

HISTORICAL INSTRUMENT SECTION

Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors

Ophicleide

by Tony George

We've all had the feeling, you know, of finding a 1920's York CC in a junk shop for \$100, or seeing a Wilson euphonium for a ridiculously low price, or switching the TV on to find something actually worth watching. Well, friends, it's finally happened to me.

The British Library has a huge stock of books, journals and music so large that it is still finding items destroyed during the Blitz of London in the Second World War. This temple to the Goddess of Academe has, until recently, been bypassed by the "advances" of computerisation. However, thanks to the efforts of large numbers of data enterers (there must be a collective noun for them), the British Library now has the facility to browse its holdings. This brought me to enter the name "ophicleide" into the system to see what might be trawled up. Amongst the expected solo pieces was an interesting item—for keyed bugle, horn in A-flat, trombone, and ophicleide—by the French composer J. Bellon.

Bellon composed 12 quintets for his friends who taught at the Paris Conservatoire during the first half of the 19th century. The British Library has three of the 12 (Nos. 1, 2, 3). Most interesting of all is an arrangement of the 12th quintet in the series for two cornets a piston, horn (valved), trombone and euphonium; this arrangement dates 1850

➤ Composer Simon Proctor, Kent, England

in contrast to the 1830-35 dates for the composition themselves. This suggests that the quintets were so popular that publishers felt that an arrangement would sell; this begs the questions—why have they never been heard of? That is the question that I can't answer, but these pieces could well be the earliest written for a brass quintet, at least a quintet that is around today. That started me thinking about the instruments that could be used to play the ophicleide part. In his book on instrumentation, Ebenezer Prout, a 19th-century authority on all things musical, has a bit to say on the subject of replacing the ophicleide in the orchestra. In reference to Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Nights' Dream*, he writes: "The effect of the bellowing tones of the ophicleide is admirable; neither the trombone nor the tuba would adequately replace it."

Of course, we all know that the beautiful sound of the ophicleide cannot



be adequately replaced by anything! However, what should we as tubaists who care about music do when confronted by the situation of having to play a part clearly not written for the instrument at hand? Should we: One: Pick up our trusty CC and try our best? Two: Find the correct instrument from our huge collection of instruments stored in the family Winnibago? Three: Choose a compromise based on our judgment of the type of sound that the composer might have wanted? Four: Go and watch *The Simpsons*? Five: None of the above.

Obviously, the choice is completely yours, but if you didn't choose number three, then you might find the rest of this article a trifle tedious. If you chose number four and want to come back to the article later, then please feel free. In the United Kingdom, the tuba player has developed the art of compromise to such a

◀ Susan Bradley, serpentist and tubist, who recently performed the world premiere of Simon Proctor's Tuba Concerto (November 1996) with The Orchestra of the National Chamber Opera of Australia



degree of attainment that only one instrument is considered necessary—by the majority of players, at least—and that is the tuba in E-flat with four compensating valves. This instrument has all the advantages of being able to cope with most music without a huge amount of problems. But what about those players who are able to experiment with instruments. The closest approximation to the sound of the ophicleide that I can come up with is that of the euphonium. I'm pretty sure that the average management would be about as happy to start booking euphonium players to cover tuba parts as Eric Popplethwaite was when he found out that his formula $E=MC^3$ wasn't quite right.

Of course, the way around this is to learn to double on tenor tuba yourselves. Do it; have a go! You might even end up enjoying it. That is the only way that a tuba player will be able to play the parts for the Bellon Quintets when they become available soon(ish). They are just too high and fast to make sound good on even an F tuba, and it would be a shame to give up the chance just for the sake of a little hard work—wouldn't it?

Good practising and may the sound be with you.

The Year of the Operacleide? by Cliff Bevan

As we approach the millennium, ophicleides have played more notes in the London opera season than at any other time during the whole of the 20th century. First, Tom Winthorpe performed on Samuel Hughes's original Royal Italian Opera instrument in the Royal Opera's production of Saint-Saëns's *Samson et Delila* at Covent Garden. It is possible that Hughes took

◀ Doug Yeo, Boston Symphony Orchestra serpentist and bass trombonist, who recently performed Simon Proctor's Serpent Concert (May 1997) with the Boston Pops.

part in the first Covent Garden performance (in concert) on September 25, 1893, but almost certain that no ophicleide would have been heard in the English stage premiere there on April 26, 1909, as Hughes had died some 10 years earlier, and the fashion had turned against keyed brass. More recently, John Elliott played ophicleide in the English National Opera production of Berlioz's *The Damnation of Faust*. Although the first London performance (in the presence of Queen Victoria) took place as early as 1853, 1997 was undoubtedly the first time that the ophicleide had been heard in the English National Opera orchestra as this company presenting opera in English was formed only in 1974. It was also the first time that an ophicleide had been heard in their home at the Coliseum, built in 1904, as the largest variety theatre in London.

A Letter from Ingfart

And now for some organological matters. I have received a letter from Dr. Abor Ingfart that reads as follows:

My Dear Bevan,

I most interested was to see the photography and article by Craig Kridel in the recent issue of *TUBA Journal*. Not previously had I seen a tuba mouthpiece affixed as the terminal point of a gear-stick. I noted that it was a Bach 24AW, which the maker claims: "Produces a timbre of tone like a large organ" (see *Embouchure and Mouthpiece Manual*, Mount Vernon, NY: Vincent Bach Corporation, 1954, p. 74).

A professional player I am not. However, interested in applying academic rigour as I am, I have further been considering the mouthpiece question.

It seems to me that one of the frequent criticisms made by early music scholars of performances by modern-day brass players is that they do not in fact always the instruments play as did the players at the time when the instruments in common use were. I have, for example, heard that some players of the sackbut have mouthpieces that externally look very historical but internally are no different from the mouthpiece they may use with their modern trombone. This adds to their own comfort but perhaps detracts from the purity of their approach as historical

brass players. I believe also that some players of the natural trumpet have holes pierced in their instruments that they cover or uncover to ease their way.

Now, of one thing I am quite certain: this name Bach it is no accident! I your attention direct to the most famous member of the family: Johann Sebastian (b. 1685, d. 1750). He had 20 children, of whom several became musicians. Amongst these were Carl Philipp Emanuel (1714-1788); Johann Christian (1735-1782); Johann Christoph Friedrich (1732-1795) and Wilhelm Friedemann (1710-1784). Often I think, *What a pity that they were not born 200 years later; what joy would they have brought with their tuba quartet!*

I wonder if it was merely coincidence that in the *TUBA Journal* in which the photograph appeared there was also a poem in Welsh? We all know, of course, that in that language the word "bach" means small. But "bach" also indicates how modest was this man, the world's greatest musician, potential father of a tuba quartet and, had he known about its existence (which unfortunately he did not), probably the most prolific composer in history of concertos for serpent and harpsichord.

Compare the modest Bach, "little," with his contemporary, the big thrusting Handel: "Handel," is this not a thing that turns things, that works things, that winds them up? And then there is Gershwin. Not, notice, *Gershlose*, a modest composer, but *Gershwin*, flaunting his ambition to be successful at all costs, and writing a three-measure tuba solo in *An American in Paris*. I could continue, citing, for example, Shostakovich, except that I do not know what his name means, and I cannot lay my hands on a Russian dictionary at the moment.

And now I come to my conclusions. What so far have I avoided making is the link between Johann Sebastian Bach, musician and parent, and Vincent Bach, designer of a mouthpiece suitable for a gear-stick and capable of making a tuba sound like a mighty organ. Did not Johann Sebastian Bach, also active on the organ and father of 20 children, the same name share? Were these not both modest men? The one first Trumpet in the Leipzig Symphony Orchestra and the

other Kapellmeister with St. Thomas's, Boston (I think; I seem to have lent my *Young Observer's Book of Music* to someone who has unfortunately not returned it). This should be a lesson to all of us, whether we drive a truck or whether we play the tuba.

As the travelling salesman said to the hotel receptionist: "I rest my case." (Like John Cage, I always like to end with a joke. Ho-ho.)

Cordially,
Dr. Abor Ingfart

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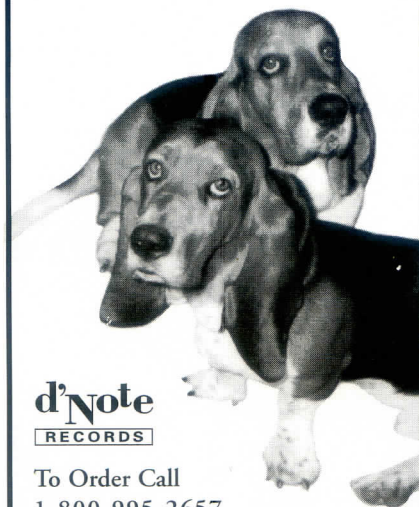
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