

Fingering Options

Horn fingerings do vary from style to style and teacher to teacher. I am going to attempt to explain some of my theories about fingerings.

I do believe that initially it is a good idea to start out with a single set of fingerings— one for each note— a “chosen set” if you will. After you or your student has mastered this concept, it is time to move on to a more advanced knowledge of possibilities beyond the realm of “correct” fingerings. Every other instrument uses various fingerings according to the situation, but I find that often amongst horn players and teachers, there is an almost archaic clinging to the idea that there is really only one fingering for each note, and to use anything else is “cheating.” If you have not been exposed to this medieval thought, count yourself lucky and move on with me to learn more about your horn. If you have been so infected, give yourself a chance to see other possibilities.

Unfortunately, on horn you cannot just press down a valve and assume you will get the right note, let alone the best pitch or tone for that note. Horn fingerings have as much to do with pitch and tone as they do with the note itself. We have choices. In my chart I discuss some of the reasons I like certain fingerings over others. Additional reasons and explanations will manifest themselves in other parts of this book.

The “chosen,” or regular fingering is in bold type. Other alternates follow. Sometimes these are just for lip trills or other special use. Anything in parentheses is pretty obscure, or has a special use. Assuming that I can’t cover every possible type of horn or valve system, I’m going to stick with the full double horn pitched in F/Bb.

The regular double horn can be divided into different ranges and the associated fingering patterns:

The usual F horn range.

This range is normally played on the F horn (in the US anyway) because we tend to favor the sound of the F horn in this register. It is a more covered, less “honky” sound than that of the Bb horn, although a good Bb horn player could fool you. Also, some of the Bb fingerings are really bad in this range and the F ones are nice and convenient. As I have stated earlier, it is important to use both horns in this register and to try and get the Bb horn to sound as much like an F horn as possible.

2nd valve on the F horn. Very likely, you will never have to play this note any other way. T123 is a possibility, but why? Only if you just have a single Bb horn. See the Intonation section about multiple valve fingerings.

A nice big fat open note, more or less in tune with the other open harmonics. What more could you ask for? T13 on Bb horn is way sharp. On a Bb horn with a stop valve, SV23 is a good choice and can generate all the open F horn harmonics.

23 on F horn is standard. Adding the Bb valve is another possibility and we might need it sometimes. These are very large slots on the Bb horn so care must be taken to center the note and play with a non “tubby” sound.

A musical staff in treble clef showing three notes. The first note is a sharp (F#) with a flat line above it and the fingering '2, (T123, 123)'. The second note is a natural (F) with a flat line above it and the fingering '0, SV23 (13, T13)'. The third note is a flat (Fb) with a flat line above it and the fingering '23, T23'.

Normally 12 on the F horn. Since this is bound to create a sharp note, you should learn to play this on 3rd valve at times, depending on how you have your horn tuned. 12 is more convenient for speed. Both fingerings are possible on Bb horn too, with the usual caveats about tone and intonation.

1st valve on F or Bb horn. Again, this is a very wide note on Bb horn and should be played with care.

2nd valve on F and Bb horn.

A musical staff in treble clef showing three notes. The first note is a natural (F) with a flat line above it and the fingering '12, 3, T12, T3'. The second note is a sharp (F#) with a flat line above it and the fingering '1, T1'. The third note is a flat (Fb) with a flat line above it and the fingering '2, T2'.

Another nice big old open note on the F horn. Same on Bb but the note is very wide in pitch and has to be controlled.

0, T0, 23 12, 3, T23 1, T3, T12, 13

Normally 12 on F horn. Also 3 for a flatter note. Here is a situation where a 12 fingering almost works because this is a flat harmonic. The T23 fingering works great for fast octave jumps in both directions.

1st valve on F horn is standard but will be flat because it is on a flat harmonic. T12 and T3 work well on Bb horn, especially for fast leaps.

2nd on F horn is slightly flat (same harmonic as E). 1st on Bb is a very wide note and will tend to go sharp. 23 on F horn is sharp but could be used for a lip trill or valve trill.

2, T1, 23 0, T2, 12, T13 1, T23, T0, 13

A nice fat open note on F horn but it is a flat harmonic. Great for thirds in the key of F concert but not a good note to tune to. If you tune to this note you may end up with all your other notes being sharp. 12 is sharp and not as focused but is a trill possibility. T2 is wide, usually creeps up in pitch and needs attention to tone.

1st on F horn should be a good note if your 1st valve is tuned correctly. This harmonic is slightly sharp. Open Bb horn is extremely wide in pitch but T23 is **much** better if your slides are not in an extreme position.

2nd on F horn is good. Bb horn fingerings give you other possibilities but need attention to tone and pitch.

2, T12, T3, 23 0, (13, 12,) T1, T13, SV23

Open on F horn. The next note up is where most people shift to Bb horn. The T1 fingering is flat and unpleasant sounding compared to the F side, but is useful in certain fast passages. 12, 13 and T13 are for trills. On a Bb or descant horn with a Bb stop valve a great fingering is SV23. Don't forget that the next several notes have the same fingering on F or Bb. This can be very useful.

The Bb horn range.

From here on up, most people just go with Bb horn, and, after all, that's what its there for. But be aware that in the old days, many people waited to switch until after third space C. The F horn notes are actually very strong and very useful for trills and alternate fingerings, and as you have undoubtedly noticed, many of us use F horn up high as part of a practice routine.

T23 is "normal" but you must realize that this multiple valve fingering will be sharp unless you pull your 3rd valve to compensate. T2 is flat but can be useful on fast passages in certain keys. 23 on F horn is good for lip trills.

T23, T2, 23 T12, T3, T0, 12, 3 T1, 1, T13

T12 is normal but sharp. Beware! T3 works if you tune your horn accordingly. 12 and 3 are similar possibilities on F horn. Open on Bb horn is flat but can be used on fast passages.

You don't have to stray too far from T1. 1 on F horn is great for lip trills.

T2 is strong but 2 on F horn is the choice for lip trills and very handy in E transposition passages.

We come to the end of our little run of duplicate fingerings, but not the end of the usefulness of the F horn! Because this note has a very wide pitch potential, you need to know where this note centers on Bb horn. It is much more focussed on F horn.

T23 is great but don't forget how strong 2 is on F horn and that it is the choice for lip trills. T123 is another option for trills on Bb horn.

T2, 2, (13, T23) T0, 0, (T13, 1) T23, 2, (T123)

Please read the section on intonation before you trust any note played with more than one valve. This note must be played in tune carefully. Similar to third space "A."

Possibilities abound— and a good thing too. T1 is fine except it becomes a major cross-fingering hassle in certain keys. Be aware of T23 and 2 on F horn.

T2 is best, and not a bad note to tune to if your Bb 2nd slide is in the right place and the harmonic is in tune on your horn. Open on F is very strong. Other fingerings are good for trills.

T12, T3, 0, 1, T13, 13 T1, 2, (T23, 23) T2, 0, 12, 3, T12, T3, T13

Don't forget how strong these notes are on F horn. If you are pinching up in the upper register these notes will easily go sharp. Keep your air going and work to play in a relaxed manner in this range. Another thing to consider is that the two harmonics in question here can vary in pitch on horns with different bell flares, making the G high and the F low on some horns, and vice versa. Know your horn!. Hand position is also very critical from here on up.

Horns vary when it comes to playing this note on T23 or T2. T2 is a stronger note and a lower harmonic, but slightly flat. You can learn to play it in tune on most horns. T23 may be flakier and higher. Always test this note on a new (to you) horn.

T0, T1, 1, T23 T2, T12, 2 T0, T1, 0, T13 T2, T23, 23, 12

This is another note that varies from horn to horn. T0, T12 and T3 are all good choices, depending on the horn and the situation. As with the note just below, you should know how these fingerings feel and be ready to use them.

Most of the time T1 is the choice. In fact, if you are looking for something else that is better you are probably in a lot of trouble. Some very old horns are flaky in this register.

Again, this top range is very strong on F horn if you need it. **Hand position is critical for centering and pitch.**

T0, T12, T3, 12, 3 T1, 1 T2, 2 T0, 0

If you are going higher than this, remember that fingerings from an octave lower often work well. Logically continuing the harmonic series might give you another choice, and since the intervals are getting closer and closer as we go up, we could probably try just about anything. You really have to just see what works on your horn. But say you equate the top C on Bb horn with the top of the staff G on F horn, which is a comparable harmonic. The next note after G would be A and it would be fingered 12 or 3 on F horn. These fingerings often work on Bb horn above high C (which would make the high D T12 or T3), *but there might be better ones on your horn.*

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The Low Register.

You might be wondering why I didn't just include the notes below F# as part of the normal F horn range. Although these notes are part of the range of the F horn, modern demands on our playing dictates that we be able to play many of these notes on either horn, or, know which notes to avoid on a particular horn altogether. These next few notes are the "Twilight Zone" of horn fingerings.

Although this note is strong on F horn, there will be times when you will want to play it open on Bb horn. You must learn to cover the bell a little with your hand and make it sound as "F hornish" as possible. This note, as well as others in this range, is an extremely wide pitch target on Bb horn.

12 on F horn will be sharp but is better for fast passages. 3 is solid and lower in pitch. T2 is there too, especially if you have mastered making these notes sound like F horn.

When picking between F and Bb in this range, you must use what you need to do the passage but make it sound good. This note is really a toss-up for most people on most horns in terms of using F or Bb horn.

1, T0 3, 12, T2 23, T1

To me there is no reason to play this note on F horn, ever. 13 is way too sharp and a lousy note. Learn to play this note beautifully on Bb horn. Use the fingering that works with other fingerings. Know the intonation tendencies of all of your fingerings.

Hey, we finally found a note with just one fingering. Again, there is no reason to ever play this note on F horn (123) unless that is all you have, or you are using it as part of a warm-up sequence.

Good old pedal C. A very wide note that can slide down in pitch very easily. Many people reach too far down for this note and play it flat. If you have only a Bb horn, it's T13 or SV23.

T3, T12 T23 0, T13

From here down, you can just play the same fingerings as an octave above, switching to Bb horn at low F. Of course in this nether world we finally find a note that you would have to play 13, the pedal G, and one that you would actually have to use 123, the pedal F#. In this range on F horn, those fingerings are not so bad because the slots are big enough to center the notes anywhere you want.

2 1 12, 3 23 13 123

T0 T2 T1 T12, T3 T23 T13, 0