

Mutes

It is my feeling that all trumpet players should own certain basic mutes. Depending on the kinds of music the player performs, other mutes may very well be necessary. Each mute has certain traits that make it useful in various situations. Every trumpet player needs to have at minimum: one or more straight mutes, a cup mute, a Harmon Mute and a plunger. Additionally, situationally, a player might want to own a bucket mute and/or a SoloTone mute. Beyond all these, there are any number of mute choices – mostly variations on the aforementioned. Below, I show some of my mute recommendations for the most well-travelled mutes. Based on how much you want to spend and the sound you want, you can determine what works best for you.



Straight Mute

I use a number of straight mutes in my playing. Without a doubt, the standard mute for me is the Denis Wick. I still occasionally use the Vacchiano, Tom Crown and even my Humes and Berg mutes.



Pictured at left is the Denis Wick Straight Mute. In my opinion, it simply has the best characteristics overall of any mute out there. The pitch is very true in all registers, and the sound is appropriately pointed – but still possesses depth. The Denis Wick is a little pricey when compared to other mutes, but it is a workhorse – appropriate in just about any situation. For that reason, it gets *my highest recommendation*. In order to get the maximum vibration and buzz, some players remove the felt from the head of the mute. Personally, I think the effect is minimal and it just makes it more likely you'll dent or scratch the bell of your instrument.

There are a number of other straight mutes that I use situationally. Each has different properties. I like the Vacchiano (pictured far left) for softer playing. Each of the Tom Crown mutes has a different sound (from left to right they go from brighter to darker in tone color). Additionally, when I want a very diffuse sound (pianissimo), I will even sometimes use the Humes & Berg Stonelined mute (or, better yet, the Ray Robinson straight mute – not pictured). All the mutes mentioned here have consistent pitch in all registers, save for the the H&B, which badly loses focus in the extreme low register.



From left to right: Denis Wick, Vacchiano, Tom Crown (aluminum), Tom Crown (brass bottom), Tom Crown (copper bottom), Tom Crown (copper), Humes and Berg Stonelined.

Cup Mute



There is the Denis Wick (pictured left) and the Humes & Berg Stonelined (right). Personally, I do not own a Denis Wick, but I generally like the mute. It is well made and the sound is very good (and it has the added bonus of the adjustable cup, which can be tightened toward or loosened away from the bell of the trumpet, relative to the sound you want). The downside is that it is expensive. For this reason, I am perfectly happy to just use my Humes and Berg mute. It sounds very good and the pitch is consistent – and it's about half the price.



For a variety of sound, you may choose to stuff some fabric scraps in the cup – or, better yet, cut a piece of packaging foam into a ring and place it in the cup. You can play it that way, or for a more “woody” sound, you can take it out and use the mute *au natural*.

I will also mention a third option: the Ray Robinson Cup Mute (not pictured). This is a fiber cup mute (like the H&B), but has a fantastic sound and excellent playability. The problem is that these are rare – no longer in production – but you may find them if you look long enough. The Ray Robinson really was an excellent product, and it is a shame it is out of production. I have read on the Internet accounts of trumpet players modifying the H&B “Mica” mute (not pictured) into a Ray Robinson mute.

Harmon Mute

For me the most important attribute of the Harmon Mute (also known as the “wah wah” mute) is the ability to play it loud enough to be heard in a large ensemble. There are some excellent sounding Harmon Mutes out there (the Denis Wick, for example), but they either can't be pushed loud enough to be useable, or go far out of tune when pushed to louder volumes. The best thing going, in my opinion, is the original Harmon Mute. The big flaws with this mute are the cork, which has a propensity for flaking away and/or coming unglued, and the stem which likes to get bent so that it either becomes stuck or becomes so loose that it won't stay in place. Still, it is a good sounding mute.



Another mute worth mentioning is the Jo-Ral “Bubble” mute. To date, I have not played the mute, but I have appreciated the sound of the mute as played by some other trumpet players. It is a little pricier than the Harmon brand mute – which I find as a deterrent to purchasing one.

Plunger Mute



At its beginning, the plunger mute was a simple toilet plunger (with handle removed, of course). You can buy these mutes at a music store, or just purchase a toilet plunger at a hardware store. My preference is for the toilet plunger. It is less expensive, and since the mute is supposed to sound “dirty,” the fact that it is made of rubber is not a problem at all. If you would prefer to buy the mute at a music store, you may do so. In that case, there are a few options – two of which are shown above at right: the rubber Humes & Berg Trixie Mute and the Glenn Miller Tuxedo Plunger Mute.



Other Mutes



Lesser-used, but really effective, is the Humes & Berg Bucket Mute (shown at left). You actually clip this mute to the bell. It brings a very dark flugelhorn-like tone color to the trumpet. It is used mostly in big band work.

The Humes & Berg SoloTone Mute (right) is a big band and show mute used mostly in popular and Broadway style music from the 1940s and 50s. It is brighter – perhaps more piercing than a straight mute; and it may also be wah-wah'd.



Beyond these, there are a great number of mutes – many of them variations on the mutes shown above. For the most part, a trumpet player will very seldom see any mutes but those listed above called for in any music he or she plays.

Mute Stands



This falls into the category of accessories, but since it has to do very directly with mutes, it makes sense to speak of it here. This is not a necessary addition, but can be very useful – especially when the musician is dealing with multiple mutes and multiple mute changes. This is most often the case when playing in pit



orchestras and the like. You can buy individual mute holders which clip on to the music stand. I have not had much luck with these – it is sometimes difficult to get them to clip to certain brands of music stands. The two shown above are good options – they are quite robust and they hold multiple mutes. At left is the MuteRack Universal Mute Holder and at right is the K & M 159 Mute Holder.