

Braces and Horn Playing

Compiled from Hornplayer.net by Ross Taylor

I'm 16 and going into grade 12. I've played horn for about 5 years now and am a pretty good player (I think, anyways!) However, I am getting braces in about a month. This is seen by me as an utter catastrophe!!!! My horn teacher says I may be able to play just as well with braces but there's no way to be sure. As I'm going to have them on for a year and a half or 2 years, I will almost invariably have to wear braces to my university auditions (and I'm auditioning for

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some pretty big schools in the states) and also this is my first year playing with the edmonton youth orchestra. I have a very strong suspicion that I will be given high parts (i've always played 1st horn) and now I'm worried that I won't be able to play them and will be kicked out. If anyone knows anything about this or has ANY advice AT ALL!!!! please please PLEASE tell me!!!! Also, if anyone has any suggestions for a really good music school to audition for in Canada or the US, please tell me that also.

Here's something interesting: when I was growing up, my teeth were every which way but straight. I had one tooth in front that came in about 45 degrees wrong, and it was in front of one of my front teeth. Braces were suggested by my dentist, but being that they are expensive, I didn't get them. Years later, in high school it was time to have wisdom teeth removed. By then I had a different dentist - my old one had a heart attack and died in a theater watching "Jaws" - and he told me that the braces I had had did a good job of straightening my teeth. I told him that I had never worn braces. He asked if I played an instrument, and I said, "why yes, I'm a horn player, have been for quite awhile". He said that was his next hunch, because he had said that many of his patients that play brass instruments regularly had been candidates for braces, but after years of playing, their teeth had straightened themselves out. He also said that he rarely recommended braces for kids that play. Now, I'm not suggesting that you go against either your parents or your dentist's wishes, but it's interesting anyway.

I've been playing for about 4 years now, but I've never had to get braces, so i can't do much with that, but I did have to have a cold sore removed from my mouth that required stitches. When I tried playing my horn, my mouth was in pain. I'm sure if I had the time though, i would have gotten used to it. You'll just have to work around it. Mouth pieces- I've always like Vincent Bach's. Mutes and cases I don't know much about. As for high school, that's me. Glad to help.

Advice regarding your impending dental work: The suggestion to have a second or third opinion on your dental needs is certainly a good idea; however, if you need braces, you'll know it.

I had braces many years ago for cosmetic reasons, and as a cost-saving measure, only my upper teeth were corrected, since no one ever sees my lower teeth anyhow. This was when I was in elementary school, after having played horn for a year, so I had to re-learn with the braces. Years later, when I was in my 3rd year of an honors degree, I had braces

a second time, this time on my lower teeth, and for horn-related reasons. My front two lower teeth were overlapping, and the angle of the outermost tooth (being this was where the mouthpiece rim sat) caused my mouthpiece to slide downwards, making the 2/3 upper - 1/3 lower thing a near impossibility.

So altogether, within my first decade of playing, I learned without braces, relearned with braces on the top, relearned without braces but with a retainer, relearned without the retainer, relearned with braces on the bottom, relearned without braces but with a new retainer, and relearned with no foreign matter in my mouth whatsoever. Not fun, but very worth it. The change I found in my playing once the last set of braces was removed was incredible. It turned out I wasn't a hopeless case afterall.

Now, as for how to survive playing with braces on, here's what you do. Take the wax that the dentist gives you, and throw it away. It does no good, and will just end up breaking off and flying into your horn as you try to play. Wax is not good for valve mechanisms. Instead, head out to your local variety store, and pick up some cigarette paper. *Don't* smoke it. By folding the little pieces of paper in half, you end up with a thin strip of paper which you can slip between your braces and your lip. This must be done carefully, and you must quickly moisten the paper with your tongue; the moist paper will mold itself to your braces, forming a slippery layer which allows your lips (and embouchure) to move freely without getting caught.

You can expect your high range to vanish, but this is not permanent. The braces will not allow you to play with any excessive pressure at all (without carving up your lips) - but will instead train you to play relying solely on the strength of the embouchure and the airstream. Practise carefully, and stop the second you feel any pain relating to pressure. It's better to build up your strength gradually rather than risk doing damage. In ensembles, it will be better for you to *request* low parts at first while your in the building-up stage - with your braces, no one will question why. Feel free to email me directly if you need any other more specific information. I currently have a student (just entering high school) who had braces put on about six months ago. He's doing just fine.

I had them this way for a short while and I eventually said "Turn those things around!!!" While it made it more comfortable on my lips in the front, tonguing was nearly impossible! It felt like tonguing through a briar patch and nice sharp attacks were not easy at all. I usually used thin strips of paper over the appliances in front and that worked fine.

I can sympathize with your situation; one exactly like mine a little over twenty years ago. I got braces just before my senior year in college. I went from 2nd chair in All-State band down to 6th chair. It is difficult to play with braces, but not impossible. I managed to get a full scholarship to West Virginia University. I played alot of low horn stuff until I got my braces off, something that came in very handy as I now play 2nd horn in the West Virginia Symphony in addition to teaching in the public schools. I had a student about 10 years ago who was accepted to the Eastman School of Music with braces. She played Bozza "En Foret" with her High School Band as a senior with braces. I must say that she

was very, very talented. By the way, Susan Doughty, decided to change her major to chemical engineering. She earned a doctorate and is now pursuing a law degree. Her husband says after this she needs to finally go out and get a job. So, be brave. It will be rough at first but you can learn to deal with it.

Before you get braces--get a second opinion (and maybe a third). I was once told that I must have braces. I didn't get them. I have no problems with bite or alignment, and various dentists over the years have asked me if I had braces as a child (because my teeth are so straight). Be sure to explain the disruption that braces are likely to cause for you. There may be other options.

As one who went through the braces and horn thing in high school, allow me to offer some perspective.

First, the obvious: playing with braces is hard. I used orthodontic wax to blunt the lip trauma. It felt to me like my musical world was over. Hearing my favorite musical passages strained through braces was, at times, heart breaking. I forced myself through continuing to play for a year-and-a-half because I didn't want to give up what I truly loved. And in high school, where we are trying to figure so many things out about ourselves, giving up a passion that I had already discovered seemed like too much. I did end up stopping in college for a few years (it was less traumatic then), but resumed shortly after college and continue to play to this day.

Now, the less obvious: starting out on trumpet did far more lasting damage to my embouchure than my six years of braces. Un-learning trumpet habits that are incompatible with good horn technique is far more difficult. In retrospect, playing with braces forced me to concentrate more and build endurance.

Though I agree with my friends on the horn-list that I would never recommend braces unless it were medically necessary (as it was in my case), braces are just another step in your life as a hornist. Try to focus on the things you will be able to do better after your experience with braces (such as playing more "forward" and playing well in the low registers), and that losses in performance are temporary.

The Brasswind (800/348-5003) carries a lip protector called Jet Tone, which, according to the add, facilitates "PAIN FREE playing for students with braces." How true this is, or how helpful it would be I don't know... I've been fortunate enough not to ever have braces. Anyway, you might want to check it out; it sells for US\$7.95. Also, I suggest that, if it's not too late, you get a second opinion... you'll find that orthodontists generally vary a GREAT deal in their treatments/opinions/recommendations!

I began to play the horn at the end of fifth grade, and it just so happened that I got my braces on a few weeks before I received a school-lent horn. Because of the perfect timing of braces and then the horn I've just learned to make do with my mouth full of braces, being that I had known of no other way. I'd go far enough to say that I'm a pretty good (semi-beginner) player. Meanwhile, with my braces on, I've been thinking ahead, and I'm sure that what I want to do in life is music... this is good, but in a couple months I'm getting my braces off, and I was wondering how much my playing will plummet because

of this drastic change! Has anyone else been in my shoes before? If so, could someone explain the difference between braces and no braces? Thanks so much!!!

I had a friend in our high school ensembles who got her braces taken off her senior year in high school, and she enjoyed what she thought was a vast improvement in style. Of course, it will take some getting used to, as will anything. Once, in a lesson, I commented to Bear that it was too late for me to change my emboucher. He kinda looked at me funny, asked me how old I was, and laughed. I'm scared of any kind of dental work, but I've gotten over everything pretty much unscathed.

One of my greatest disappointments and frustration with my playing came when I got my braces off. Not because it took me forever to play well again, but because several people had told me how good playing with braces would be for me in the long run because I'd learn to play "without" pressure. I think I expected it to be a miracle cure for my high range problems and it wasn't. Expect some adjustment time, but try not to worry too much!

This is feedback on person asking about playing with braces. I had them in high school, and made the mistake of trying to be competitive immediately. I think you will have to be patient, be sure to work on playing with low pressure. I did not; as a result, my playing was so-so with the braces on--and when they were removed, I had a horrible embouchure. Was doing high- pressure, so lips did not last long. It was good enough for college band, but not more than that.