

HISTORICAL INSTRUMENT SECTION

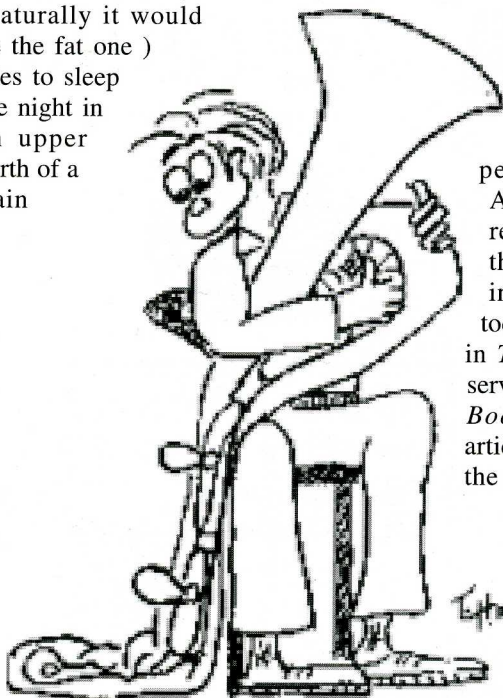
Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors

The Historian's Perspective by Ronald Davis

This could qualify as the most sensitive and controversial conflict within our profession, a subject that raises the fieriest passions within each of us. The debate has raged for over 160 years. There are compelling justifications to support both sides of this issue, yet no resolution seems possible.

Is the tuba funny?

What prompted this question was my going through some archive acquisitions and coming across the manuscript of an article written by Roger Bobo, "Tuba Humor" (*TUBA Journal* Volume 7, No. 2, Fall 1979). Some of his observations: "...Humor and tuba are not a new combination: the humorous paintings of a clown with a tuba; the Laurel and Hardy film where Hardy (naturally it would be the fat one) tries to sleep the night in an upper berth of a train



with a sousaphone; the Um Pa Pa tubist of a German beer garden band and many many other such images that the mind can conjure."

He then described participating in the recent *Tubajubalee* in Cincinnati, Ohio:

"This was a concert of tuba humor at its best and without even a hint of the all-too-frequent movements to organize and improve the tubas' and tubists' lot. It was arranged for the pleasure, fun and entertainment of the audience and the performers and it was completely successful."

Most interesting! Here is Roger Bobo, the serious recitalist, admonishing us to "lighten up." Almost two decades after its publication, his comments elicited enough of a visceral reaction to raise my curiosity and motivate me to examine how the organization has dealt with this most delicate subject.

We are serious artists who have chosen this instrument. One of the founding principles of the Tubists Universal Brotherhood Association is, "... to enhance the image and role of our instruments and performers," (*TUBA* Constitution, Article III Section B) or as Roger restates, "... to organize and improve the tubas' and tubists' lot." From its inception in the Spring of 1973 until today the majority of articles published in *TUBA Journal* have been devoted to serving this goal. Open *The Tuba Source Book* and examine the entries in the article bibliography; in all areas most of the articles documented come from our organization's publication.

Several *Journal* entries have shown how seriously we can take what most outsiders would consider humorous subjects. Take for example the Ohio State tradition of dotting the "I"

(Volume 7, No. 3). What for the football fan is a curious little diversion to pass the time while their team rests is serious business for the individuals involved. In 1977, I met a female tuba major who decided to make Bowling Green State University her choice of college simply because she missed the opportunity to be the first girl to dot the "I" by one year (thanks to Jan Duga). Other topics in this category: *Tubby the Tuba* (Volume 9, No. 4), *The Flight of the Tuba Bee* (Volume 9, No. 2), "The Tuba" at Harvard University (Volume 16, No. 1). We have a rather undecided area in two of our most celebrated institutions, *Octubafest* and *TUBACHRISTMAS*. Are they serious or not? Harvey Phillips has always been an innovator, creating catchy names with instant appeal for the general public. According to the published programs, in their earliest manifestations, *Octubafests* at Indiana University were opportunities for serious recital performances. Other institutions came along later and emphasized the more comedic possibilities. *TUBACHRISTMAS* continues to be very popular, and the *TubaSantas* continue to draw large crowds wherever they perform. Performing as a *TubaSanta* however is a most unusual experience and may not be to everyone's liking. If so, then beware of Christmas gigs where the required dress is "hard black shoes and socks."

Admit it, tubas are funny. Many of us are so focused on the image we are trying to create that we ignore or deny the tuba's more droll possibilities. At the 1992 International Tuba/Euphonium Conference I was having lunch with several of my students, and the topic of conversation

◀ The First Cartoon, "The Deflating Tuba" by Tom Hancock



◀ The Tubist as Artist

➤ Same Subject from the Other View

focused on unusual college classes and majors. Their attitude was rather sardonic when they discussed popular culture, roller coaster designing and riding, comic books, hotel management and billiards. I made the suggestion that as far as Joe Q. Public was concerned, going to college and majoring in tuba sounds just as absurd as any of the topics just mentioned. That quickly damped their spirits; this thought never even occurred to them.

One artist has courageously taken a stand on the issue of humor in tuba, Charles Daellenbach. Several years ago the Canadian Brass made an appearance on the *Today Show*, and Daellenbach announced that he had founded an organization dedicated to putting the humor back into tuba playing. Since then nothing has been officially documented regarding his progress in this area.

At one of his many master classes Roger Bobo posed another philosophical question, "are we tubists because of the way we are, or are we the way we are because we are tubists?" If we were to take a survey and have people describe tuba players in general, what would appear on that list? Hopefully "artists" or "musicians" would be suggested more often than in the past, showing that the organization has been successful in its mission. Other possible descriptions: easy going, laid back, supportive, share a genuine camaraderie. Consider that last one for a moment. Are other instrument

groups as gregarious as we seem to be? Consider the Trumpet Guild handshake, "Hi, I'm So-and-so, and I play better than you!" Our instrument has been blessed with wonderful and memorable personalities, people who enjoy what they are doing and who invite us to share in their delight. Could anyone possibly forget the sight of Rich Matteson playing a masterful helicon solo, and following it by taking the instrument off of his shoulder and vacuuming the stage with it?

Decades ago Gerard Hoffnung delighted us with his whimsical drawings of the instruments of the orchestra, and by far the favored object of his affection was the tuba. The *TUBA Journal* has regularly featured tuba and euphonium cartoons, beginning with Volume 1, No. 1, the "Deflating Tuba." We have been treated to contributions from Tom Hancock, Carole Nowicke, Brady Chieffi, Dietmar Hansen, et al. In the last few years the number of cartoons has tapered off significantly. Another running theme in tuba folklore can be labeled, "stuff it down the bell." Consider first the unavoidable occupational hazard, tuba mutes. I have yet to meet a tubist anywhere who is sincerely enthusiastic about them: big, bulky, expensive, hard to put in, hard to take out, easy to drop, a hassle to transport and a menace to intonation. Yet whenever they are used they create a sensation for the audience. Have you ever put one in and not seen a "look at that!" reaction? A variation on the "stuff it" principle "mute substitutes," objects other than mutes provocatively placed in the bell of the instrument. In this genre babies lead the field, followed by dogs, cats, beer bottles, beer kegs, flowers, plants, mailboxes, wastepaper baskets, oboe players and a vaudeville star ("Little Billy" inside David Dapeer's sousaphone in Volume 16, No. 3)

We don't have to laugh at ourselves; others are doing it for us. Argue all you want, but as far as the general public is concerned, tubas inspire an instinctive wonder! Walk out on stage at any children's concert and hear the amazed



"Ooooh's" and "Ahhhh's." Grease yourself and your instrument through a tight doorway and listen for the old reliable, "don't you wish you played the flute?" Disney Productions has shown benevolence towards tubas in the past, featuring the *Tubadours* at Disneyland and the *Tubafours* at Disney/MGM Studios. But Disney Productions has also displayed the capacity to exploit tubas for the sake of cheap laughs. At Walt Disney World the Muppets have a "3-D Show" that is a must see. In their patriotic finale one of the musicians takes a faulty step and gets his instrument stuck on his head, then he runs amuck, knocking things over and ruining the production. Guess which instrument it is?

We could resign ourselves to the fact that most people do not understand us. I have one of those regular German Band gigs that Roger was talking about, a group called *Polkageist*, specializing in authentic Bavarian "brewglass" music. The fact that I have a DMA in tuba performance and teach at a university carries very little power of persuasion when somebody has a \$20 bet riding on whether that big thing you have is a tuba or a sousaphone (Dang it all! Are you sure that isn't a sousaphone?!?). One night our band took a break and a woman waved me over to her table. "Excuse me. I've been sitting here watching you, and I can't really see that you do all that much. I mean, you play a sound and then you

wait a second and then you play another sound and wait another second. Do you really have to know anything about music to play that thing?" ("Heck, no! Come on up! Give it a try!") For performances during Oktoberfest we dress in authentic lederhosen with all of the accessories, and because of this we put up with constant complaints from our wives about how much they hate it when we leave our stockings hanging up in the bathroom. Awhile back our accordion player gave me an old accordion harness to use on my tuba and it is better than any strap I have ever used, supporting over both shoulders and hooking snugly in the back. The first time I struggled into it a couple of guys at a front table watched and laughed. "He sure is having a lot of trouble hooking it in back. ...Yeah, but I bet he's a natural at unhooking it with one hand."

A clear example of the dual nature tubists work with can be seen with the Lunatic Band from the movie *Chatahoochee* (Volume 16, No. 3). Hemdale Pictures shot this film in South Carolina, and they needed to cast locals for a dance scene inside a mental hospital. When the casting people were brainstorming what a

"heavy mental" band would be like the first instrument to cross their minds... tubas! Refer now to the two photographs. Photo No. 1, an example of the tubist as serious artist: positive, poised, confident. Photo No. 2, the same subject after his Hollywood make-over.

Conclusion. To return to Roger's article: "With our annual October *Octubafests* (the name itself brings on a smile) coming up soon, I cannot help but think how appropriate it might be to set aside the serious thinking and feelings we all have in regard to all things tuba, and to send ourselves and our audience home laughing. Upon careful thought of the tubas' comedy and humor potential it becomes obvious the material is enormous. Why not look into these potentials and improve in the art of laughing at ourselves—we're very funny."

Normally I embrace Roger's advice. I enjoy participating in an activity that is viewed as just a little unusual. Perhaps it is a passive/aggressive way of getting attention.

Are there any situations where it is advisable not to follow Roger's suggestions? I can think of one instance where

we should be absolutely serious, and these comments are directed to those of us who teach at a college or university. We face an occupational hazard called the peer evaluation. These are an unavoidable certainty when the time comes to apply for tenure and promotion. Many of us are the first tuba/euphonium artists/teachers hired at our respective institutions, so our cases may be the first of their kind evaluated by the upper administration and college-wide committees. These committees are made up of senior faculty from other disciplines. They take their responsibilities very seriously, and often their task is difficult and quite humorless. They judge the validity of medical research, mechanical engineering and pro bono law practice. What do they think when they see some of the activities in which we engage? This point needs some serious thought, and many would be interested in the insights of those who have made it past this hurdle. The public appreciates the funny and the unusual; colleges and universities demand serious scholarship. It is very clear that we should be prepared to play the game from both sides.

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