes Pour Cor*, by Barboteu

Random Suggestions

Notice what other horn players are using for mutes and if you like the sound, ask them what they are using.

Ask to play on colleague's mutes if you feel comfortable enough and know them well enough to borrow their mute to get a feel for how it plays, especially in a work/rehearsal situation.

Despite what makers may say, not every mute they make is as consistent as they would like, particularly the mass-produced mutes. If you can, you should try several to see if one of them plays better than the others.

Most music merchants won't allow you to take the mutes out "on trial" before buying one but they might allow you to take two different makes to your job situation to see which one works the best for you. Of course this all depends upon how long you have known the merchant and how much business you have done with them before.

If you have students who are still playing on the old style Humes & Berg mute there are a couple of things you can do to improve them. First, you can actually make them tuneable by taking a fairly thick piece of card stock about the size of a 3"X 5" file card and rolling it up and inserting it into the inner shaft of the mute. Push the rolled up card beyond (below) the length of the tube to whatever adjustment is needed to make the mute play in tune in the middle and middle-low register. Another trick is to drill a 3/16th inch hole into the bottom of the mute (not in the center) and that will often help eliminate the uncentered notes in the octave below the staff. Then again, the basic problem with that design mute as well as most of the mutes from that period is lack of total volume in the low register. The later Rittich style mute does partially address this issue.