

HISTORICAL INSTRUMENT SECTION

Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors

Serpent

While many events have occurred in the serpent world since our last dispatches, I will dispense with reports and descriptions so that TUBA readers might enjoy certain photographic holdings from the Serpent Archives. We conclude this HISS edition with raconteur Bevan's musings of performance practice in relation to historical and modern acoustics—such is the fate and folly of performing historic sounds in modern arenas.

...and everything in its place

by Clifford Bevan

One Saturday in February, the Arts and Books section of *The Daily Telegraph* devoted most of its front page and the whole of its centre spread to the New Queen's Hall Orchestra. "Out Goes the Oomph"



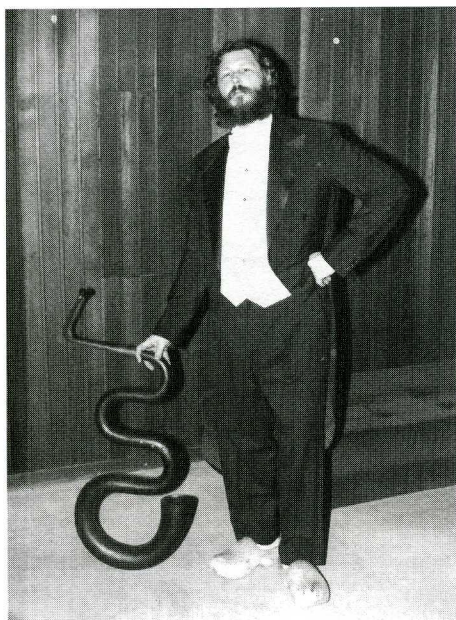
10 serpent chandelier, Le Grand Salon, Conservatoire Royal de Musique de Bruxelles

was the headline to an article by Brian Hunt which began by drawing attention to the twentieth century's increasing "clamour for ever louder and shinier sounds," and continued by considering the "synchronisation and brilliance [which] became valued above depth of tone and range of expression" in response to the demands of the recording industry, aided and abetted by such as Toscanini and Fritz Kreisler.

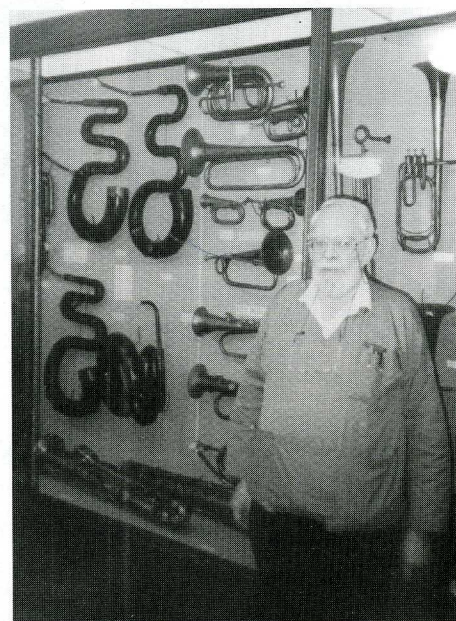
Paradoxically, it was record producer John Boyden who formed the new orchestra, using recordings from the earlier part of the century as guides to style. The name New Queen's Hall Orchestra was adopted by Sir Henry Wood in 1895 in connection with his promenade concerts. Boyden's aim is to revive the style of playing prevalent in London at the turn of the century. Not a universal 1900 orchestral sound, as there was no such thing. Berlin, Vienna, Manchester, Boston—the orchestra in each city prided itself on its own distinctive playing style.

To this end, as the article admirably spells out (with the help of pictures of instruments and an illustration of Wood's orchestra at Queen's Hall in 1906), the string players use gut strings, portamento and variable vibrato; there are timpani with skin heads, wooden flutes, French type bassoons, single F piston-valve horns and a pea-shooter G bass trombone. The journalistic presentation is exemplary: clear, accurate, and persuasive. The heart rejoices...until the last three lines, when it drops with a thud like a falling tuba mute. "The New Queen's Hall Orchestra plays at the Barbican Centre tonight and on February 28," they read.

These words chimed in eerily with thoughts that had eddied round the brain while driving home from the First National Conference for Tuba and Euphonium in Birmingham the previous weekend. The official account of this highly successful event will appear in an upcoming issue, but



Garry Crighton, a Canadian wearing Dutch shoes, standing in a German living-room, propped up by an English copy of a French serpent (Germany 1987)



Jeremy Montagu at the Bates Collection, Oxford University (England, 1991)



serpentists (l-r) Claude Engli of Canada (copper serpent by Robb Stewart, 1988); Alan Lamsden of England (serpent by Forveille, 1821), Clifford Bevan of England ("Monty," serpent covered with python skin by Christopher Monk, 1987) (U.S.A. 1989)

my unofficial response to the event was that it formed a significant breakthrough for UK low brass players. Amidst a profusion of serious performances, it was my privilege to provide a contrasting twenty minutes of ophicleide during the Sunday lunchtime concert.

In ophicleide terms, Birmingham is no mean city. Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, with its prominent part for the instrument, received its first performance (in 1846) in the Town Hall, an impressive stone structure still standing within sight of the Conservatoire, where the Conference was held. William Ponder played ophicleide in Birmingham Music Festivals during the 1830s, appearing there in 1834 on a monster (contrabass) ophicleide specially made for the event—a unique instrument which nine years later Prospero played in the same city. Birmingham craftsmen were quite capable of making ophicleides: an example by George & John Cottrell still exists.

It was, therefore, a particular pleasure to play ophicleide in England's second city. But why the worries, and how did the reference to the Barbican tie in?

The massive Barbican complex, the City of London's contribution to the capital's

artistic life, contains a theatre, concert hall, art gallery, library and a music conservatoire succinctly and perceptively described during an account in *Brass Bulletin* of an International Trumpet Guild Conference held there as "architecturally uninspiring."

Audiences, having successfully followed the yellow brick line leading from Underground station to concert hall through a series of gloomy and intimidating concrete tunnels, sit in ergonomically-designed seats in a wide auditorium with controlled temperature, humidity and acoustics. Excellent—in theory. But surely, a performance takes place only when there is communication between performers and audience. The latter must be as much part of the process as the former. And can there be meaningful communication across a time-war?

There are still plenty of people who attended concerts in the Queen's Hall before it was destroyed in an air-raid in 1941. Both their testimony and written accounts make it clear that the hall was as beloved of audiences as the Barbican is disliked. The acoustics—as was the case with so many rectangular concert halls with galleries—were superb. The benches, upright and unyielding, were uncomfortable. Audience members had to play an active role, concentrating on the sounds tickling the ear rather than the horsehair tickling the behind.

If a present-day audience is going to be in the right frame of mind to appreciate gut strings, F horns and ophicleides, it needs to travel backwards in time quite as much as the players—ideally precisely as far, so that a complete congress betwixt performers and listeners can be reached. Reminiscences of Christopher Monk are here. As a historian, he strongly maintained that the only way to understand any historic period was to dress, eat, live and think as people did then.

The Adrian Boult Hall of the Birmingham Conservatoire is very new, very carefully designed, very comfortable, and very beguiling. But musicians easily break through a façade and plumb the artistic truths. My accompanist of the day (who before that morning had never even seen an ophicleide, much less heard one) lost no time in suggesting nearby venues more suitable for ophicleide performances—and local pianos more capable of complementing the instrument's distinctive sound.

What is the answer? Should the managements of these superb new concert halls hire menials to tickle the bottoms of members of the audience during authentic performances of nineteenth-century music? Or must we reconcile ourselves to an inevitable time-chasm between stage and stalls?

Surely, whatever the solution, it can't be right to leave the job only half done.

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The London Serpent Trio with a "reformed" serpent (l-r) Clifford Bevan, Alan Lumsden, the late Christopher Monk, Andrew van der Beek (U.S.A. 1989)