Performance Presentation

Performing on Natural Horn and Modern Horn: How Music Was Written for Each Instrument and What Elements Both Instruments Bring To Performances

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Performance on any instrument is challenging, but when it comes to historical instruments the decision to perform on modern or time-period appropriate instruments can be difficult. The modern day horn comes from a long lineage of simple instruments such as conch shells and hollowed out animal bones. With the mixing of metals, the lineage branched off into hunting horns and eventually what we know today as the natural horn. The natural horn is a horn without valves; to get all the pitches in any harmonic series one has to adjust the hand position to fully open, partially closed, or fully closed. While these hand positions gave the horn the ability to hit all pitches in a scale, it had a major setback in consistency of volume and tone color. The natural horn was improved upon by using crooks and a tuning slide in the early 1700 and was the primary horn used until the mid 1800s. The invention of the horn with valves (c. 1818) enabled the performer to play all notes of the chromatic scale without changes of tone color or dynamics. Some schools (Paris Conservatory) and composers still taught and wrote for the natural horn after 1818, however, with the valved horn not gaining prevalence until the mid-nineteenth century. This performance presentation will explore the advantages, disadvantages, personalities and performance decisions unique to both instruments.