

# HISTORICAL INSTRUMENT SECTION

Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors

## Serpent

In these dispatches I wish to report serpent activities of the past six months here in the United States. I'm pleased to say that it has been an active time, indeed. Members of the British ensemble, the Mellstock Band, toured New York, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Maine during December and performed their unique repertoire of West Gallery music (a topic discussed in Clifford Bevan's essay). The Mellstock Band's most widely distributed recording, *Under the Greenwood Tree* (Saydisc CD-SDL 360), is the perfect introduction to this unique literature and displays the fundamental role of the serpent. The ensemble's United States tour could not have been better timed in that the day before they arrived, CBS/Hallmark Hall of Fame aired a production of Thomas Hardy's *Return of the Native* with the ensemble portrayed, including Mellstock serpentist Phil Humphries. For those who happened to miss this airing, I have been told that Hallmark's productions have been released for video rental/purchase. The Mellstock Band reported that one of the highlights of the tour was a performance at the Hanover, New Hampshire, Revels of a choral work with 45-plus voices, 10 woodwinds and strings, and a bass line, well-supported by just two instruments—the serpent and an ophicleide played by guest artist and T.U.B.A. member Robert Eliason.

While the serpent in the West Gallery was being seen throughout New England, the serpent in the church was being heard in Chicago. I took part this past February in a lovely concert of neo-Gallican chant with the professional

early music choir, In Terra Vox. Neo-Gallican chant represents a movement of the late 17th-early 19th century that re-asserted the chant repertoire of the Church of France in place of the Roman rites and Gregorian monophony. Neo-Gallican chant is characterized by part-singing, three- to four-part polyphony, and improvised ornamentation. The serpent would not only double the cantus and/or bass line but could also play a composed, continuo-like instrumental part. Our performance included sacred works written for choir and serpent by Abbé Nicolas Roze (1745-1819), serpentist, composer, and the first librarian of the Paris Conservatoire. The effect of this music is astonishing, and I hope the performance will generate more interest in this yet-to-be-explored repertoire. For anyone currently swept up in the Chant phenomenon and wishing to hear something other than the Benedictine Monks of Santo Domingo De Silos, I recommend a neo-Gallican chant recording—sans-serpent, alas—produced by Ensemble Organum, entitled *Plain*

*Chant: Cathédrale D'Auxerre* (Harmonia Mundi 901319). Also, Ensemble Organum has recently released a collection of Corsican chant from 17th and 18th century Franciscan manuscripts, *Chant Corse* (Harmonia Mundi 901495). This is "in-your-face" chant that brass players can *really* enjoy!

My comments thus far are merely leading up to *the* American serpent event of the past few years—the appearance of the serpent in the Boston Symphony Orchestra (BSO). This occurred in the recent performances of Hector Berlioz's *Messe solennelle*, a work discovered in 1991 and receiving its first American performance. The original instrumentation includes voices, strings, woodwinds, and serpent, ophicleide, and buccin [a variety of trombone with a bell shaped like a dragon's head, which was used during the time of the French Revolution for festive occasions]. BSO bass trombonist Douglas Yeo saw the Berlioz performance as the perfect opportunity to make his serpent debut and, thus, auditioned for Maestro Seiji Ozawa. The

alternating ophicleide and buccin parts were performed on euphonium by the BSO's tubist, Chester Schmitz. While the Boston Symphony Orchestra has yet to record this work, a lovely 1993 world-premiere performance/recording is available on original instruments by the Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique (John Eliot Gardiner, conductor; Philips 442 137-2). Historical brass performers on this recording include Stephen Saunders, serpent; Stephen Wick, buccin; and Marc Giradot, ophicleide.



To conclude this description of serpentist activities in the United States, I will mention the upcoming Early Brass Symposium, sponsored by the Historic Brass Society. The Society is celebrating over a decade of early brass festivals with an extravaganza that will exceed all others. The Society, under the able direction of Jeff Nussbaum, will stage the Symposium July 25-30 at Amherst College, Amherst, Massachusetts. The event is being held in conjunction with the Amherst Early Music Festival. Serpentists Clifford Bevan, Andrew van der Beek, Bernard Fourtet, Michel Godard, Philip Humphries, Alan Lumsden, Steven Wick, and myself have been invited. I must submit this copy well before the final plans for the Festival are determined and before all invited performers are able to respond; however, I am certain that serpents and ophicleides will be well represented, and I encourage all euphonium and tuba players to visit the Festival, even for just an afternoon. Leading brass scholars and performers of cornetto, natural trumpet, natural horn, and sacbut will be in attendance. Those who wish more Symposium information, please call: 803-254-9443; fax 803-777-3068; or via Internet: serpent@univscvm.csd.scarolina.edu.

On a personal note, I wish to thank British virtuoso Stephen Wick for helping me obtain a serpent Forveille. This instrument, invented in 1823, had always been a curiosity to the late Christopher Monk and, in Monk's view, may have advanced the fingering pattern of the serpent. I was able to locate such an instrument at a major London instrument dealer, and Stephen gave it a good going over before I made the decision to purchase the horn—an 1835 instrument made by Darché of Paris. One runs risks when purchasing any antique instrument

and, indeed, I am finding new fingering options and new cracks with each passing week. However, the possibilities and the sense of “advancement” of the serpent Forveille do seem somewhat encouraging. Also, I have commissioned American historical brass instrument-maker, Robb Stewart, to copy a metal bass horn as invented by French expatriot Louis Alexandre Frichot in the 1790s. I am embarking on studies of these two bass instruments of the early 19th century and, as I continue to practice my 1827 Serpent Forveille treatise by Hermenge, I will keep the membership informed of any oddities and/or insights that emerge from my research. Of course, I would also be interested in talking to others who are actively involved with the Forveille and bass horn.

Lastly, I want to mention the Tigers—the Graceland McCollough Tigers—and their new recording, *Heaven* (Fire Ant CD 1005: Fire Ant, 2009 Ashland Ave, Charlotte, NC 28205). I am uncertain who has had the opportunity to hear a Shout Band, but it's a wonderfully unbelievable sound—somewhat of a cross between African-American gospel and ragtime music. The primary instrument of Shout Bands is the trombone with, typically, a euphonium and sousaphone. The Tiger's recording includes seven trombones, sax, euphonium, sousaphone, and drums. What a sound—there's nothing quite like it.

## O Wild West Wind

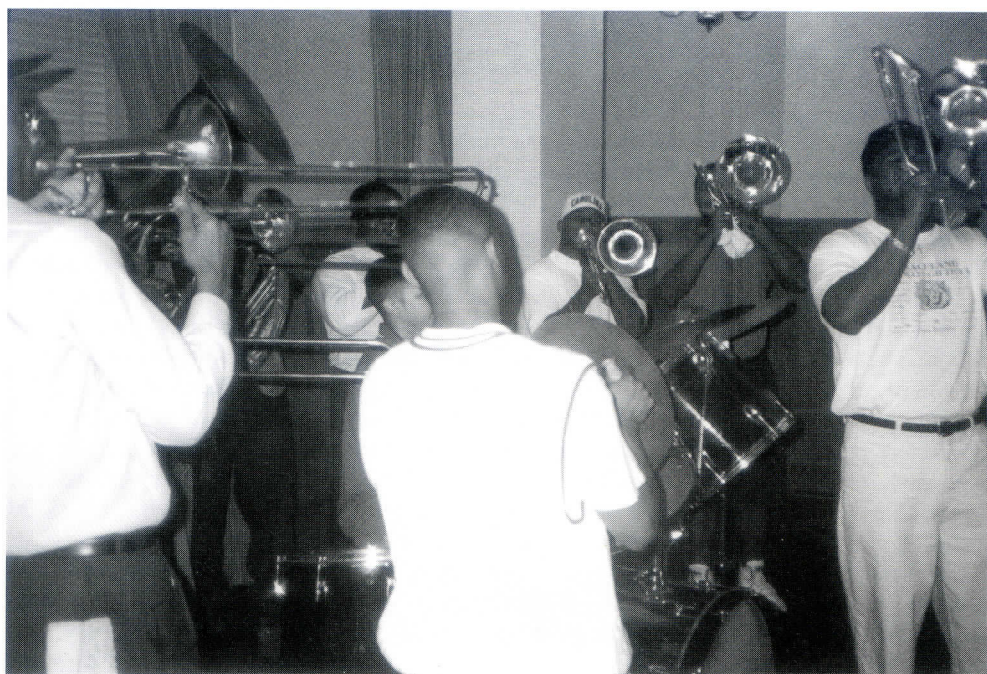
—by Clifford Bevan

How about going West? Or, better still, how about opening up the West?

If you had wanted to do this around the middle of last century, you would have needed to invest vast amounts of capital, bribe as many elected representatives as you could find, and recruit thousands of workers. Then, suddenly, it's six years later and 1869, and you're being photographed alongside Leland Stanford missing the last spike with his unfamiliar mallet as he marked the joining of the rails from east and west.

The other way to open up the West was to drive your mail coach the 105 miles from London to Bath (as happened for the first time in 1784), sail your barge from the Thames to the Severn (1786—though not for long—until the superior Kennet and Avon Canal was opened), or race your train the nine extra miles to Bristol itself (from 1841), where, in 1845, they launched the *SS Great Britain*, which could then take you even farther west to New York.

The point about all this is the scale: a mere 112 miles is the distance between London on the River Thames, draining east into the North Sea, and Bristol on the River Severn, draining west into the Irish Sea. That is the length of the journey coast-to-coast.



◀ Maestro Seiji Ozawa and Douglas Yeo

➤ The Graceland McCollough Tigers

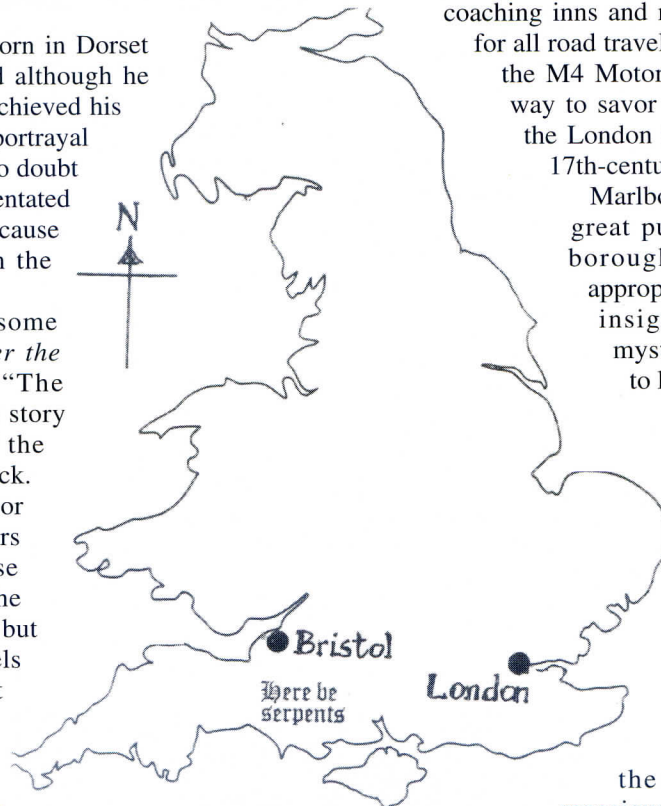
Now, if this country of England is on such a Lilliputian, model-railroad-up-in-the-bedroom scale, how come that in Dorset the inhabitants were still blowing serpents in the middle of the 19th century? Had they all been locked in their houses and forbidden to take a look at what was going on elsewhere, where by that time valved instruments had long been grouped into brass bands, and the well-known, but not necessarily respected, British brass band contesting movement had become well established?

The reason for their isolation was much simpler than that. It was that the road, the canal and the railway had passed them by, leaving the inhabitants of Dorset isolated in a kind of time warp. No new industry had been established there during the Industrial Revolution, and there were no great ports on its pretty coastline to pick up novelties from the import/export trade in new ideas.

The author Thomas Hardy was born in Dorset in 1840 (dying there in 1928), and although he worked in London for a while, he achieved his great success through the accurate portrayal of rural life in the region. There is no doubt that Hardy was the most serpent-orientated writer in history. He had to be, because the instrument was so familiar in the time and place he wrote about.

The serpent is the subject of some discussion in his delightful *Under the Greenwood Tree*, subtitled "The Mellstock Quire," which tells the story of the trials and tribulations of the musicians in the village of Mellstock. Hardy sets his novel in the 1830s or '40s, and in his introduction, refers to these amateur musicians whose functions were not restricted to the gallery of the church on Sundays, but also included playing jigs and reels for local dances. Many Dorset churches were built with a gallery at the western end to accommodate the band. The performers were out of sight of the congregation, but unfortunately within the vision of the parson, who could see their misdemeanors as they filled in time between hymns. If you would tread in their footsteps, there are numerous village churches in the county where you may—my favorite is in Puddletown.

Hardy was always very realistic in his references to the serpent. A member of a musical family, he grew up to its sound, knew its purpose and function, and found no reason to poke fun at the instrument any more than he would have ridiculed this simple country people about whom he wrote. His characters regret innovations like barrel-organs and "the things next door to 'em that you blow wi' your foot." When one of them states, "They should have stuck to strings as we did, and kept out clarinets, and done away with serpents," another, Mr. Penny, the boot and shoemaker and a member of the church choir replies, "Yet there's worse things than serpents. Old things pass away, 'tis true; but a serpent was a good old note: a deep rich note was the serpent."



Many of the manuscript books used by the Dorset village musicians are still in existence, while much of their performing style has been retained by regional folk musicians. The Mellstock Band has been re-created, and brings the sounds of 19th-century rural music to a far wider audience than ever heard them at the time. The band recently made a triumphal tour of the United States, and the presence of a serpent amongst the fiddles, clarinets, and concertina did not go unnoticed.

Meanwhile, back along the east-west line of that road, canal and railway joining London and Bristol, lies the picturesque town of Marlborough in the County of Wiltshire. This was where coach travelers revived themselves for the final leg of the journey to Bath, or prepared themselves for the longer haul to London. Its broad High Street still contains two or three coaching inns and numerous tea rooms and restaurants, for all road travelers stopped here until the building of the M4 Motorway, and many still go out of their way to savor its particular delights. Not long ago the London Serpent Trio (LST) performed in its 17th-century Merchant's House.

Marlborough also houses one of England's great public (i.e., private) schools: Marlborough College. The school song is appropriately *The Old Bath Road*, while the insignia of the Music Department is, mysteriously, a serpent. Nobody admits to knowing why.

Another of Wiltshire's many attractions is the village of Lacock, with its half-timbered houses, bridge and ford. Its integrity is assured through virtually the whole place now being owned by the National Trust (which is not national in the sense of being a government body, but the country's largest charity, preserving land and property the length and breadth of the U.K. from the hands of the rapacious). At Lacock Abbey, William Henry

Fox Talbot made the world's first photographic negative in 1835, which also happened to be the year the bass tuba was invented. Of even more significance, however, is the fact that London Serpent Trio member Andrew van der Beek lives in the village. And here, from May 19 through 21, a Serpent Weekend will take place. The Mellstock Band's serpentist Phil Humphries will be there, along with other members of the LST, and the prospect of making music on a bright May morning beside the little stream that flows through van der Beek's orchard is more than attractive.

There may just be time for you to arrange to be there, too. Contact Andrew at Cantax House, Lacock, Chippenham, Wiltshire, SN15 2JADZ, England (telephone and fax: 01249 730468).

Shelley didn't realize when he wrote the words at the head of this piece just what the Western Wind could sound like on a really good day.