

Wagner tuba playing guide for horn players

As a horn player, at some point in our career, sooner or later, it is very likely that the opportunity to play the Wagner tuba will arise. This moment is certainly an exciting situation as the repertoire written for this instrument is scarce. In addition, the fact that Richard Wagner created this new sound for the orchestra and that it was given to the horn players is fascinating. Therefore, we should try to enjoy this opportunity to the fullest, and this requires prior preparation and knowledge.

Playing the Wagner tuba may seem at first glance a simple task, just by changing the mouthpiece we use for the horn, we can make it sound. However, what we are looking for is not that, we must try to become familiar with the instrument, to get to know it and to work on it efficiently in order to improve our performance. We must give this adaptation process the importance and time it requires.

For this reason, below I show you the guidelines, advice, steps or tips (however you want to interpret it) that will make your experience and development with the Wagner tuba a more enjoyable, effective and successful process. In addition, I strongly recommend that you complement your practical development with the necessary intellectual knowledge, since a great part of knowing an instrument lies in knowing its history and background.

Pay attention to the following:

The first step we must take is to know the instrument we are going to have to play. There are three types of Wagner tubas: tenor, bass and double. Most probably, if you are going to play in an orchestra, the orchestra will provide you the instrument, so you will not be able to choose the type that suits you best and you will have to adapt. If you are lucky and can choose between different types, base your decision on the register and role you play, tenor tubas will give you an easier register and bass tubas a lower register. In any case, each brand and model has very different shapes and sizes, and considering that each person's physiognomy is very different, you will have to take some time to adapt your body to the Wagner tuba.

Posture is one of the aspects that changes the most from the horn to the Wagner tuba, and as it can cause you unwanted pain and tension, it is important that you take your time to find the right posture. You are likely to notice that the angle of the leadpipe is different to the horn, so keeping an ergonomic posture, leaving your back, shoulders and neck relaxed, you should find the ideal position that allows you to have a good angle. Otherwise, if you try to adapt yourself to it, you will most probably find yourself uncomfortable and the air column will be affected (due to the inclination of your body). Place the Wagner tuba further forward or behind your legs, look for different angles or help yourself with objects like a pullbuoy (if the instrument is too small or big for you). Once you have found the position of the instrument in your body, hold it with your right hand in the part that is most comfortable for you (up, down, hug it...). The important thing is that you feel comfortable and don't hold the instrument too tightly so as not to take away from the vibration.

One aspect that is interesting to think about is the mouthpiece. It is entirely feasible to use the same mouthpiece you use on the horn, and sometimes necessary since in certain symphonies the change from one instrument to the other is quick and your embouchure is not affected and does not feel cold. Still, you might consider trying a mouthpiece that features a deep cup and large bore (especially if the

mouthpiece you use does not identify with these characteristics). This will help to equalise the resistance between the two instruments (as the Wagner tuba has less) and will let more air into the instrument helping to produce a fuller sound.

It is important to keep in mind that your perception of the sound will change because the bell will be placed very close to your ear. Therefore, your impressions will be that you are playing too loud or that your articulation is too hard. Despite having this perception, you should know that from the outside it is not perceived the same, in the end it is only what you hear from so close, and being used to point the bell backwards, it is something that surprises you. Therefore, let your sensations guide you in this aspect, look for the same dynamic sensations that you have with the horn, and even more important, listen to the indications of the conductor or an external listener.

It is very likely that after a while of playing, you will feel that the intonation is not the same as on the horn and this is completely normal. The Wagner tuba has a lesser constructive evolution than the horn and this can be noticed, also depending on the brand you use or the type it will change more or less. Another reason is that it is more difficult to find the centre of each tone, and it is much easier to modify it. Therefore, it is important that you spend your practice time looking for the centre of each note and if the tuning of the instrument is too far off, don't hesitate to try different fingerings. In fact, finding the right fingering for each note (leaving aside the usual ones you use on the horn) will give you more confidence in your playing. Finally, if this occasion involves playing in a 4 Wagner tuba section, it is very important that you know your role in each note and that you encourage the section to do a sectional work in which you find the balance of sound and tuning between the four of you. This will undoubtedly improve your confidence in the more exposed passages and give you a higher quality result.

Once you have spent the necessary time that all of the above requires in your daily practice, you can try playing simple musical etudes that make you practice your sound and tuning, reinforcing your ability. Etudes such as the vocalises of Bordogni or Kopprasch are a good example, but look for the ones that you like the most and that are as similar as possible to the music you have to play later on.

Finally, a little tip that is sure to save you from an embarrassing moment, practice removing water from the instrument. Sometimes this can be a cumbersome task (depending on the model and brand), so take the time to understand where the water is stored.

I hope these tips and guidelines will help you to enjoy and play this beautiful instrument more easily.