

HISTORICAL INSTRUMENT SECTION

Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors

Serpent

My dispatches continue to center on the summer Historic Brass Society's *Historic Brass Symposium*—a festival whose influence will be quite monumental and certainly long-lasting. The event, staged in conjunction with the Amherst (Massachusetts) *Early Music Festival*, was conceived originally as a summit conference to document accomplishments in the field of early brass, and to chart directions for future work. The presence of serpentists among the discussants was somewhat of a victory, since much of the work in this field revolves around research and performances on natural horn, natural trumpet, cornetto, and sacbut. Yet, the serpent's presence at the "grand round-table" was not the sole accomplishment at the Symposium [symposium participants included Cliff Bevan, Ralph Dudgeon, Bernard Fourtet, Michel Godard, and myself]. As one talks of the "Symposium of '95," the serpent performances by Bernard Fourtet and Michel Godard will never be forgotten (and stand alongside Alan Lumsden's legendary 1989 performance of Proctor's *Serpent Concerto*). Fourtet's performance was the first portion of the Symposium's opening concert, and he delighted the audience—an unbelievable assemblage of distinguished historical brass scholars and performers—with works by Bassano, Falconieri, Frescobaldi, and Corrette. Similarly, Godard stunned the audience with the finale to the Symposium's Saturday evening concert. While performing with *Ensemble La Fenice*, Michel played works by Frescobaldi, Falconieri, Pesenti, and Cazzati. The virtuosity of their playing and the astonishment of other brass players certainly cannot be portrayed in print. Needless to say, all of the participants

were more than reminded of Mersenne's 1636 statement that the true bass of the cornetto is the serpent and, "one without the other is a body without a soul." In fact, many reported that the performances by low-brass players—Bernard, Michel, and ophicleidist Tony George—were the highlights of the festival. This is all to say we will be anxiously awaiting the release of upcoming recordings by Bernard and Michel with *La Fenice* (as well as by our new Historical Instrument Section columnist, Tony George).

Perhaps one of the more touching moments at the festival was the performance by the *New York Cornet & Sacbut Ensemble* (N.Y.C. & S.E.), the oldest active cornet & sacbut ensemble in the world now having entered its third decade. [While TUBA members may recognize the cornetto players of the N.Y.C. & S.E., trumpeters Allan Dean and Ray Mase, few would recall that Sam Pilafian was the ensemble's original bass sacbut player.] Director Benjamin Peck

has greatly influenced the development of historical brass and early music in the United States, not only by forming and directing the N.Y. Cornet & Sacbut Ensemble, but also by serving as the first president for *Early Music America*, the first president of the Historic Brass Society, and the founder of the Historical Brass Festival. During the Ensemble's concert, Peck stopped to reflect on what he most loved about the field:

"The constant need for and encouragement of trying new things; the celebration of risk-taking—affirming and renewing your life through the risking of it; the truly wonderful potential of combining one's love of blowing on a horn (fundamentally a childish and childlike feeling) with a very wide range of more mature intellectual and musical pursuits; and, of course, that this all occurs within a web of delicious tension that keeps us all really alive."



Photo by Craig Kridel

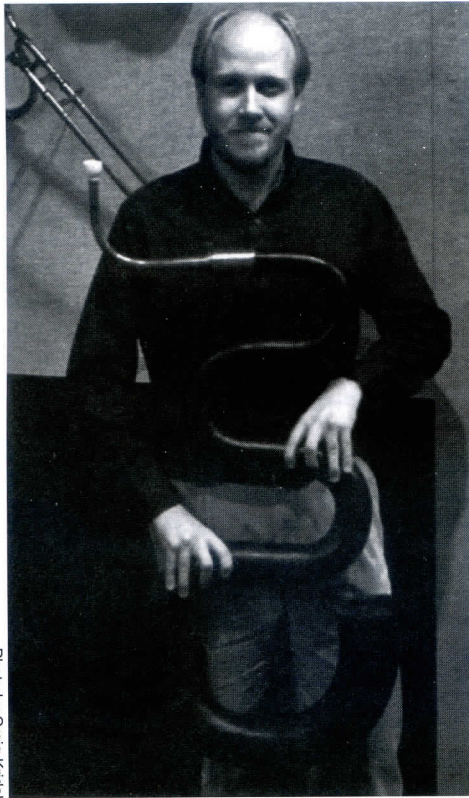


Photo by Craig Kridel

◀ Darcy Kuronen of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts with a serpent from the Collection of Musical Instruments

moment was when the Historic Brass Society acknowledged its “common faith.” I take consolation when, if ever in the future, I am told that I “don’t have a prayer.” Well, now I do! I thought *TUBA Journal* readers might enjoy this moment of profound simplicity that occurred at the Historic Brass Symposium.

What follows is a slightly altered version for all brass players, as introduced by Ben Peck:

“Musings like this have led me to compose an early brass player’s prayer for our field—it’s short and non-sectarian, i.e., good for trumpeters, cornettists, sacbut players, serpentists, horn players, and all players of brass instruments.

Early Brass Player’s Prayer

May music always challenge—never too easy, never without risk;
 may music always grow in knowledge and collective wisdom, but never ever should we find the answer for long (or, as our French colleagues would say, *vive la difference*);
 may music always be fun to play—may it always be fun to blow on a horn.

The Serpent at Amherst

In the United States, Amherst, Massachusetts, has served as a spiritual home for the serpent. The first meeting of United Serpents was held at Amherst in 1986; the late Christopher Monk conducted the first serpent class of the 20th century there; Simon Proctor composed the first and only work for eight serpents, titled *The Amherst Suite*, and premiered the work in Amherst. [All of these events were held in conjunction with the *Amherst Early Music Festival* and the *Historic Brass Festival*.] Well, it seems as if Amherst was awaiting the return of the serpent since, as we have

discovered, the instrument appeared shortly after the College’s founding in 1821. During the 1993 Historic Brass Festival Robert Cronin noticed a serpent in the athletic department’s display case. I asked to see the instrument and discovered that the serpent and a bassoon had been used in the Amherst College Paean Band from 1822 to 1828. [The unsigned serpent is now preserved, catalogued, and concealed at the Amherst College Archives—a rather ironic sense of presentation when the most massive gathering of historical brass performers and scholars occurs on one’s campus.] Documents suggest that the Paean Band—paean referring to choral song or song of triumph and coming to mean hymn—rehearsed weekly and performed at Amherst College gatherings and serenaded the first families of Amherst as well. Of course, one immediately begins to wonder how many other serpents were included in college choral/field bands. After the 1995 Historic Brass Symposium, Cliff Bevan and I traveled to Williams College where we were delighted to see a serpent proudly and prominently on display at the entrance of the music building; however, the instrument was part of a collection acquired in the 20th century and had not participated in college lore. Similarly, our viewing of the rather remarkable collection of serpents, basshorns, serpent Forveilles, and ophicleides of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s Symphony Hall, wonderfully displayed and cared for by curator Darcy Kuronen of the Museum of Fine Arts, caused us to wonder of the existence of American collegiate serpentists of the early 19th century. Do any TUBA readers have stories to tell? Legends they have heard?

Since this is now the one serpent column of the year, I ask readers to contact me directly during the intervening months with questions and/or requests for information. I may be reached at the following addresses:

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◀ Serpent and 19th century Brass NEH Symposium participants (l-r): Michel Godard, Bernard Fourtet, Trevor Herbert (chair), Clifford Bevan, Ralph Dudgeon, not pictured: Craig Kridel.

Pride and Prejudice

—by Cliff Bevan

The news is not only bad, it couldn't be much worse. There's no doubt of that. Those tickled by the tuba, those euphoric about the euphonium, those who bask in the baritone horn or see the sousaphone as sacrosanct should make the most of their final few seconds of bliss.

Think about the joys and delights of mastering your chosen instrument. Remember how you first applied lips to mouthpiece and carefully balanced breath and tongue to produce that initial magic note. Recollect the joys of practicing scales and arpeggios, the delights of the fingering-chart, and how much pleasure you experienced learning about those three little valves and their use singly or together to produce enchanting chains of melody.

Do you recall how you next began to use the fourth valve, and later perhaps even a fifth? Can you remember the first time you realized your intonation was perhaps not quite perfect, and you lipped up or down, learned how to push a valve-slide gently one way or the other to tame that naughty note, or maybe planned a way of raising enough funds to buy a totally compensated instrument?

Well, I'm truly sorry to have to say this, but for much of the time you might just as well have been playing ball, Painting by Numbers or gazing at *Baywatch*.

I must admit that it took me many years to realize the truth. My Road to Damascus was set in Hampshire County, Massachusetts, in the town of Amherst (pop. 35,228), and mine eyes were opened during the Historic Brass Society Symposium held at Amherst College last July—an amazing and sobering experience. Here, names previously only seen below the titles of learned articles in reference books, or superimposed upon inappropriate but spectacular illustrations on the covers of CDs, shone from the identity-badges of men and women wearing shorts and tee-shirts, spilling their cold drinks as they filled their plastic glasses in the refectory, or perspiring profusely (one would have written “sweating” of lesser mortals) in the unexpectedly hot Massachusetts summer.

They played, many of these legendary people, not only the right notes in the right places but also with feeling and expression, and upon instruments described as “defunct” in text-books published 20 or 30 years ago. Was it then a “Freak Week,” a musical Barnum and Bailey of an experience, with grotesque sights and bizarre noises offending eyes and ears below the cloudless blue sky? Did the audiences need to make allowances, or wear ear-plugs, or avoid the performers in the bar afterwards so as not to perjure their own standards through insincere congratulations?

Here is the sobering truth: in the entire week I did not hear a single, solitary chord that was not totally in tune.

Now, pause, and think.

If Lowell Greer and his team of natural horn players could play their way through 19th-century music by Dauprat that modulated measure by measure and beat by beat every bit as much as anything by Richard Strauss or Gabriel Faure; if serpentists Michel Godard, along with violin, cornetto and harpsichord, could be the hit of the Saturday evening concert, publicly referred to the following day in terms of quality of musical experience; if Ralph Dudgeon and Tony George could present the assembled with virtuosic runs, trills and multiple-tonguing galore in their keyed bugle and ophicleide recitals—what has been the point? Why have we been bothered by all those mechanical encumbrances, the valves and slides and compensating devices, if players of natural instruments can play as well in tune, as quickly, and as musically without them—and without the need, in turn, for regular maintenance checks, let alone the ever-present awareness of their propensity to stick, jam and otherwise annoy? Now I understand why 19th-century horn-players didn't fall over each other in the rush to buy valve horns, and why clarinetists were suspicious every time a new key was added.

Has it all been a big con trick, with the business boys—the Adolphe Saxes, the Henry Distins, Nathan Adamses and the rest—leading the way, as usual, to produce new “necessities” at high prices? Were these the mobile phones, electronic diaries and internets of the 1800s? You no more “need” valves to play Berlioz

faithfully than you “need” a fax machine to do what a pigeon could do at a fraction of the cost—and paint your house white at the same time. It's a matter of craftsmanship, leading back to the guilds of the middle ages with the apprentice living in his master's household in order to absorb slowly but thoroughly all the tricks of natural trumpet playing. Now we need instant results. If I set out to mend a bit of my house, I first of all plug in the Black & Decker multi-purpose electric saw, reamer and glass polisher (guaranteed to cut through even Bruckner's orchestration) and manage something close enough to need only a modicum of plastic wood or filler to make it watertight. If I get a professional to do the job properly, I shall soon hear the wonderful rasp of a cross-cut saw biting into wood as he exercises his gradually-learned craft skills to produce a clean, smooth incision at exactly the right angle.

There's usually an easy way, but it's rarely the best.

Meanwhile, the British Broadcasting Corporation emptied the streets for an hour each Sunday evening in September and October as it transmitted another blockbuster television adaptation of one of the great classics. This time it was Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. Exterior scenes were shot in the famous serpent center of Lacock, Wiltshire, apparently considered more like Hertfordshire than Hertfordshire itself. But it was episode two that was the most gripping for some of us.

Here was a country ball, and a dance that seemed to go on forever so that hero and heroine could exchange the dramatically important phrase as they came face-to-face. With typical thoroughness, all the period details had been checked out, and in consequence the sound of the serpent was heard in the band, playing bass alongside the 'cello. Suitably disguised in late 18th-century togs, there was Mellstock Band and London Serpent Trio serpentist Phil Humphries, apparently set for a *Guinness Book of Records* entry as he blew his way through what must have been the world's longest non-stop bass part...and not a valve in sight...