

# HISTORICAL INSTRUMENT SECTION

Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors

## Serpent

This issue's dispatches certainly have a Continental flair, as colleague Bevan and I—unaware of the other's proposed topic—both report on serpent activities and events in Spain and France, respectively.

While most of my writings for this column have reported on activities in England and the United States, my trip was the perfect opportunity to explore and discuss the serpent in France, where Canon Edmé Guillaume of Auxerre is said to have invented the serpent in 1590. Since this fact was first reported by Abbe Leboeuf in 1743, and certainly could not be considered an eye-witness account, the accuracy of the precise date and place will never be confirmed. We can document that by 1602, a serpentist/bassoonist (Michael Tornatoris) was appointed at Notre Dame des Doms in Avignon and, within a few years (taking inflation into account) was making more than the organist and a few ecus less than the Maitre de Chapelle. What can also be said with certainty, is that the serpent permeated the musical culture of France from the 17th century through the early 19th century.

In Paris, I saw much reflecting the role of the serpent. My Paris strolls often seemed to begin or end at Sainte Chapelle—one of the foremost examples of 13th century French architecture, a truly astonishing structure of stone and stained glass which Proust called “the pearl among them all”—and a site known, by 1651, to employ serpentists to accompany plainsong. Within Sainte Chapelle—an intimate space that was quite acoustically live—I could truly sense the vital role of the serpent in the choir. If any realization has emerged in our understanding of the instrument in the past five years, it is that the serpent was meant to *blend* with voices more than to be played as a solo

instrument with continuo, or in duos and trios. The serpent supports the voice and, according to descriptions, loses its own tonal character as it melts into the vocal ensemble. In recent years we may have lost sight of this dimension, but, indeed, the serpent was common in religious settings and continued to play this role for well over 100 years. In 1770, the peripatetic Charles Burney reported that during his visit to Notre Dame de Paris, “Several motets, or services, were performed by the choir, but accompanied oftener by the serpent than organ; indeed, at my first entrance into the French churches, I have frequently taken the serpent for an organ...”

This is all to say that the serpent was a valuable member of music ensembles, both sacred and secular, in France. The serpent was a member of the wind band at the court of Louis XIV, the Sun King, who reigned from 1643-1715. The Chapelle du Roi employed three serpentists in 1692. By the early 18th century, four of the most important churches in Paris each had appointed two serpentists to “bring vitality and zest” to plainsong—as was the original intent of Canon Guillaume.

While this strong sacred and secular tradition existed through the 17th and 18th centuries, the serpent's military and civic role (in France and Paris) must also be mentioned. The Conservatoire de Musique in Paris—founded in 1796—continued to train musicians for the regimental bands and included four professors of serpent out of a total of 21 brass instructors and eight additional staff serpentists, possibly adjuncts. Forty serpent students would have been in attendance at all times. This is not to suggest that serpentists did not exist before the emergence of the Conservatory. In fact, on July 14, 1790, the Festival of the Federation performed

Gossec's *Te Deum* with 300 wind instruments including 50 serpents, 300 drums and many hundred voices.

While the Parisians would have difficulty mustering 50 serpentists today, I can report that the serpent is alive and well in France and has two leading proponents who are actively recording, performing and teaching in various venues throughout Europe. One is avant-garde tubist and serpentist Michel Godard. While we exchanged many messages, faxes, and calls during my visit, I'm sorry to say that Michel's busy schedule never permitted me to meet him face-to-face. I was able to obtain Michel's most recent releases—notably, *Aborigene* [see review in *New Materials*], a wonderful array of modern and period transcriptions for tuba and a brilliantly played series of 16th century Spanish works on serpent and harpsichord.



M. Andre Bissonet, proprietor of...



### ...Instruments Musicaux Anciens, Paris

Michel is a well-known jazz player in Europe, and has performed at the Montreal, Paris, Tokyo, Köln, and Amsterdam jazz festivals. I most certainly look forward to his upcoming projects with the serpent—he is currently touring Germany and France with the outstanding early music ensemble, La Fenice, and will be recording this program of 17th century music in the very near future.

The other leading performer of the serpent in France is Bernard Fourtet, who, throughout the past few years, has offered a variety of serpent workshops and seminars in Toulouse and Lyon, France, and Daroca, Spain. Bernard is also a well-known member of the early music community, as an original member and bass sacbut [the forerunner of the modern trombone] player of Les Sacqueboutiers de Toulouse. During my visit, Bernard demonstrated his mastery of the art of diminution on the serpent. His playing can be heard on two beautiful recordings where he displays the original use of the instrument as an accompaniment of chant. These are Du Caurroy's *Missa pro defunctis* by Ensemble Vocal Sagittarius and La Fenice [Erato, Musifrance 2292-45607-2] and recently released Charles D'Helfer's *Requiem, Messe de Funerailles des Ducs de Lorraine* by A Sei Voci and Les Sacqueboutiers de Toulouse [Astree E 8521]. All the recordings by Godard and

Fourtet display thoughtful and sensitive playing and are a wonderful introduction for those who wish to hear what can be done on the serpent.

I expected to be impressed by the playing of Michel and Bernard and, indeed, I was, but I was further surprised and delighted with my visit to one of the leading instrument dealers in Paris, Andre Bissonnet's Instruments Musicaux Anciens, 6 rue du Pas-de-la-Mule, 75003 Paris (near the Place des Vosges); telephone 1-48-87-20-15. Alison & Sonia Landes in *Pariswalks* say, "This is one of the most fascinating shops in Paris. It is called the *Le Boucherie*, "the butcher's shop," and it no longer sells meat, but musical instruments. M. Bissonnet...began by hanging violins and trumpets alongside his sausages, but eventually the meat vanished, and now the shop is crammed from floor to ceiling with instruments..." Crammed is an understatement! There are hundreds and hundreds of instruments on display—all for sale. Upon entering one of the rooms, I saw approximately 30 serpents—serpents d'église, Russian bassoons, serpents militaire, one serpent Piffault, serpents Forveille, and bass horns. Moreover, I actually stood before a serpenteau, a "tenor" serpent (perhaps what Mozart called for in his scoring of two serpentini in the 1771 opera, *Ascanio in Alba*, K111, aria no. 25).

My visit to another instrument shop, Orphee, 8 rue du Pont Louis Philippe, 75004 Paris; tel 1-42-72-68-42, was just as delightful though not from an overwhelming array of instruments. I did, however, play a beautiful Bassoon Russe, and noticed many unique large brass-looking items in the corners. The delight of Orphee is in meeting the shop's owner, Richard Charbit. Richard is everything one wishes in a Parisian—witty, good-natured, and charming. Richard asked that I give his greetings to all of the T.U.B.A. brotherhood, and extended an invitation that when you are in Paris to stop by at the end of the day and to join him for a drink. With the thought of hearing Bernard and Michael again, visiting Bissonnet's shop, and joining Richard for a drink—I am eagerly awaiting my return to France.  
—Craig Kridel

### Alone in Catalonia by Clifford Bevan

Has there ever been a time without music?

Did you know that back in 700-and-something B.C., amongst the cypress trees, moussaka and retsina of ancient Greece, there were contests for trumpeters as part of the Olympic Games? They took place on the second day of the games, presumably so as to ensure that triumphal fanfares were sounded as required on the first day: There was no guarantee that any of the players would be in a fit state to apply chops to mouthpiece after the contest, as, apparently, an important part of Olympic trumpet-playing was to outblow the other contenders—reminds me of a symphony orchestra I used to play in.

Despite wearing the capistrum (a bandage around the face with a hole left for the embouchure), split cheeks were the frequent outcome. And you complain about tired lips—and your musical director about split notes?

Perhaps this is even more reassuring bearing in mind that the original games were on a severely local scale, while those of today give new meaning to the good old Greek root *mega*. For example, there were many people to whom Barcelona meant only a city until the highly successful Olympics hosted by the city in 1992.

While the marble floors of the spectacularly rebuilt airport echoed to the

squelch of enthusiasts' sneakers and the brand new rail link carried tens of thousands of sports fans to the welcoming bars and restaurants of this lively city, sitting quietly on a shelf in an ornate building on a corner of the busy Diagonal was—virtually unnoticed—the most remarkable sight in Barcelona.

Instrument number 802—shown in glorious colour in the sumptuous catalog of the Barcelona Museu de la Musica, and usefully described therein in Catalan—is a serpent. But no ordinary serpent, this. Probably Spanish, possibly dating from the 17th or 18th century, it is pitched in C with six finger-holes. Its construction follows all the normal serpent conventions—except for its shape, described in the catalogue as “*vuit corbes amb tres ponts entre les corbes*,” “eight loops with three stays between the loops.”

This firmly places the Barcelona serpent in a league of its own. And it poses a new question to add to the many in the serpent book of mysteries: Why did its maker go out of his way to create even more difficulties in matching together the two longitudinal planks that, in this serpent as in most others, are cut to complementary profiles and hollowed out to give the final tube? Christopher Monk spent nine months carving out his first, totally hand-made serpent, but that followed the normal shape with a mere four bends. This one has eight. How did its maker find the time to do it? Where did he discover his pattern? Why does no other in this shape exist?

Unlike the various later upright serpents, the distinctive profile does not help the player's fingers cover the holes. Nor is there any obvious improvement in the disposition of the mass of the instrument over the normal configuration. There was no advantage for the maker in economies of material. Other, normal serpents in the museum average out at an overall 79 cm x 13.5 cm, not significantly different from this model's 67.5 cm x 12.5 cm.

Its provenance, therefore, does not necessarily lie in an area producing thin trees. Its form seems not to have been dictated by an earth-shattering breakthrough in the field of ergonomics. The application of an enhanced aesthetic hardly seems appropriate.

If we knew that it had been made in Barcelona itself, we might even be able to date it. The newer part of the city, *Eixample*, developed between about 1860 and 1936, is laid out in a grid pattern. The older *Barrio Gotico* consists of a mixture of open spaces and winding alleyways. The instrument therefore adheres to pre-1860 ideals.

But we don't know that it was made in Barcelona, so that thesis is scarcely tenable. And in any event, the local modernist architecture of the early 1900s, including the 1909 building in which the museum itself is housed, is remarkable for its flamboyant curves, so the instrument—using that argument—could equally well date from the 20th century, which it clearly does not. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that the answers should be sought locally. Fortunately, the Catalan-English dictionary I have been using in writing this piece—not being a native speaker of the language, you understand—prefaces the entries for each letter with a useful proverb in the two languages. They may help provide some of the answers we are seeking. As it says, “*El*

*costum fa llei*,” “custom rules the law.” But as it also says, a few pages later, “*Feta la llei, feta la trampa*,” “Every law has a loophole.” In this case, rather more loops—eight—than holes—six. Nonetheless, “*No tot son flors i violes*,” “Life is not all beer and skittles”—although I can think of some serpentists who might be working to disprove that contention. “*Si vols estar ben servit, feste to mateix el llit*,” “If you want a thing done well, do

it yourself.” After all, “*No tot es bufar i fer ampolles*,” “Rome was not build in a day,” and “*Mentre hi ha vida hi ha esperanca*,” “Where there's life there's hope.”

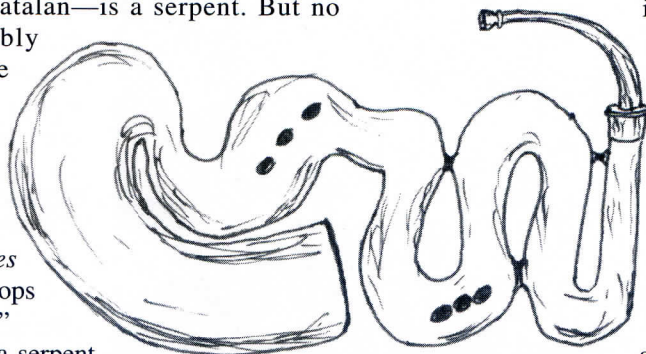
It is easy to imagine the resilience of the devoted craftsman who conceived and build this instrument, and to hear his subsequent cries of “*Xanxes venen, xanxes van, com que no em toquen, res no em fan*,” “I don't care about mockeries, as they don't hurt me.”

By this time you probably share my suspicion that the dictionary's compiler would not be the ideal sort of person to find yourself with on a journey across Spain by tandem—or even Harley-Davidson. Spewing up an appropriate saying for every conceivable situation could be just a teensy-weensy bit boring. As the man himself wrote: “*Una gota vessa la copa*,” “It was the last straw that broke the samel's back.”

And I do mean samel.

But as for that cerpent...

4x24



## Leather Gigbags

BarrLines have been producing leather gigbags since 1982.

Each BarrLines Gigbag is handmade from high quality leather with high density foam padding, carrying handles and straps for convenient lightweight transportation.

**Euphonium** US\$275  
**Tuba (Specify model)** US\$490

Measurements are available for: Hirsbrunner CC and BBb, B & S F and CC, B & H EEb and BBb, and Miraphone 88.

Any other Tuba please specify measurements

BarrLines, PO Box 430, High Wycombe,  
Bucks HP13 5QT ENGLAND  
Tel (0494) 437265 Fax (0494) 437619