What is Horn Playing?

This essay asks, “What is this thing called horn playing?”. The answer might seem obvious; accordingly, the question irrelevant. However:

“Too often we take for granted the things that require the most explanation. After all, it’s easier to assume we know what something means than it is to explain or define it.” [[1]](#footnote-1)

Trying to assume as little as possible, we will look at different metaphors of the phenomenon “horn playing”. To give a taste of what is coming: Horn playing is variously described as (1) being akin to sports, or (2) having nothing to do with sports: it all is about music and art (!). And art is fundamentally different from sports.

We will explore the logics underlying these metaphors and shed light onto the tensions between them. In doing so, we will discover interesting philosophical issues that underly performing arts [[2]](#footnote-2).

In this essay we will:

* Survey a selection of metaphors for horn playing
* Explore the tensions between the metaphors
* Investigate why different metaphors exist
* Explore ways to harmonize the understandings into a coherent account

A preliminary note: We tend to commit to one metaphor at the expense of others. This helps us to tackle the complexity, but also oversimplifies the phenomena we try to understand. Favoring a particular view over others is normal: it underlies the scientific method. It is the cause that different scientific disciplines exist.

The argument of the essay: we should be aware of the metaphor(s) that we use and the tensions. Keeping in mind our tendency to value a particular perspective over other ones will give a constructive attitude for the discussion that follows.

Horn playing is a small discipline. Would it not be more relevant to ask a broader question: what is music? Or what is music performance? These questions are too broad. Horn playing is a smaller case-study.

***Eleven (?)*** vignettes illustrate how the literature and folklore describe horn playing. Each vignette follows the same structure: a short description, its underlying logics, and tensions with other views.

These views shape educational practices, institutional settings, legal frameworks.

# Metaphors for Horn Playing

## Horn Playing as Sports

Horn Playing is inescapably a bodily activity. Following qualities are as relevant to a horn player as to an athlete: strength, agility, coordination, speed, balance, elasticity, being in shape etc.

Following this similarity, several accounts[[3]](#footnote-3) conceive of horn playing as primarily an athletic activity, a kind of sports. Horn playing has in recent years become even more embedded in the logics of sports by the fact that sports psychology has gained increased prominence in the discourse and educational offerings. Not only the physical strength and skills, but also the cognitive strategies and coping mechanisms of high-performance sports define this view of horn playing[[4]](#footnote-4).

Commentators describe the sports metaphor as carrying with it following logics[[5]](#footnote-5):

* Competition, outperforming others
* Measurability, objective comparison
* Goal setting, winning, the only thing that matters is aiming to the top
* Top shape physically and mentally (best når det gjelder)
* Determined, deliberate, tough training
* No pain, no gain: Exploitation, sacrifice

Interestingly this set of logics is used to both defend[[6]](#footnote-6) and criticize[[7]](#footnote-7) the relevance of sport metaphor. Sports also come with more abstract notions like:

* play, flow; immersion, game
* challenge
* mastery and achievement

Sports are typically rule-based. The behavior of athletes is constrained by the rules of the game. The emergence of new behaviors is restricted. The goals are clear; the behavior is directed towards these goals. This is not to say that the skills in sports shaping the behavior are all the same. Athlete training distinguishes between open and closed skills: a soccer player must relate to constantly changing circumstances on the game field; a javelin throw consists of a skill that doesn’t vary that much. It is a rather simplistic presentation but makes a point. Despite being close-ended tasks, the solution can be open, creative, innovative, masterly

## Horn Playing as Art

Describing Horn Playing as Art is challenging. For, what is art?[[8]](#footnote-8) For the purposes of discussion, we will consider art as a phenomenon having following dimensions:

1. Material:
   * Masterly manifestation of a craft or a skill [[9]](#footnote-9). Art requires significant amount of skill that’s difficult to master [[10]](#footnote-10)
   * Tools and materials
2. Aesthetic: Something to do with aesthetics [[11]](#footnote-11)
3. Relational:
   * Something extra-ordinary [[12]](#footnote-12). Detached from ordinary
   * Art consumes you (rather than the other way around).
4. Sociological:
   * Art is what people think art is (Music is what people in a particular place think music is) [[13]](#footnote-13)
   * Dynamics of Power: creators, performers. Distributed
5. Creative: Imaginary, visionary [[14]](#footnote-14)
6. Affective: Gives pleasure, humor, joy[[15]](#footnote-15)
7. Communicative. Art has a meaning, significance, it communicates or evokes or consumes the spectator
8. Hermeneutic: Meaning
9. Teleological: Higher truth. Shield of mystery. From the above follow a responsibility of Serving music, serving higher authority. Art is a calling; an ability to access and communicate a higher truth [[16]](#footnote-16)

## Horn Playing as Profession

Horn playing becomes a profession once one starts making a living from it. But what is a profession? What characterizes the notion of profession? Talking about profession we must acknowledge the existence of the following logics:

* Professional standards. Relatively clear idea of what “mastery”, or adherence to those standards, means. Formalized skills?
* Professional ethics. A degree of “seriousness”
* It is a job, regulated by labor law
* Career
* Longevity. Ability to be professional until the retirement
* As business: efficiency, reproducibility, market mechanisms. Ability to market, sell, produce.

## Horn Playing as a Vocation or Calling

* Identity
* Path dependency. To perform as a horn player professionally one is dependent on following a relatively fixed path.
* Developed over a long period of time.
* High degree of Specialization

### Horn Playing as Identity

Becoming a horn player is characterized by extreme path-dependency. Horn player’s skills are highly specialized, developed over a long period of time. Changing the profession to horn playing in mid-life is therefore quite unlikely (if not impossible). Preparation for the professional life, some would argue, starts already before entering the formal higher/professional education.

These formative years play an important role in one’s self-understanding.

In an orchestra the identity of the horn player is often defined by the instrument. An conductor might talk to a horn player as “Hey, 2nd horn do this and that”. The person and the instrument is treated as one.

In many ways horn playing is a very consuming/demanding/immersive activity. Performing at a high level according to cultural standards requires constant practice, physical shape. The combination of high specialization and being consuming shapes the self-understanding.

Horn Playing as Identity thus connects Profession and Hobby metaphors.

Logics:

* you are what you are

The notion of life-long learning and the development of identity might contradict a strong focus on the Identity-analogy. However, fixed mindset is also quite prevalent and arguably is codified into some legal systems.

Mindfulness

being your own teacher

A spiritual practice

* Self-expression
* Identity
* Entertainment
* Self-mastery
* Fun, humor

## Horn Playing as a Hobby

The notion of Horn Playing as a Hobby relates to many of the other analogies.

One starts out horn playing as an extracurricular activity. It becomes a hobby, part of identity. The investment of time and energy is high. One develops sense of mastery and competence.

Logics:

* nerd
* play and fun
* research, curiosity, immersion
* flow (fleeting passage of time)
* participation, socializing

## Horn Playing as Cognition

The cognition metaphor accommodates (1) a fetishization of the brain and neuroscience and (2) a more general discussion on epistemology and ontology. For the purposes of discussion, Horn Playing as Cognition will refer to fetishization of the brain. Epistemology and ontology of Horn Playing is discussed by the remainder of metaphors (Language, Cultural Practice, Sound Production, Movement).

* Psychologism
* Scientism

“[Horn Playing] is the most complex thing that the brain can do“ to paraphrase one commentator [[17]](#footnote-17). Steenstrup [[18]](#footnote-18) [[19]](#footnote-19). Gordon

Reflection-in-action, reflection brings us further into the murky waters of cognition. Disembodied.

Especially in the context

## Horn Playing as Cultural Practice

* Heroes
* Values
* Community

The Tradition-metaphor is closely related to horn playing as culture. In this account I choose to separate them. Tradition emphasizes the historical/temporal dimension, while culture focuses on the social side.

Horn Playing emerged over time. It is a result of technological development, cultural practices. It is both a product of those practices and the vessel that carries the practices forward.

Both momentary and historical, ongoing.

An agent of tradition, community.

### Logics

* Community
* Tradition, heritage
* History
* habit
* legitimacy through having been done before
* conservation

Less obviously

* Learning

## Horn Playing as Speaking a Language

The Language-metaphor is prevalent in a broader discourse around Western Classical Music.

### Logics

* grammar: syntax etc. Rule based
* meaning is as much in the content of what is said as in how it is said
* A systematic framework (tool) for expression
* symbolic significance of some gestures
* Ways of organization: poetry, prose
* Communication
* Rhetorics

The characteristics that are emphasised are akin to those of an orator, negotiator or therapist.

* confident speaker
* sensitive and attentive listener

### Tensions

### Limitations

### On speaking and listening

Becoming a and a . Confident talker and sensitive and attentive listener.

I am speaking metaphorically as if music were a language, which it in some ways is

What’s the point of making music?

Confident talker and sensitive and attentive listener. Achieve mastery, accomplishment, meaning and flow.

Have something to say, say it with confidence, listen, interact. Participate, have a conversation. You are learning to participate in a highly structured and organized human activity. Your goal is to engage others into that activity

* Horn Playing as Communicating with the Audience

## Horn Playing as Sound Production

Horn is a sound instrument (???)

Sound is a central idea in horn playing. The practical concern of how to produce sounds is as important as which sounds to produce, their qualitative characteristics, their aesthetic value and meaning.

It is not uncommon to conceive of horn playing as Sound Production. The metaphor can have two interpretations: production of meaningful sounds and production of generic sounds.

Production of meaningful sounds is covered by the Speaking Language-metaphor. Here we will focus on the production of generic sounds and a “mechanistic” mode of production. The “mechanistic” mode emphasizes the physiology and physics of horn playing.

### Logics of the mechanistic mode

* efficiency of sound production
* precision
* Notion of correctness (correct posture, embouchure, breathing technique, ergonomics)
* automating skills
* beautiful sound
* meaning is in the sound

Physics

In many ways, acting as an extension of the “mechanistic” mode, the wholistic mode extends the physiological and physical concerns to the realm of aesthetics

### Tensions with other metaphors

The “mechanistic” mode’s implications of “correct”, “efficient”, “automatic” stand in tension with the logics of art, expression, cognition, mastery, just to name a few.

Assumption that, for example, “correct” posture exists presupposes a normative stance on the optimal posture, which in turn presupposes a normative stance on what the goal of horn playing is (optimal for what?). Arguably, an efficient, healthy technique that allows one to play what one is supposed to play in a sustainable way (over the period of a career) is the goal. But this, again, pressuposes that that the answer to the question “what is to be played” is evident.

The “correct”, the “efficient” might accompany Horn Playing as a Profession: the goal is to play what’s in the score. However, in the a more open-ended interpretation the efficiency and correctness is not evident sizes.

The logic “automatic” presupposed close-ended skills. It also raises questions when meeting certain accounts of expert cognition. While it has been argued that expert performance is akin to zombie reacting mindlessly/automatically to “the solicitations of environment” (Dreyfus), there is are good arguments for claiming that these views are insufficient in describing how experts skillfully cope in situation where expertise is called upon to be executed at the highest levels (Breivik on Dreyfus).

There is also a peculiar problem of posture in horn playing. While there is no doubt that certain ways of self-organization are better than others, there are two problems with the notion of posture. First, it appears to exclude movement: (horn playing is a static activity, horn player stands still, she shoul not move too much). Second, the mechanistic account of posture divorces cognition from behavior. Third, and related, it defines Being as composed of idle and act-ive states. I.e. there is a discontinuity of experience. A phenomenological account of being would argue against this choping of lived experience/consciousness.

### Sources

* FRW?
* Farkas?
* Schumann?

## Horn Playing as Movement

The movement is related to the sports. I highlight movement as a separate metaphor to illustrate (1) a paradox about movement in horn playing; (2) the notion of gestures in (classical) music; (3) challenges in understanding what movement is.

The movement paradox stems from the following question: is a horn player moving, or being still while playing? It is common to say that a horn player stands or sits still.

Large movements, what is the movement threshold.

The notion of gestures in music roughly refers to a way of phrasing. The performer shapes musical phrases based on the physical gestures that have certain meanings. Examples: downbeat, bowing etc.

### Logics

There are three distinct ways of conceiving movement: a mechanistic and intentional/meaningful movement. Ongoing movement. Each has their own set of logics.

The mechanistic conception has

* A control system (brain)
* Actuators (muscles)
* Optimal and suboptimal states
* Movement is a multi-step process, taking place in discreet steps, separated by idleness of the system
* Typically, it’s the most visible instances of the movement that fall under this conception

*Intentional* movement follows the logic of gestalt:

* Movement is holistic, in a sense that it has the physical, cognitive, affective, and other dimensions
* Acknowledge that the parts of the mechanistic view are useful analytic abstractions (muscles, brain), but on their own two limited

*Ongoing movement*

Continuity of experience

### Tensions

### Interesting questions

Movement/being idle/standing still

* Autopoesis
* about “not” moving (Is a horn player moving while playing?)
* What is movement?
  + Is movement a sleep-walker-like response to the environmental stimuli?
* Is a horn player moving? Or is it a static activity?
* Skill

## Horn Playing as Research

A more recent metaphor that deserves attention is that of Research, that appears in the discourse of Artistic Research.

Positivist truth

# Tensions between the metaphors

## Sports and Profession

Elite sports are a profession in a similar way that professional horn playing is. One does it for compensation, following professional norms. Vocation is an important notion. However, whereas a typical career of an athlete performing at top levels stops before she is 40 or so, a professional horn player is expected to keep performing at the top level until the age of retirement of the general population. Longevity is seen quite differently.

The support apparatus and the financial surroundings also (typically) differ. Whereas elite athletes have multiple coaches throughout the career, horn player (especially a freelancer) is left with the toolkit from their education, having to improve their knowledge at their own expense.

## Sports and Arts

The Art metaphor is difficult: It is difficult to define in simple terms what art is. In the narrow view of the sports metaphor, however, we can readily say that sports lack an aesthetic dimension[[20]](#footnote-20). Similar debates occur in related disciplines, such as dance [[21]](#footnote-21).

Many also argue that horn playing should not be seen as a competitive activity: art cannot be measured. The empirical reality with auditions and competitions, however, exposes the competitiveness, which is embedded in the cultural practices.

* Sports can also be a profession
* Active Career of elite athletes lasts until they are 35-40 years of age
* A horn player is expected to stay active until the retirement age (65-70 years of age)

## Arts and craft/profession

* mediation-of-higher-truth, serving vocation, is in tension with the down-to-earthness of labor, of a job.
* Producing music is a rather ordinary matter for a musician, yet extraordinary for a fan
* Uniqueness of a creator is in tension with the community that makes it possible to define something as art.
* Horn Playing as an Independent Art vs a cog in the machinery
* Art and culture
* Live performance arts: here and now - arts that build up over time and are possible to develop
* Music making
* Material, but not in the same way we think
* Poetry, visual arts
* Humor

We find significant variations underlying the Art metaphors. and a good degree of circularity. Despite not being as stable of a reference as the other metaphors (sports, profession, language), we will try to extract some logics from the above description.

The notion of craft has several interpretations

* As a constituent part of art
* As a step towards art
* As a self-sufficient thing, that underlies a profession

## Identity and Profession

## Hobby and Profession

## Hobby and art

## Cognition and Art

* Neuroscience
* Imagination
* Creation
* Conception
* Learning
* Perception

# Interesting Problems

## Interesting Problems in Sports

* Intentionality [[22]](#footnote-22)
* Expertise, skill development [[23]](#footnote-23)

## Problems in Arts

The notion of the “*work of art*” is about manifestation of a craft or skill. This notion is predominantly employed to refer to the “work” as an object, or a product. However, for Dewey “work of art” means more “labor of art” rather than “object of art”. Christopher Small proposes a related notion of musicking; a verb for engaging and participating in music. These two senses have their corresponding accounts of materiality: one is disembodied, the other lived, embedded-in-the-world.

Accounts on aesthetics have various levels to which they acknowledge the two senses of the “work of art” and of materiality. It is commonly the visible, the empirical, which is art (score, painting, even performance). What is not there is something else: the labor is in the background. There is a discontinuity between the labor and the object: something goes from not being art, to being art. (boundaries of art; autopoesis)

The notion of *extra-ordinary* comes in several facets. In one sense, art is outside the everyday life. In another, it is the extra-ordinary mastery of a skill. In yet another sense, it is the extra-ordinary connotations that its significations evoke. There is also an extraordinary notion that we do not consume art, but art consumes us [[24]](#footnote-24). “Vision and artistry” Guarino 2015

Finally, what we call art appears in many manifestations which have few shared characteristics. There are two ways out of this conundrum: either (1) we go into the theological realm and argue that there is a higher truth that can peek into through art; or (2) we take the relativist path and subscribe to the idea that art is what a group of people agree that art is. It is a shared meaning and significance.

## Problems in Cognition

* Psychologism

# So, what is horn playing?

A simple answer: all the above. Horn Playing can be described in terms of differen metaphors. It can also be described in terms of the inherent tensions.

# Why do the different views exist?

The challenges of harmonizing different views are not unique to horn playing.

## background/foreground. One of the key insights of phenomenology

The proximity to “here and now” in cultural practice shows the challenge of acknowledging background/foreground. Playing the horn takes place “here and now”. The closer one is to the “here and now”, the less apparent the historical and cultural background becomes. Many things in horn playing are done because they were done like that “for generations”. Yet each new performance is a new act; that carries forward the cultural and historical practice.

* Music making is a broad phenomenon. Different cultures and sub-cultures. Values

## Ontology: Materialist vs idealist accounts

Viewing horn playing as sports comes into tension with “idealistic” views. By “idealistic” I refer to the views that lean towards idealistic ontology: there is a world of ideas separate from the physical world. It is in this world of ideas that horn playing lives.

## Epistemology: natural and phenomenological attitude attitudes

Natural/detached/empirical/3rd person attitude | phenomenological attitude

* We tend to adopt a “natural” attitude

## Ethics: who should get the best flute, who should be able to work

## Philosophy of mind

## On certainty

* See Maturana&Varela 1991
* Negative certainties
* an attitude

## Learning theories

Behaviorism

Cognitivist vs Sociocultural accounts

## Different values, cultural aspects

## Personal preferences

## On Metaphor

# Implications for teaching and learning

## Practicing Horn Playing

* Mastering skills
* Routines / Maintaining skills / Staying in shaping
* Long term development
* Studying / Competence development
* Ensemble playing / Utøving

1. Constructing Social Research. Charles C. Ragin (1994)  [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From more concrete matters, like practicing and performing, to more fundamental questions of: What is (performing) art(s)? What is the nature of knowledge? [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Belfrage et al (1982): Practice methods for brass players based on physiological factors (related: Belfrage: “Blechblaser-Sportler” in Brass Bulletin 21, 1978") [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The Sports metaphor is broad: sports can be recreational and/or competetive. We will primarily focus of high-level competetive sports - the kind that music performers often strive for. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dance articles, Belfrage [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Belfrage [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Dance [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. A couple of paragraphs will not do justice to such a complex topic. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Farkas [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Farkas [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. ??? Adorno? [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. OOO [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. ??? [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. ??? [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. ABBA: Thank you for the music [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. ??? [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Kontekst 21.april 2022 ?? [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Brass players are the only instrumentalists for "whom the basic oscillatory motion takes place in the player's own physical structures, under control of the central nervous system and ultimately the brain". PAGE ??? [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. “For many brass players, lack of success comes from being unable to relate mentally to written music; that is, they cannot activate the brain to "hear" the music that they see on the page, that is activate parts of the brain that are involved in mentalizing music. Often, a problem that appears to be mechanical in nature, having its origins in faulty training of the musculature of the lip, tongue or respiratory system, may in fact be caused by the player not mentally "singing" the relevant music while he plays. In the absence of singing, the lip musculature does not receive any message regarding the degree of contraction required for each pitch, and the brain does not coordinate the highly complex muscular systems in the required temporal pattern, because of a lack of knowledge of the rhythmic structure of the music.” page 46. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. A view that many will object to. Certain sports have a prominent aesthetic dimension, like figure skating. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. One such example is dance. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Zombie-like? Breivik [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Dreyfus [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. The guy who worked with Bjork??? [↑](#footnote-ref-24)