



YAMAHA

Educator Series

WIND INSTRUMENTS



George Shelby

George Shelby has numerous C.D., movie and T.V. credits. His latest C.D., "A Little Deeper", will be released by Morpheus Music. It will feature his two note alto and run-over tenor. He can be reached at www.GeorgeShelby.com.

Is It Me Or The Horn?

By George Shelby

When I was in college I wasn't happy with my tenor sax sound. It was too thin and didn't have enough overtones. I called one of the few musicians whose tone I truly admired, Ernie Watts, and he graciously said to come on over. When I got there, I explained to him that I didn't know what was wrong with my horn, but I wasn't getting the right sound out of it. Ernie took my horn and spent five minutes changing my life. During the next five minutes he played my horn, with my mouthpiece and reed, and played some of the most beautiful, amazing music that I had ever heard come out of a horn. He put my horn down, looked back and forth from the horn to me, and said, "Well, it isn't the horn."

All of your playing life, you will try to find the balance between confidence in your playing skills and confidence in your instruments. Sometimes you'll knock your head against a wall, not being able to perform a certain technique, only to find out that it's your instrument holding you back. It may need a mechanical adjustment, or you may have out-grown the instrument. At other times you'll convince yourself that you would play better if you had a certain piece of gear, and then hear someone else play something amazing with the exact same equipment that you have. We're going to set down some guidelines and give you some practical advice for knowing what instrument(s) will work for you, when it's time to change instruments, and how to look at the whole "me or the horn" question.

The first concept: "Is it me or the horn?" And of course the simple answer is, "Yes, it's both." The most important thing you'll do as a musician is develop your own voice through your instrument. As you work to develop your musical voice, your instrument(s) should serve as the amplifier of your voice. Sometimes you'll want to musically whisper, and sometimes you'll want to scream through the horn. You will be spending literally thousands of hours with your instrument, developing skills and techniques. So the first rule is: **THE EASIER IT PLAYS, THE BETTER OFF YOU'LL BE.** This of course takes some obvious shapes. New sax players use weaker reeds, with smaller mouthpieces. Beginning guitar players use smaller gauge strings. But many new players make the worst mistake of all by starting out with a bad instrument, in bad condition. How are you going to learn to play if your instrument won't even do the most basic things? Most important for beginners: **ALWAYS MAKE SURE YOUR INSTRUMENT IS IN THE BEST PLAYING CONDITION POSSIBLE.** As professionals, when our instruments don't work, we usually know exactly why, and how to work around it. As a beginner, you have to make sure that when you have a problem, it's you and not the horn. As you continue to develop, always keep that same "the easier the better" rule with you. As a parallel example, when you switch to a harder reed, your altissimo should come out easier, not harder. In the same way, when playing a better horn, your intonation from the top to the bottom of the horn should improve, making it easier to play. As you develop better diaphragm support for your air column, you will want a horn that resonates more, and allows more overtones to project out of it. When trying a new instrument, don't ever let anyone sell you with, "Well, you just have to get used to it." **WRONG!** The new instrument will either immediately play better for you or it won't. Whenever you watch a master perform on their instrument, it seems effortless. Guess what? To a certain degree it is! After spending all the time working on their craft, they've found instruments that have the least amount of restrictions to their musical expression. Okay, how did they find those instruments?



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Well, they knew a great instrument when it came along. How did they know? Because they played every other horn on the face of the planet! If you looked into the desk drawer of any working sax player, do you know what you'll see? Besides the ridiculous number of pictures of ourselves, and some really old reeds? You'll find an embarrassing number of mouthpieces. Big, small, metal, hard rubber, stock, custom, gold plated, no lacquer, baffles, different ligatures...we try 'em all. We do this because we're always looking for our musical voice to be a little bigger, and be able to express ourselves a little easier. It's the same concept with our instruments. You are obligated to try every instrument out there within your reach. If you play in a section in high school or college, you should regularly be trying each others' horns. Not just once, but again in a few months to see how you've changed against the instrument. When you do this, try to have some sort of set routine. Play something low to high on the horn. Play the horn soft and loud. Take it through some different styles of music. Always have a tuner with you, to see if the horn is in tune with itself, and in tune relative to other instruments (this last one is tricky. It makes the assumption that, all things being equal, you're actually playing in tune!). Try a couple of different mouthpieces, and if applicable, reed combinations, to see what kind of different textures you'll get.

Playing other instruments will constantly do three things for you: 1- Let you know if there are better instruments, at whatever level you're currently at, than the one you're playing; 2- Let you know if the instrument you have now is the one working best for you; 3- Let you know if your horn is in good working order, in relation to the way other instruments feel. As you start reaching professional levels of performance, you'll start to notice something interesting about instruments. The best instruments will have only small degrees of difference to them. In the relative difference between a \$5,000 instrument and a \$15,000 instrument, the one for 15g's ain't gonna' be 3 times better! If you could qualify it, you might get 3-8% more sound out of the more expensive instrument. But to a professional in the symphony, that small difference represents the difference between being able to express themselves clearly and easily, with the biggest sound, or struggling with parts of their instrument. A beginner will notice no particular differences in professional instruments. An established player will view each instrument as its own little world, with hundreds of good and bad points when compared to any other instrument.

The next most important rule is: NEVER BUY ANY INSTRUMENT FOR ITS NAME. The name is a starting point, which usually tells you that an instrument will have certain characteristics. And many players have it refined down to knowing which horns with certain serial numbers may play better. But no two horns ever play exactly alike. In addition to the basic manufacturing differences, some horns you try will be in pristine condition, and some older horns will need a complete over-haul. One time I tried out an

alto sax that was for sale. It was in terrible shape, and I could only play two notes on it. But those two notes sounded really good! I bought the horn, had it over-hauled, and it's one of the best horns I've ever had.

TRUST YOUR EARS. When the general public listens to someone perform, they don't know the mechanical difference between a gold-plated horn and a beginning student model, but they know what sounds good to them. As a player, be the same way. The best tenor sax I've ever played was one that was run over by a car. Just the very top part of the horn got flattened. However the repairman fixed it, it ended up having something a little bigger and easier from any other horn I played. It took me seven hours, trying to talk myself out of that horn, because I was bothered by the chipped lacquer at the top of the instrument. **TRUST YOUR EARS.** I've had that horn for a long time now, and it's the only tenor I own.

Playing as many horns as possible will also have two additional benefits for you. First, you'll start to quickly see if the horn you're playing has problems. If you play five other instruments that all play more in tune than yours, or have a better tone, it's time to step up to the next level. If you never try other horns out, you adjust to yours, for better and worse. Even if it's a terrible horn, it's all you know. You start to think that's the way a horn should feel. You won't be able to recognize a good horn when it comes along, because you'll be too deep in your own trench to see out.

IS IT ME OR THE HORN? The second benefit, and most important one, as you try horn after horn, is this: as you develop your sound, your voice, you'll start to see that the instrument has **NOTHING AT ALL TO DO WITH YOUR SOUND!** Remember, at the start of this article we talked about the importance of developing your voice. Why? Because your voice is exactly that: your own voice. If ten sax players of equal ability all picked up and played the same horn, you'd hear ten different tone qualities. Not just good to bad, but the inherent differences in each player would come out. Of course certain instruments will make it easier for you to express what you have to say. But the way you say it, and the voice you say it with, all come from within you and nowhere else. As you go throughout your playing career, always keep in mind that the instrument is only the amplifier to your musical voice. When it's working best, an amplifier will present your voice as clearly as possible. But don't look to the amp to make your voice something that it isn't. You can talk into the best microphone in the world, but you're still not gonna' sound like James Earl Jones. Same with your axe. It will only amplify the voice you've developed from within you.