

# HISTORICAL INSTRUMENT SECTION

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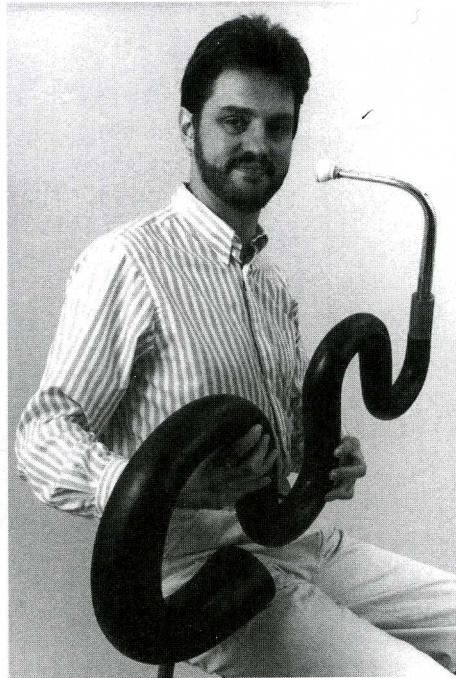
## Stephen Wick and the Informed Approach

by Clifford Bevan

Any orchestral tubist will recognize a program consisting of music by Richard Strauss in the first half and Brahms 4th Symphony in the second half as a good evening's planning by someone in the management. Thanks to this lucky conjunction in a concert at London's Royal Festival Hall back in the spring, I was at last able to catch up with the phenomenally busy Stephen Wick. His stimulating thoughts were more than a substitute for being a Philharmonia trombonist that night, finding ways of not falling off the chair before the first exposed entry following three tacet movements.

Wick might just possibly have become one of those players himself, since his father was London Symphony Orchestra principal trombone, author of one of the best brass-playing handbooks, designer of mouthpieces and mutes, Denis Wick—obviously a strong influence around the home. And, yes, Steve did begin his brass playing as a trombonist before deciding to become a musician and taking up tuba instead around the age of 13. He says there never really was any doubt in his mind that he wanted to become an orchestral tubist once he had experienced the pleasures of providing the foundation to the brass section of the National Youth Orchestra (NYO) of Great Britain. His tutor had once occupied the same NYO chair: John Fletcher, who with satisfying symmetry had himself taken lessons from Denis Wick.

There is another even more striking similarity between Steve Wick and John Fletcher: exceptionally for U.K. players, neither studied at music college. When the matter came up for consideration, Fletch



advised against it and Steve went off instead to read Music at the University of Surrey. Situated in Guilford, some 30 miles south of London, much of Surrey's approach to music was considered revolutionary at the time, with courses in performance and recording techniques taking place alongside more traditional activities. (It needs to be remembered that not many years earlier, it was possible to obtain a music degree in a conveniently large number of British universities without the need to be able actually to play so much as a note on any kind of instrument.)

Signs that Steve wasn't going to run smoothly along pre-ordained career tracks appeared when he took a two-year sabbatical in the midst of his academic work to fill the post of tuba with the Oslo Philharmonic. He ultimately returned to Guildford and simultaneously began freelance work in London. On graduating he found that he was already making a

living in the lucrative recording session scene of the 1970s. He admits to being totally overwhelmed by the talent surrounding him on such recordings as those for *The Man Who Would Be King*. "The orchestra was full of stars," he still enthuses. "People like [hornist] Alan Civil were sitting only yards away!"

Wick's involvement in early music wasn't even something he thought about: it just happened. "There's such a continuing tradition here," he explains, "with people like New College Choir in Oxford who've been singing it since the same music was contemporary, there didn't really seem any need to take positive steps to get involved." He bought LPs of the London Cornett & Sackbut Ensemble just as he bought recordings of other music he enjoyed. He also bought an ophicleide from Tony Bingham having heard the attractive sounds Alan Lumsden could produce from the instrument, and over a period taught himself to play it. In the meantime, the early music movement was rapidly fast-forwarding from J. S. Bach to Mozart to Beethoven to that landmark Berlioz *Symphonie fantastique* recording made by Roger Norrington in 1989.

Wick remembers the day the phone rang, and subsequently the tremendous amount of preparation he and Steve Saunders, playing the other ophicleide part, did before the sessions. "We were all so aware of the high standards elsewhere in the brass," he says. "We just had to work away together, teaching ourselves how to do it. The whole exploit was like an experiment, and we felt like pioneers." But once having done it, the sheer exhilaration of playing early music took over.

He acknowledges the Svengali-like role of Norrington. "He was the guiding light, and he was quite superb. It wasn't just a matter of playing the right notes, but of getting right down into the music through

thé composer and through his understanding of what had brought the music about..."

Steve Wick experienced similar feelings when recording the earlier version of the *Symphonie fantastique* involving serpent in the John Eliot Gardner sessions in the actual Paris Conservatoire hall where Berlioz himself had directed. Here the full significance of Berlioz's decision to use serpent suddenly hit home. Quite apart from the doomy, sepulchral tones of the instrument in the *Dies Irae*, its very presence in the orchestra, including the visual aspect, would have had multifarious mysterious and evocative meanings to contemporary listeners.

His introduction to the serpent had been made through a decision by Crispian Steele-Perkins of London Gabrieli Brass, with whom they both played, to take four natural trumpets along with the quintet's usual instruments on a tour of eastern Europe in the 1970s. Steve used a D serpent along with the D trumpets, and later bought an instrument from Christopher Monk, although he will talk about his playing in only the most modest of terms. However, the way in which he prepares for a performance or recording is something on which he is much more forthcoming. For a start: forget the word "authentic." It's just not possible as there are too many elements out of the performer's control (things like the passage of time, economic conditions and the average life-expectancy). What must always be used is an "informed" approach, even if this may seem to contradict that suggested by authentic considerations.

Although the ophicléide was in use for a relatively short time, its strength lay in the quality of its tone. Steve points out the way in which Berlioz exploits its dryness alongside the similar quality of the bassoons. But while it might well be correct to use the ophicléide to play ophicléide parts in orchestras consisting of early instruments, this is not necessarily the case with orchestras using modern instruments. He quotes a recent production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, including Mendelssohn's complete incidental music. He felt that the most appropriate instrument to use in the circumstances was a small F tuba.

He gives other interesting examples, pointing to the dramatic possibilities of

the cimbasso that are now being regularly exploited by a number of film composers, while the lightening of textures found by using ophicléide in Wagner's Overture to *The Flying Dutchman* (as originally envisaged by the composer) he feels was a true breakthrough. (Though don't forget: this is the man whose contribution to Dixieland is made via the legendary York sousaphone that once belonged to Martin Fry.)

Steve Wick has the interesting task of teaching ophicléide and serpent to tuba students at the Royal Academy of Music, but not, he points out, until tuba tutor Patrick Harrild has made sure they have an absolutely sound tuba technique. Wick then sees his job not so much as encouraging them to buy serpents and ophicléide and wait for the phone to ring, but more as enabling them to experience first hand the effects of using those instruments to play the parts originally composed for them. He hopes that as a result they, like him, will then be able to give committed and musically informed performances, although the actual instruments they use may well never include either ophicléide or serpent.

But now let's consider a case of change in the 19th Century.

## Le Man's Le Mans for a' that by Cliff Bevan

By the time the second edition of M.-N. Bouillet's *Dictionnaire universel d'histoire et de géographie* was published, in 1864, 'Mans (Le)' merited almost four column inches. Bouillet was attentive to its history since Roman times, referred to its cathedral and two beautiful churches, its population of 37,209, and its distance of 212 kilometers from Paris (291 by rail). Although it had suffered during three centuries of wars between France and England, it was now notable for its new episcopal palace, its theatre and its pretty promenades.

As might have been expected, Bouillet overlooked another of the glories of Le Mans: the town band. In 1899, *Notice historique sur la musique municipale du Mans* was published to celebrate the band's centenary. Although its cover clearly shows its country of origin, and its

typography and style of illustration leave the reader in no doubt about its period, it is in many ways an unremarkable book, painstakingly researched and presented with an attention to detail bordering on the boring by George Durand, 'Stenographe du Conseil Municipal du Mans'. Like many another, the band was founded in 1799, at the height of Revolutionary fervor when the idea of music as a people's art from was being strongly promoted by the new forces in power. There had actually been a musical presence in Le Mans since the 17th Century, when the cathedral chapter decided upon an establishment that in 1781 was directed by Jean Francois Lesueur, later to become inspector at the Paris Conservatoire. Two years later the town council was authorized to pay five musicians who had previously worked at the cathedral but were now attached to the Garde Nationale, along with a sixth who was recruited to make the band up to size. This was the beginning of municipal music in Mans.

In 1799, Citizen Pons was appointed director of the 38-strong Band of the Garde National. A membership list drawn up nine years later shows four flutes, two E-flat clarinets, five first clarinets, five second clarinets, three bassoons, three horns, two trumpets, two trombones, one rucchin (an error for "buccin," a trombone with a dragon's head), eight percussion and two serpents: Monsieur Fourniols and Monsieur Vinchon.

Fourniols was to be a tower of strength in the band for many years to come, taking on the additional post of treasurer from 1815. Each player was expected to present a set of parts of the piece of his choice to the band on joining, and Fourniols gave it two, Berton's *Aline* and Lebrun's Overture to *Rossignol*. He demonstrated his loyalty on December 27, 1827, when the band disgraced itself in connection with a procession to the cathedral. Of the 23 members then on the roll, 13 went absent. The mayor, M. de Chateaufort, summoned the director of music, M. Bizeray, to the town hall and demanded to know the reasons why. Present-day members of bands may wish to make a note of the reasons:

Brichet (1st clarinet): Illness of wife.

Had to mind the shop.

Hdlx (oboe): On the way for two months[!].

Comtois (2nd clarinet): Ill with a swelling.

Dureau (2nd clarinet): Sick in the nose, causing breathing difficulties.

Duval (1st horn): Ill with a very heavy cold.

Farm (1st horn): Water on the knee.

Jarossay (trumpet): Instrument not yet arrived from Paris.

Lemercier (trumpet): Recovering from an illness.

Pons (1st bassoon): Sick.

Didier (2nd bassoon): His daughter was sick and he had to stay at home.

Ménard (cymbals): On the way.

Pattier (bonnet chinois [Jingling Johnny]): Told that he could not come.

Housseau (bass drum): After going into the countryside had to rest because of the severe headache to which he is subject.

However serpentist Fourniols was present, alongside him M. Demause playing ophicléide; a mere six years after the instrument was patented.

In 1830 the band consisted of 33 players, including Fourniols and his nephew. The young man did not stay for many years, and in 1840, after over 30 years' devoted service, his uncle retired from his posts of serpentist and treasurer. This may have been the result of the new instrumentation, with *bugle* (flugel horn), valve trumpet, alto ophicléide, two bass ophicléide and bass trumpet shown in the band list that year.

So what is the point of this story of events in an obscure French town during the last century? Why bother to trace the history of a town band and its serpent players, and the subsequent appearance of that new-fangled ophicléide and, a few years later, even newer-fangled flugel horns and valved trumpets?

I think it's a wonderful saga, because it demonstrates two outstandingly important things. First of all, nothing stands still, and if new instruments or new styles of playing appear then, if they are viable, they are going to be accepted, even if it means that the likes of Monsieur Fourniols eventually give up their serpents, hand over their office as

treasurer, and retire. But even more importantly, it demonstrates that we are all part of a truly universal activity. Who, reading this, has not belonged to a band where members have presented sick notes at an engagement rather than appear themselves, and who has not been part of continuing arguments and party to the changes within the band?

The message is: keep it up, for without it, civilization, and the whole world, will simply wither and fade away...and sometimes, when you've got a split lip and you can't play either pedal notes or get decent sound above the stave, don't you feel that it already has, Monsieur Fourniols?

## The Ophicléide: (A) Historical Exchange by Anthony George

Twickenham 1859

My Dear Hughes,

It was splendid to see you at the sitting for the Royal Military School of Music (1) - 'twas a pity that we had to spend such a long time sitting so still, but at least we were not standing. Forgive me for writing to your home in Middlesex rather than speaking to you at the Royal Italian Opera next month, but I simply must beg your permission to compose a piece for you, especially as you are enjoying such fame with the success of

the Jullien tour (2) and your recent appearances with the Cyfarthfa band (3).

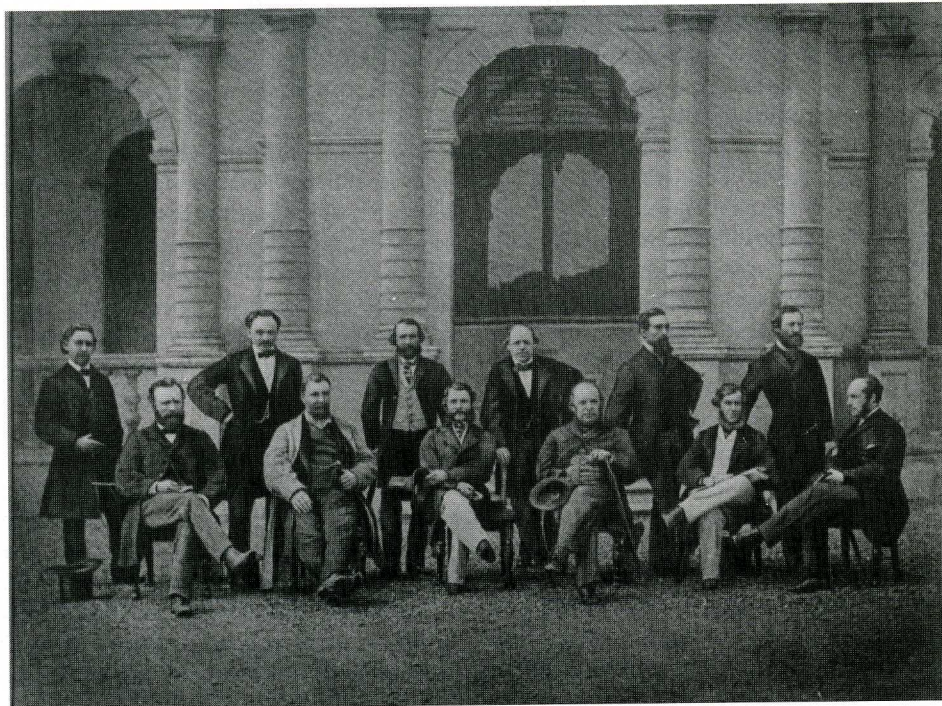
I was most affected by the recent performances of Verdi's *Attila* at the Opera and am fancied to write a Fantasia upon it for you to perform at your convenience. Of course I shall make it as difficult as I can (much more so than if I were to play it), perhaps it might help to fill in a few idle minutes when not spending time with your delightful family! Although confident of your considerable prowess I am confident that this piece will make even the famous Hughes 12th key blister with heat at the speed I shall require it to move. I look forward to a reply at your earliest convenience, yours,

Alfred Phasey

Middlesex 1860

My Dear Phasey,

I must apologize for being so slow in replying to your letter. Prospere was kind enough to deputize for me at the Opera as I am becoming ever more engaged to adjudicate at brass band contests, which I must confess are tolerably interesting when the contesting bands are allowed to choose their own piece, but are intensely dull when one is forced to hear the same wretched piece 15 or 20 times. With regards to the 12th key that you mention, the invention of this is not mine but that of Messrs. Courtoise and Prospere (4), but the venting hole in the front of the bell



➤ Royal Military School of Music 1857 (Hughes and Phasey are the first two seated on the left).