

## So You Want to Be a Pro?

Rebecca Root

*[Note: The personal situations described as "current" have of course changed since the original publication of this article in 1979. However the story and the lessons told in it are both timeless and universal.]*

As I sit here on a Saturday night, (usually reserved for concerts) in my warm, comfortable house, instead of a cold, tension-filled orchestra hall I find the need to express my thoughts on some events in my life during the past ten years.

I have recently resigned my post as principal horn in the New Orleans Philharmonic and am currently enjoying my first year as horn instructor at Columbus College here in Columbus, Georgia. I must admit that nearly everyone in the music business discouraged me from quitting the position I'd had in the New Orleans Symphony for five years. But, as many people discover, when determined to marry, and live with another, one must be prepared for certain allowances and adjustments. Since my husband could not find employment as a voice teacher in the New Orleans area, we had to look in other cities for jobs. Columbus quickly accepted us, and we are now completely transplanted, after only four months of living here.

I think this move has been the most terrifying experience I've ever endured. Having played horn professionally for eight years in the Denver Symphony, I was extremely well acquainted with what I needed to know to do in that environment; but in a college atmosphere, how could I fit in? My worst fear, of course, was the most real - having quit my coveted position in New Orleans, it was entirely possible I would never play in another professional organization again. What with competition getting greater every year, and orchestras becoming less affluent, the possibility was all too real. Actually, it seemed as if I was burning a bridge in the back of me.

There was another side to the decision. The past four years of my principal horn career have been painfully growth-producing for me. I have forced myself to examine every facet, positive and negative, of the job. How does this job affect my life financially, physically, emotionally and culturally? Perhaps by sharing my thoughts on this subject some young aspirant might gain insight into his/her ambitions.

### **INCOME**

Finances are one of the less positive aspects of being a professional player. I've heard the same stories everyone has about how much money the "superstar" horn-players make, but that includes only the top five orchestra's horn sections in this country [the USA]. The rest of us make a pittance. Those colleagues of mine who had families with spouses who didn't work had to drive cabs or become secretaries or bartenders on their off hours. I must say, the first few years I was playing horn for a living, I considered it a joke on the management that they were paying me to do something I would do anytime for no money. I've found, as I get older, my creature comforts become more important to me. Thus, the life-of-a-student type existence is just not enough any more.

## **PHYSICAL MALADIES**

Physically, the principal horn job was a real effort. I can't remember many concert days of the first two or three years I didn't have a headache. Besides the very real nervous pressure of being a principal horn-player, I believe consistently playing only high notes is a physical strain. Not many principal horn-players last as long in their careers as fourth horn-players. Some get smart and move down to fourth horn. I must say that during the five years I was first horn, I had pneumonia, an ulcer, an appendicitis attack and strep throat; to say nothing of the countless colds and bouts with stomach aches and head aches. Who knows? Maybe they would have happened anyway. I feel that illnesses are quite often brought about by stress situations. I have not been sick a day since I stopped playing first horn in a professional orchestra. (Keep in mind, these are only my personal experiences - also, I got over most of the physical maladies as I became more secure in the job and in myself.)

## **EMOTIONAL STABILITY**

On the negative side of the job must come my emotional stability. After studying carefully my behavior while on vacation, while working in the orchestra, and before and during concerto or recital situations, I have noticed vast differences. Perhaps what affected my stability most was a constant first horn job. I noticed a definite tendency toward paranoia on my part. I often felt as if my neck was on the line - that I must produce! Also, after one big, taxing concert, there would follow another just as hard. My reaction was to live very much on a day-to-day basis; never looking beyond the next two or three concerts. Also, my friends tell me that on nights of difficult concerts, I was quite distant and strange. I felt I was gathering my resources for the concert at the expense of normal relationships with people.

My reaction to a concerto or recital situation is far from normal. The difference is that all my energies are centered toward that one day. Before and after that day, and even most of the day, I feel my time and energies are my own. Except when I am practicing or rehearsing or performing, I don't even give the piece a thought. So, it's much easier for me to deal with being a soloist than a first horn-player.

## **ADVANTAGES**

My favorite thing about playing in a really great orchestra is that each player's ability is so accomplished that often during a woodwind solo, or a brass tutti passage, I actually get an emotional rush just hearing the beautiful music. There is a certain feeling one gets from hearing a beautiful phrase, or an artistic interpretation that I have not found to be duplicated any other way. I really miss it.

As an orchestral player, I was privileged to hear truly great artists week after week - Stern, Tuckwell, Andre, Zuckerman, Starr, Kavafian, Farrell, Perlman, Sills and countless others - in live performances. What a thrill!

While I was playing full-time, I played perhaps three or four hours every day, on an average, in the orchestra. One hour of practice a day besides all the playing kept me in tip-top shape with ease. Now that I don't play professionally, I must find within myself the will-power to practice the three or four hours that keep me in really great shape. I never knew how many excuses for not practicing there were until I made them up myself. I've also found it difficult to keep in great shape all the time when I don't have the pressures of constant performing and audiences to play for. In other words, I must learn to enjoy playing and practicing only for myself. It sounds easy, but, being so new to me it's really quite difficult.

### **CLOSING WORDS**

I feel that my personal decision to move here with my husband has been the most positive thing I've ever done. Our lives here are rich and full in many ways, including musically. It should be remembered that these reactions are purely personal, and I'm sure there are dozens of professional horn-players who would never change careers because they love what they do more than anything else they could choose.

I loved my experiences as a professional horn-player and thank God every day that I had those wonderful opportunities; but, right now, I wouldn't trade my life for any other.

See [THE HORN CALL](#) Volume IX No. 2 for the complete, uncut article.

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