

Learning the French horn in 10 weeks!

by Jessica Wyatt

At the end of the spring term, myself and a number of my fellow instrumental teachers at St Leonards School in St Andrews, Scotland, decided it would be fun to take up different instruments to the ones we normally teach and then sit a grade 1 exam in June (commonly known as a 'Grade-1-athon'). Others chose violin, saxophone and double bass, but I decided to go for - the French Horn!

I'd like to say I've always wanted to play the horn, but actually it was a relatively recent interest, as I love the sound of the instrument and I was intrigued by fact that it is always described as the most difficult brass instrument to master (I do like a challenge...) Full of enthusiasm, I went to the teacher who'd bravely agreed to teach me and she provided me with a small size 'Kinder horn' (I didn't know these existed!) which she'd found at the school to start me off with (I later progressed to a full size 'double compensating horn'- which can play either in F or Bb). I took it home and tried to get some notes out of it, but only ended up sounding like a wounded elephant and scaring my cat! My teacher's parting words had been 'practise blowing raspberries into the mouthpiece' so I dutifully did this, much to the hilarity of my husband...

My first lesson mostly consisted of me trying to get notes out of the horn and then breaking down into fits of giggles at the noises that came out! It also brought the realisations that a) this was a lot harder than it looked and b) reading music was going to be a challenge when I have perfect pitch, as the horn is in F and is written a fifth higher than it sounds. I discovered that, due to the fine control needed in your lips (and missing from mine), it is quite possible to want to play one note and to find that an entirely different one comes out - cue me going down scales when I wanted to go up and vice versa...

Over the course of five lessons over the 10 weeks before the exam, I learnt about things I had only ever heard wind players talk about – like embouchure, tonguing and diaphragm control. I made fairly rapid progress and found it was incredibly satisfying to learn a new note or a new technique and get better at producing the right notes day by day. I tried to practise every day, even just for 10 minutes - in fact by the end of the 10 weeks I could still only play for about 30 minutes at a time, because any more than that and my lip had 'gone'! I think part of what motivated me was although being right back at the beginning was frustrating when I couldn't play something or the wrong note came out, I saw significant progress almost every time I practised (versus the comparatively small improvements that happen when I practise viola) – so I was hooked!

The exam came round almost before I knew it and all of us taking part were all feeling pretty nervous – it was so strange to be feeling like a pupil again, particularly as I had my own pupils taking their exams on the same day. When I walked in, the examiner looked a bit surprised at my horn and commented 'But aren't you the violin teacher?!', as I'd been tuning my students' violins all day! The exam itself was a bit of a blur but the pieces went ok apart from a few wobbly notes down to nerves – annoying as I could definitely play the pieces cleanly at home! I think the examiner was impressed with all the different teachers taking part - we had two violins, a sax, a double bass and me. I certainly learnt an awful lot about being a brass player (I now have much more sympathy for horn players in orchestras!) and it was a really fun, rewarding experience – I would recommend it to any music teacher who'd like a challenge! It is so instructive to remind myself of how my beginner pupils feel and to be pushed out of my comfort zone. And I ended up raising £300 for Arco too which was very satisfying (the page is still up for anyone who'd still like to contribute - link below). At the time of writing I don't know my result, but of course I'm hoping for a distinction! I also want to continue

playing (much to the disgust of my cat!) – my goal is now to be able to play the first movement of Mozart’s horn concerto, as this is on the grade 6 list and I heard it being played the day after my exam by some rather more expert players....

If you would like to donate to Arco, Jessica’s Justgiving link is here:

<http://www.justgiving.com/Jessica-Long8>



Jessica Wyatt

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