

# HISTORICAL INSTRUMENT SECTION

Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors

## Serpent

May and July 1997 will certainly be months well remembered by serpentists and serpent enthusiasts as three events occurred that represent the further integration of the serpent into the musical mainstream. Michel Godard's performance at the July 1997 International Tuba Euphonium Conference in Riva del Garda, an event described in the last issue of the *TUBA Journal*, certainly represents the serpent's emergence as a true musical instrument as opposed to a mere curiosity. A serpent workshop occurred at a past ITEC, yet Godard's performance is the first full recital at this event. While I have yet to receive a detailed report of the performance, I have witnessed Michel converting the skeptical and unsympathetic while bringing ovations at the 1995 International Historic Brass Society's Symposium. For those interested in obtaining any of Michel's many recordings, a discography may be found on the *Serpent Newsletter* web site: [www.wwa.com/~ocleide](http://www.wwa.com/~ocleide).

In May, Douglas Yeo, bass trombonist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, performed the Proctor *Concerto for Serpent and Orchestra* with the Boston Pops at Symphony Hall. The concerto, written for Alan Lumsden in 1987, and premiered at the 1989 First International Serpent Festival in Columbia, South Carolina (an event celebrating the 399th anniversary of the serpent), elicited great delight from Pops conductor John Williams, members of the orchestra, and the approximately 4,000 audience members at the two evening performances. The *Concerto for Serpent and Orchestra*, a connected three-movement work, is considered the most substantial piece ever written for the instrument and, as described by Yeo, explores "the complete tonal range and technique of the instrument in an accessible style



Photo by Craig Kridel

encompassing jazz, minimalism, and unabashed romanticism." Yeo will perform the *Concerto* in December 1998, with the Boston Classical Orchestra, Harry Ellis Dickson, conductor.

While Yeo and Proctor were preparing for their performance with the Boston Pops, Andrew van der Beek and 16 other serpentists from four continents and six countries met for what has become a biennial weekend gathering, now termed the Lacock Serpentarium, at Andrew's historic home in the village of Lacock, Wiltshire, England. During the weekend, representatives from the BBC Radio 3's "Music Matters" arrived to prepare an edited show. Paul Schmidt provides a delightful account in the most recent *Serpent Newsletter*, and closes the description with the following statement:

▲ Doug Yeo after performing the Proctor *Concerto for Serpent* with the Boston Pops, Symphony Hall, Boston; (l. to r.) Doug Yeo, Simon Proctor, John Williams.

"Well, at least the Lacock event ended at The George (pub) where all good serpentariums should."

In essence, three major events have occurred within three months portraying the serpent to hundreds of viewers and thousands of listeners. Much of this work is attributed, of course, to the wonderful serpent exploits of Godard, Yeo & Proctor, and van der Beek; however, the selfless organizational work of Paul Schmidt, Dick George, and Nigel Nathan

The Mellstock Band: (l. to r.) Dave Townsend, Charles Spicer, Tim Hill, Phil Humphreys

must be noted. These “officers” of the *Serpent Newsletter* provide an important network via conventional newsletter and the Internet for serpent owners, players, and enthusiasts. I encourage all readers of this column to check their website at [www.wwa.com/~ocleide](http://www.wwa.com/~ocleide). [While I’m making such suggestions, visit Doug Yeo’s website at [www.yeodoug.com/](http://www.yeodoug.com/) not only for the informative essays and music, but also to appreciate fine cyberspace design—his award-winning website is quite spectacular.]

Under the “opportunities for the adventuresome serpentist” category: This past summer I attended the Sidmouth International Folk Arts Festival in Devonshire, England, and participated in the West Gallery Workshops led by David Townsend. Dave serves as director of the Mellstock Band, a group considered the finest exponents of this type of music. [*Tenants of the Earth: Music of Rural England* by the Mellstock Band, WGS 281 CD, Wildgoose Studio, 1996, takes



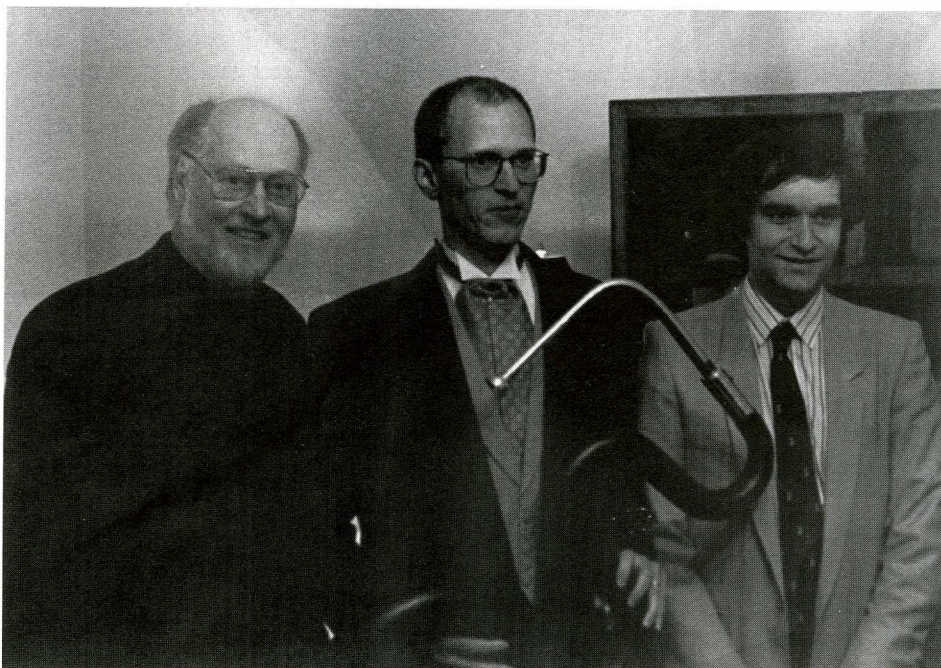
the material to a higher level from their 1986 groundbreaking CD, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, Saydise 360.) During the week I learned much about this “folk” sacred and secular music of towns and villages of 19th century England as well as learning about the West Gallery Music Association, an organization formed in 1990. Also, as I played throughout the week, I noticed more serpent owners—many of whom were sporting their instruments in public for the first time. [I’ve always been curious of the “first notes syndrome”—what does one play

upon first picking up a serpent? I recalled from the 1992 ITEC that most tubists centered the bottom ‘C,’ the fundamental, and proceeded to see how loud this note could be blown. Many trombonists as well as historical brass players would close all fingerholes and attempt to play the harmonic series. And those attending the Sidmouth Festival, primarily woodwind players, generally blew the second harmonic and then attempted to play a diatonic octave—at times seemingly resulting in a chromatic scale of a third.] Aside from my musical sociological observations during the rehearsal breaks, I became charmed by this West Gallery literature and noticed quite clearly the importance of a serpent among a choir of 15-plus along with accompanying clarinets, oboes, horns, and cellos.

I mention the Sidmouth Festival as a way of suggesting a music venue for the lonely serpentist looking for a local performing outlet. Albeit, choristers are an odd lot; however, the West Gallery Music Association brings credibility and a wonderful array of resources—articles, music, and recordings—that could persuade a nearby choir to consider performing such repertoire. For more information, visit the West Gallery Music website: [www.spublishing.co.uk/gmlgm.html](http://www.spublishing.co.uk/gmlgm.html).

Now, let’s turn to Clifford Bevan as he attends to that irritation of all serpentists: the missing B.

▼ John Williams, Douglas Yeo, Simon Proctor



## The Case of the Missing B

by Cliff Bevan

"Thank you, Mrs. Hudson," said Sherlock Holmes, taking from the tray his housekeeper proffered a copy of *The Stock Exchange Gazette* and a trombone straight mute.

"And there's just one other thing, sir," she said. "It's this gentleman who wants to see you...leastways, a sort of gentleman."

Sherlock Holmes looked out of the window, his keen glance piercing the thick fog hanging over Baker Street.

"I do believe he's almost at the door already," said the great detective. "Perhaps you would be kind enough to admit him, Mrs. Hudson."

"Well, Watson," he addressed his trusty friend. "We are indeed privileged to be the recipients of a visit from a short-sighted Australian who plays a deep brass instrument in the theatre pit."

"My goodness, Holmes . . . began the doctor, but he was silenced by a glance from the detective's piercing eyes as their visitor entered the room.

"Hi cobber," he greeted them. "I've been recommended to you as there's something I just cannot find, and I'm told you are the one man in London who may be able to help me."

Sherlock Holmes motioned the man to be seated, but before accepting his invitation their visitor flung wide open his opera cloak in a dramatic gesture.

"My God, it's the Fulham Flasher," cried Watson, reeling.

"Not so!" Holmes exclaimed. "It is merely a player of the serpent."

And there indeed was the curious instrument, hanging before the visitor's chest.

"So you're not needed at the theatre tonight?" asked Holmes.

The serpentist looked startled.

"Ah," said Holmes. "You see, I knew from the moment I saw you that you played in the pit, because you are formally dressed from the waist up, but very casually from the waist down. And your wife also is staying at home tonight?"

Their visitor nodded assent.

"Yes," murmured Holmes in an absent-minded way. "You are so short-sighted

that you put on her shoes rather than your own before leaving home, I see."

"Well, if I haven't done it again!" exclaimed the serpentist, looking down at his feet.

"Now, tell me about your other problem," said Holmes, encouragingly.

Slowly, reluctantly, and with a certain embarrassment the musician replied: "I can't find my B. Believe me, Mr. Holmes, I've tried, I've really tried. I've looked at all the method books, I've practised, I've consulted, but after all that, I simply cannot find my B."

Holmes rose from his chair. "Return here tomorrow at this same time with your serpent, and I may be able to assist," he said.

Repeating his profuse thanks, the musician went out of the door, down the stairs, and was soon lost in the murk of Baker Street.

Watson spoke. "But how did you know he played a deep brass instrument, Holmes?"

"Simple, Watson. That he was a brass instrumentalist anyone could tell from his red nose. But with those rabbit teeth, the only instruments he could play would be those using a large mouthpiece."

"And his nationality?"

"Elementary, my dear friend. Who but an Australian would have a row of corks hanging on strings below the brim of his hat?"

Watson looked at Holmes not for the first time with a glance of admiration bordering on worship.

As would be expected of any musician, the serpentist appeared promptly at Holmes' lodgings in Baker Street the next evening. Watson was also there at Holmes' behest, and the three men were soon ensconced in a hansom cab.

"We're on our way to an apiary," Holmes informed his curious colleagues.

"Oh dear, I never could stand monkeys," said Watson, but no sooner had Holmes reassured his colleague than they had arrived at their destination.

Holmes explained what needed to be done.

"You, sir, I should like to place your fingers over all six holes of your serpent. I have taken the precaution of bringing along the trombone straight mute that you

saw delivered last night," he said to Watson, "and I should like you to hold it firmly if you will."

As the doctor gripped the mute, Holmes fastened one end of a section of electric cable he had brought with him to a large electrical battery and the other end to a glass globe that he inserted into the narrow end of the mute.

"I hope you are not going to tell us our fortunes, Holmes!" observed the doctor jocularly.

"No, indeed," his friend smiled. "This globe is an Edison incandescent electrical lamp, and when I operate the switch, so...

Watson and the serpentist started as a massive five watts of light burst from the lamp.

"Now," said Holmes, "we have to sit and wait."

Within minutes a bee had appeared and was busily circling the light and the mute into which it was inserted.

"You see, Watson, this device is called a *bea-con*, because it cons the bees into thinking it is more interesting than in fact it actually is."

Suddenly he removed his hat and with one deft swoop had imprisoned the bee within it.

"Now," he cried to the Australian, "keep your fingers on the holes while I insert the bee into your serpent."

Having done this, Holmes next instructed the musician to play the note C. This was achieved with no difficulty.

"And next," said Holmes, "keeping your fingers over the holes, blow just a little less hard and hear in your mind the note a semitone lower."

The corks on the serpentist's hat danced with delight as he played a superb B!

Arrived back at Baker Street, Holmes threw a piercing glance in the direction of his faithful companion.

"Yet another superb triumph I believe, eh, Watson?" he observed. He carelessly tossed the trombone straight mute in the doctor's direction.

Next, opening up *The Stock Exchange Gazette*, Holmes removed the copy of *TUBA Journal* that it had enclosed and, the wrinkles around his piercing eyes set in an anticipatory smile, prepared to enjoy an evening of serious reading.