

HC140005: Reflections in Brass

Ginger Heath

<https://doi.org/10.15788/1608260623>

Accessibility Disclaimer:

For a more accessible version of this document, please submit an accessibility request form through the Montana State University Library website.

HC140005: Reflections in Brass

By Ginger Heath

Abstract

The French horn can serve as many things: a musical instrument, a source of great joy and frustration, a witness to growing up, and even a gateway to the past. At its core, this is a love letter to a horn that has been with the author for a quarter of its own life and half of theirs. Topics of reflection include accumulated physical changes to both instrument and player, the ever-strengthening connections between music and memory, and the active role of the listener in shaping the identity of that to which they listen.

As I walk home in the fading light of dusk, I can see that the back of my right hand is stained a familiar greenish blue. The tarnished area can be traced from the tip of my thumb to my wrist, then back up the side of my index finger, finally spilling across the backs of my fingers. The impression is that of a great, unnatural bruise. It is a Monday, so I have been in some form of rehearsal for five and a half of the past twelve hours. There are several competing lines of music stuck in my head that I am not yet eager to dislodge.

I started playing the French horn close to ten years ago. In addition, I have been playing my horn since the very beginning. It is a CONN 8D composed of nickel silver, an alloy similar to brass—copper and zinc—with the addition of nickel. Horns belong to the brass instrument family, named for the most common metal used in their construction. Instruments like mine tend to earn a sort of honorary “brass” status despite the compositional distinction between nickel silver and true brass. As a freshly initiated middle school musician who had only just memorized the phrase “CONN 8D,” all I knew was that I played a brass instrument. Nickel silver or not, I was now connected to a family unlike any I had ever experienced.

Inside the flared bell of a French horn, the right hand is responsible for supporting the instrument and shaping the pitch. My horn’s lacquer finish was stripped long before my time, leaving raw metal in most places, including the bell. When unlacquered brass meets moist air blown through the horn, the zinc in the bell oxidizes and forms a tarnish on any portions of the hand that make prolonged contact. A partially green hand is earned over the course of hours of playing and often fades away in just as much time. The same confluence of moisture, air, and brass that will tarnish a hand will also create an oxide layer on the surface of an instrument called a patina. In some cases, this is described as “satin,” which is a more polite term

for “dull.” The way a patina forms is influenced by the unique body chemistry of the musician. In this way, even as it loses its shine, the surface of your instrument can become a reflection of yourself.

I have now been playing the same horn for almost half of my life. I can no longer remember which dents, scratches, and gouges were inherited and which were the product of a clumsy youth. In any case, I could recognize the instrument by touch alone. One of the places where the patina is strongest is at a portion of the wrapped tubing that I use as a handhold. Here, the surface of the brass reflects light in pinpricks of color, subtly iridescent. Nearby, the back of my forearm often rests against the outside of the bell. Sometimes dozens of times in a single rehearsal, I pin the instrument to my chest so I can pencil notes into my music. A bright verdigris, like those on my hand but more intense, occasionally forms on my instrument due to this repetitive motion. Along the rim of the bell, there is a jumbled collage of fingerprints and water spots. The ridges of my fingerprints have started to oxidize, becoming darker and more distinct on the surface of the metal. Some horn players choose to wipe these away with a cloth during each rehearsal, but I lack both the discipline and the desire. Further inside the bell, the darkness is interrupted by a muted patch of gold where the instrument rests against my right hand each time I play. The gleaming outlines of the fingers are the same size as my hands today, completely eclipsing the wear left by my smaller, younger hands.

My instrument is not the only one changed by our time together. I have developed much stronger lip, tongue, and jaw muscles as a result of playing. Collectively known as the embouchure, these muscles allow for precise movement between notes. In the middle of my left pinkie finger, on the side facing the ring finger, there is a small dent. Barely noticeable by sight, the divot is more obvious by feel. The metal hook on the

left side of my horn, used by the pinkie finger to support the weight of the instrument, has evidently made a seat for itself in this dent.

When I look at my discolored hand, the tint is almost supernatural. The instinctual reaction is that this is the flesh of the dead, not the living. On closer inspection, there is a part of the living echoed by the tarnish: the veins running up the back of my hand. At the knuckles, where the external coloration meets the internal, there is a seamless transition. How I live and how I live become indistinguishable and inextricable.

Most would argue that time travel is not (yet) possible, nor multilocation—the ability to be in more than one place at once. People are limited to a set of coordinates and a singular timestamp at any given moment, and any other mode of existence is relegated to the world of science fiction. An exception to this lies within music. When I listen to Beethoven’s *Symphony No. 7*, I am eighteen years old again, performing in socks because I forgot my dress shoes. If it is possible to play horn with a white-knuckle grip, that is what I am doing. I am also two years older, lost in the splendor of the music. My conductor is cocking an eyebrow at me; I have just missed my entrance. When I listen to Milhaud’s “Le Boeuf sur le Toit”, I am back home, learning to give in to the temptation of playing with reckless abandon. Otherwise, the music leaves me in the dust. I am also two states to the east, gleefully sharing several minutes more of the piece with my classmates than I was to be allotted that day. I will take as much as I can possibly get. When I listen to “Saint-Saens’ Romance”, I am butchering the solo in a way that is so very characteristic of a beginner horn player. There is beauty somewhere here, but it is hidden from me behind nerves and cracked notes. I am simultaneously a decade older, standing thigh-deep in an Oregon lake and playing for barn swallows in the evening light. There is beauty everywhere now, and seeing it is so easy. Through every piece, I am as old as I have ever been and always changing, living in my present yet dancing with my past. When I listen like this, with one foot here and the other in those moments, I become the person I lost somewhere in the years between. The versions of myself that I forgot to mourn are still held safe within the music.

As I have grown older, a process that was once obscure to me has come into sharp focus. There is a patina forming on the music, unique to my own experience. My fingerprints are everywhere. Oft-handled sections have grown dull and iridescent—predictable

yet all the more meaningful. The sweat of my hands has left the outline of my presence in every horn line I have ever played, even when I am not the one playing it now. Layer by layer, this is the transmutation of both the glorious and the mundane into an enduring record of my life.

Oscar Navarro’s *El Arca de Noé* for symphonic orchestra tells the story of Noah’s Ark. This piece is a tone poem that includes sections dedicated to the word of God, great beasts, soaring birds, lullabies on the Ark, the gathering storm, and the great Flood. About three quarters of the way through the piece, as the floodwaters recede, a changed landscape is revealed to Noah. This final section, directly following “Destruction,” is titled “The New Earth.” A great silence is punctuated by flute, mimicking the call of a dove, which is then joined by a lone horn. The vast, unfolding melody, carried by that horn in the wake of such devastation, is the most beautiful solo line I have ever known.

Each time I listen to *El Arca de Noé*, a part of me returns to the day I recognized this music for what it means to me. I am winding my way through the Columbia River Gorge as sunset shifts into night, sharing the view with a friend in the passenger seat. Percussive thunder blasts through the speakers, and even though the summer sky is completely clear, I can see thunderclouds on the horizon once more. For the next twenty minutes, I can see years into the future when I am usually limited to weeks or even days. The horn solo approaches, and even though I am not the one playing it this time, my heart rate picks up. I remind myself to breathe deeply. Tonight, I can see that the floodwaters have receded after an endless, looming storm. At twenty-one years old, I feel I have already lived a lifetime. My new earth is a purple sky reflected in the waters of the Columbia River, and the lilting call of the olive-backed thrush, and every other gorgeous moment I can eke out of uncertainty to share with the people I care about.

Each time I listen to *El Arca de Noé*, another part of me returns to the day I first heard it. I am navigating the stretch of I-90 between Spokane, WA, and Bozeman, MT, twenty years old and equal parts eager and anxious for the coming fall semester. Intentionally unaware of the intended story within the piece, I let the contours of the music take the shape of my surroundings: folding landscapes, steep mountain passes, and a distant thunderstorm. The day’s threats are becoming challenges echoed in brass fanfares and punc-

tuations of chaos. Within the music there is a section titled “The Storm,” complete with raindrops, croaking frogs, and a building sense of dread, but this is something I will only learn later. For now, the storm on my own horizon silently rages, arcs of lightning both majestic and delicate in the late summer air. Each time the piece ends, I loop back to the beginning. There is something almost intimate about experiencing the world through the lens of music so perfectly. No one else will ever experience this moment with me, and if they could, it would never be in quite the same way. With every mile, up steep passes and down to the valleys below, the storm and I grow closer to one another. As I take my exit into Bozeman, we meet in a deluge of rain and hail so powerful I can no longer see the car in front of me. The water is all-encompassing, yet within ten minutes, the sun has returned.

Each time I listen to *El Arca de Noé*, a third part of me returns to the day I performed it. I am sitting at the head of a row of three other horn players. Between loud, brassy elephant calls and acrobatic passages, the pull of a smile is irresistible. Then, as the storm abates and the waters recede, there is the solo. My body sees it as a threat, throat tight and mouth dry. The passage on the paper in front of me, messy with graphite, has been marked by two sets of hands over the last two months. This is a challenge I am willing to face. At this point, I have yet to successfully, cleanly hit the highest note in the presence of my orchestra, let alone

the crowd assembled before us tonight. The orchestra fades and I feel a bit light-headed, but my conductor smiles at me and I find myself able to smile back. I breathe in. I play. A threat becomes a challenge that becomes a triumph.

During the lulls of an orchestra rehearsal, there are pinpricks of color shining in the dullest parts of my horn. It feels like an iridescence that, in that moment, exists only for me. The music somehow feels exactly the same. Everyone is listening to the same notes, but none of us hear it quite the same way. The well-loved places in the music, different from person to person, have become shimmering portals to another time. We are all communing with people whom we will never meet.

It is a privilege to love something long enough to let it see you change. A complex system of metal tubing has borne witness to the tail end of my childhood and a tumultuous adolescence, and I know there will be changes yet to come. Someday, I will listen to Steven Bryant’s *Dusk* without crying. The coming night will not loom quite so large. I will be able to see the next dawn in the hues of the setting sun. Good-byes will hurt in a different way.

Of course, by then, I will not be the person listening anymore. That is a job for someone new; I will have become just another ghost haunting the music, waiting to be recalled.

About the Author

Ginger Heath is a senior at Montana State University majoring in Paleontology. They currently study French horn under Dr. Elizabeth Schmidt. Ginger is a veteran member of several MSU music ensembles, including the Symphony Orchestra, the Horn Ensemble, and the Bitterroot Brass Quintet. In the past, they have also been a member of the Portland Youth Philharmonic, the Clark College Symphony Orchestra, and the Northwest Symphonic Pops Orchestra. In their free time, they enjoy designing concert posters, reading about historic polar voyages, and rockhounding on the banks of the Yellowstone River. After graduation, Ginger plans to attend taxidermy school.

