

The Cornetto

The smaller mouthpieces which we supply with our resin cornetti are generally referred to as “acorn” mouthpieces, and these are the ones most usually associated with the cornetto. However, you may have a larger mouthpiece, designed for us by Michael Laird, which we make with trumpet players in mind. The ideal position for either type of mouthpiece is found by experiment and varies from one player to another, depending on the structure of lips and teeth and on experience with other cup-blown instruments. A central lip position is usual for the trumpet type mouthpieces. The acorns can be blown centrally too, but they may be better to one side where the top lip is thinnest. A position just inside the right eyetooth can be comfortable and effective; this is exactly how I got started myself, following the instructions, written by the late and wonderful Christopher Monk, on the reverse of my G fingering chart!

The sound is produced by vibrating the lips across the edge of the cup. The cheeks should not be puffed out. Resist the temptation to press the mouthpiece very firmly against the lips and do not blow too hard – the tube which you have in your hands is only small and it will not thank you for treating it like a sousaphone. Most important from the very beginning is that you refer to some fixed pitch source – a piano, say, or a recorder or tuning machine – and check that the pitch which you are producing, using the correct fingering, corresponds with the note as it should sound. This might sound obvious or unnecessary, but one of the problems with the cornetto is that it is perfectly possible to form a respectable technique – quite good enough to play dance tunes for example – but to have it ‘misaligned’ so that you are playing a semi-tone or even more out of tune in either direction. I have witnessed this myself on more than one occasion and you should guard against it from the very beginning.

The fingering system operates similarly to that of the recorder. But how to hold the cornetto when playing middle A, which calls for all finger holes to be left open? It should be possible to support the instrument securely by pivoting it between the thumb, the heel of the index finger and the little finger of the right hand. This will almost certainly feel uncomfortable at first, but with time and patience your hands will learn to cope with this problem as well as with the stretch which the spacing of the holes demands.

Long notes and slow scales will achieve the quickest results, although this does not make for the most exciting practice. The true reward of playing the cornetto comes when you begin to join other musicians, and the very best preparation for this is routine practice – say 15 or 20 minutes a day, every day (or very nearly). This is better by far than a sudden long burst on a rainy Sunday afternoon followed by nothing. If you pursue the latter approach, convenient as it may be, I fear that your friends will not invite you to join in with them! What you are doing in your routine practice is to build up an embouchure, a task which takes time. But as you become stronger as a player, so your enjoyment will increase too. At the end of the day there is no sound to approach the thrill of a fine ensemble of cornetts and sackbutts as it fills a lofty church to the roof. Better still, go and get yourself into a team which makes a habit of doing just that!

Enjoy!

Jeremy West