

# HISTORICAL INSTRUMENT SECTION

Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors

## Serpent

With the completion of the first year of Historical Instrument Section columns as a regular feature of the *TUBA Journal* (and with the recent questioning of the tone of this section), I wish to begin my dispatches by underscoring the intent of this column—namely, to display a sense of adventure and exploration toward our understanding of historical instruments. As I mentioned in last Fall's issue, we seek not to permit the column to become academic, pedantic and self-righteous. Moreover, we never sought to proselytize nor submit "strongly biased, negative and destructive" writing. I think such charges are somewhat unfair; instead, I have encouraged the contributors to display their curiosity, wit, and whimsy. We do not judge the musical merit of instruments or compare the value of one over another. I encourage contributors to write about their interests and passions with the hope that *TUBA Journal* readers may see new possibilities, new interests, and new directions in which to appreciate music.

### New and "Reconsidered" Recordings

I have received many e-mail requests for serpent discographies. Those interested listeners will be pleased to learn of a flourish of serpent recording during the past year, although unfortunately, certain items will be difficult to obtain. Those who plan to attend ITEC 1997 in Italy (see Conference Corner) will have an opportunity to hear one of the serpent's most prolific recording artists, Michel Godard of France. Michel has just released *Repons* [Studio SM], a stunning recording of Gregorian chant performed by the Choir of Saint-Martin's Abbey, Lige, with accompanying serpent and tuba played in traditional and avant-garde style. This CD, when placed alongside

Michel's *Aborigene* [Label Hopi] and *Le Chant du Serpent* [Media 7], provides a unique array of instrumental work in a wonderfully post-modern vein.

Many recordings that include the serpent will be released in a matter of months. Instead of waiting for next year's Serpent column, I encourage readers to contact me for specific ordering information. Bernard Fourtet of France has recently performed the serpent part in a recording of Mendelssohn's *Paulus* [Harmonia Mundi] with Orchestre des Champs Elysees. Helmut Schmitt of Germany accompanied on serpent the Ensemble Alternatim choir in a period performance of chant. And Phil Humphries of England has been quite active with the Mellstock Band; two CDs will be released in December—a recording of Dickensian Christmas Music and a collection of West Gallery music entitled *Tenants of the Earth*. Lastly, the Mellstock Band has just recorded music for the upcoming film adaptation of Thomas Hardy's *Woodlanders*. What a wonderful array of recording during the past 12 months and, indeed, there may be other in-process projects. I must admit that I have not learned what the very active British serpentists—Steven Wick, Alan Lumsden and Andrew van der Beek have recorded during the past year. There may be more!

Recordings have been mentioned before in this column; however, while I was attending the 1996 Historic Brass Festival at Amherst, Massachusetts, I posed to festival participants the typical "desert island" question—which recordings of historical brass music would they want if they happened to find themselves shipwrecked. My compadres realized that we needed loudspeakers more than separate CD-players; consistency in our selections rang true. We quickly identified

our favorites by Bruce Dickey and Jeremy West and their respective ensembles Concerto Palatino and His Majestys Sagbutts and Cornetts. And we all realized that a recording by cornettists Alan Dean and Ray Mase and the New York Cornet & Sacbut Ensemble was essential for our line-up.

Two of the more thoughtful and opinionated festival participants, however, added new recordings that have now become part of my mainstay desert island list. Karen Snowberg and Ron Nelson, active historical brass performers who play with two New York early music ensembles, The Court Musicians and La Spiritata, were kind enough to write their comments. As they state:

Tops on our list is the collection of old-time favorites freshly and crisply produced and performed by Roland Wilson of Musica Fiata in their recording, *The Feast of San Rocco* (Sony Classical). The old chestnuts primarily from Gabrieli's *Sacred Symphonies* never sounded better, except perhaps back at San Marco's in Venice in about 1620. Another choice is the amazing CD of hidden gems by Cazzati performed astoundingly by Jean Tubery and his ensemble, La Fenice (Adda; distribution: Qualiton Imports). Our final selection has to be the Monteverdi *Vespers*. Our vote for the finest performance is Musica Fiata's CD (Deutsche Harmonia Mundi). The performance by the voices and instruments just could not be better! It is especially thrilling to hear those cornetti high D's at high pitch.

I hope *TUBA Journal* readers are intrigued by the various serpent releases and historical brass CD suggestions. Please contact me for specific information; I can be reached at serpent@vm.sc.edu





◀ Robert Eliason holding an original early 19th century English bass horn and a Stewart reproduction bass horn

modeled after an early 19th century horn owned by tuba and ophicleide performer Robert Eliason; both instruments are pictured here. The English bass horn was seen by Felix

Mendelssohn (in 1824) and led to his writing an 11th part for the instrument in the 1824 *Notturmo in C Major, Op. 24* (later reworked as *Ouverture für Harmoniemusik* in 1838 and ultimately adapted to the *Overture for Band*). While I knew I was seeing double as I gazed at the bass horn, I could not quite believe

### Historical Brass Festival 1996

In addition to our informal conversations of historical brass recordings, this past August's festival provided two very special spectacles. One involved the debut of instrument-maker Robb Stewart's English bass horn reproduction. This instrument was



my eyes when I saw natural trumpeter Fred Holmgren drive by in his truck. I must admit that while I asked Fred for photos, I did not explore his reasons for adapting his stick-shift! In fact, the questions would have proved somewhat overwhelming: Is the Bach 24AW most appropriate for American-made cars? Is the Bach MT22 applicable only for 4X4?? Should a Schilke be used on a Olds???

### Long Live the Serpent! (Oh, sorry. It already Has)

—by Cliff Bevan

To come into public awareness through a pretty severe curse could be considered an inauspicious beginning, but there it is in Genesis itself: "And the Lord God said unto the serpent, because thou hast done this, thou art cursed above all cattle, and above every beast of the field." As usual, His words turned out to be totally true. Over history nobody has spoken of the bull-roarer, the dog horn, of catgut, bird-warblers or even Saint-Saën's entire *Carnival of the Animals* in the way they have so often chosen to insult the serpent.

Berlioz: "The truly barbaric tone of this instrument would be much better suited for the bloody cult of the Druids than for that of the Catholic church, where it is still in use—as a monstrous symbol for the lack of understanding and coarseness of taste and feeling that have governed the application of music in our churches since times immemorial." Mandel: "a howl rather than an intelligible scale, and, therefore, is inferior to the bass horn and ophicleide." Evans: "such an odious affair that nothing short of compulsion could explain its employment."

Oh, dear me. I'm sure I've heard all this before...but wait awhile. When were these people writing about the serpent? Was it not the 19th century?

Indeed it was.

And when was the serpent invented? Was it not the end of the 16th century?

Quite correct.

➤ Fred Holgrum's stickshift?!?



So these people were sounding off about an instrument that had been around for two or 300 years?

Correct again, oh wise one.

Well, if the serpent was such an "odious affair," why hadn't it gone the way of the crumhorns, shawms, rackets and all those other instruments strong in garish colour but weak in musical worth? After all, you don't find Berlioz including a crumhorn section in his choral works, while whatever he had to say about the serpent

he actually wrote for it. And you don't find Wagner using pandoras and citterns either, do you?

Are you telling me that Wagner wrote for serpent?

Indeed he did. You just look at the score of *Rienzi*, and there it is playing below the bassoons for page after page. And you'll find one in *Das Liebesmahl der Apostel* as well.

Okay. I'll accept that both Berlioz and Wagner were—how can I put this

kindly—two cents short of a dollar, but we all know that strange things have gone on in places like France and Germany over the years. Anyway, I suppose the serpent was restricted to the European union—or the Holy Roman Empire, it's all the same.

Wrong again. It was known from Amherst to Austria, Spain to Schleswig-Holstein. Just think of all those serpent makers, working away like Ontario beavers to fulfill the demand. It was in such wide use, and for so many years (remember that Klose included it in *Das Leben ein Traum* in 1899) that most languages had a word for it.

Like a rude one?

No, just a word that people used when they wanted to talk about the serpent.

Give me a f'rinstance, then.

Right. What about Wales? Isolated country, separated from England by high mountains and from everywhere else by stormy seas. A country where to this day some speak only their own tongue. They had words for serpent. What a wonderful thought. Imagine the proud Celt, standing in silhouette on the cloud-covered peak of Yr Wyddfa, declaiming

*Eryri Wen, Frenhines bur,  
Daearyl Ferch y ne,  
Mewn awyr las ac wybren glir,  
Ac yn dy sanctaidd le.  
Yn fab 'y mynydd hwn' y'm gwnaed.  
I dy ofni er erioed;  
Mae tan yn rhedeg trwy fy ngwaed,  
Pan safwyf wrthdy droed!*

and then bounding down the hillside to play half an hour's long notes on his *soddudgorn*.

That was his serpent, was it?

Not quite. That was his bass horn.

So they even had a word for something as specific as an upright serpent?

Oh yes. And another for the ophicleide, but we'll leave that till next time.

I suppose that explains why Dylan Thomas had Reverend Eli Jenkins saying: "Praise the Lord! We are a musical nation."

Quite right. Indeed, you might suggest serpent influences on *Under Milk Wood* as a suitable dissertation topic for a friend studying English literature.

As it happens, I do have such a friend, but he's currently researching the influence of the ophicleide on Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

[Exeunt, pursued by a euphonium.]

**"Our goal must be to inspire musical ideas with which to communicate."**

# **The Lake Placid International Brass Ensemble Seminar**

**June 22 - July 6, 1997**

**Lake Placid, New York**

**with**

**ROGER BOBO:** tuba (Italy/USA)

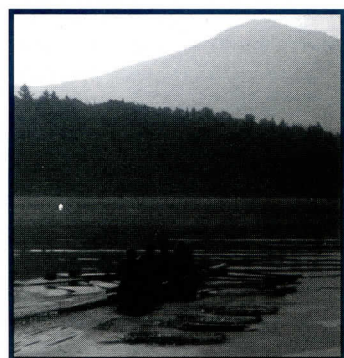
**EDWARD CARROLL:** trumpet (NL/USA)

**ERIC CREES:** trombone (UK)

**ROBERT VAN SICE:** percussion (NL/USA)

**BARRY TUCKWELL:** horn (USA/Australia)

**JOHN WALLACE:** trumpet (UK)



**and special guest ensemble:**

## **THE DESFORD COLLIERY BAND**

**(former European and  
British champions)**

For audition and application information, please contact the Lake Placid Institute, Box 988, Lake Placid, NY 12946 USA.  
Tel/fax: 800-226-0728  
or 518-523-1312  
e-mail: lpinst@northnet.org

**Presented by:  
Lake Placid  
Institute for the  
Arts and Humanities**

**With assistance from:**

**YAMAHA®**

Band & Orchestral Division