

Craig Kridel, Editor

Museums

By Arnold Myers

Have you ever walked round a museum and been surprised at the apparent amazing ignorance of the curators, or whoever wrote the showcase labels? Have you too seen a trombone labelled "trumpet" or an alto horn labelled "trombone?" My experience with label captions has been similar to that with newspapers and the media: the stories seem plausible when they're about unfamiliar topics, but when you know something well, you can see that the reports about it are full of errors. Over my years of studying musical instruments and visiting museums, I have frequently found the labels to be wrong or misleading, particularly with instrument names and statements of what they were commonly used for.

Well, please don't be too hard on the poor curators. Many have to look after very varied collections, so diverse that no one person could be an expert in all the fields represented, and certainly not have as much subject knowledge as a specialist visitor. But even for scholars, giving names to objects is not at all easy!

Instrument names can range from words used by a specific person for a single object to names which are broad-brush classifications – and there is rarely room on a label for any indication of the original significance of the name. In a catalogue, the author has space to explain terminology, but a label has to be concise and readily understood. Unfortunately, in many cases that also means readily misunderstood.

Labelling is the principal means of communication for museums after the objects themselves. I make no claim to be free from blame: when I took responsibility for the museum I now look after, there were no labels – all the labelling has been my own work and I find mistakes there, too! Here are some examples of the problems, drawn from my own museum,

but there will be similar cases everywhere.

Figure 1 shows a large brasswind instrument, probably not totally unfamiliar to readers of this journal. It was made by Besson & Co in London and dates from 1901 or just before. This was a very successful model, made in large numbers over

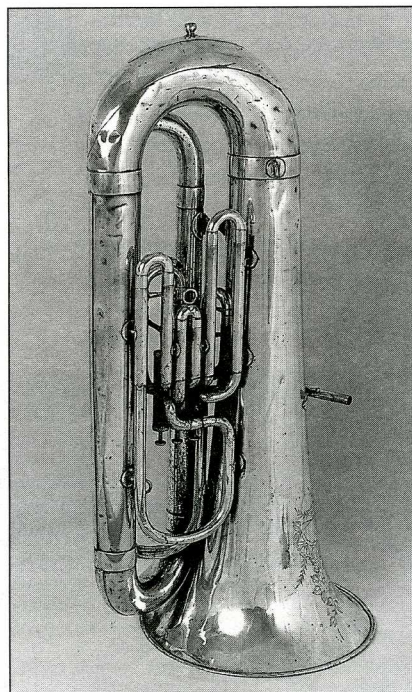


Figure 1.
Edinburgh University Collection of Historic Musical Instruments, item No. 2857. Nominal pitch: 18-ft B^b. Made by Besson and Co., London, 1901 or just before.

many years and sold all over the British Empire. From its inscription we know that this particular instrument was presented to a brass band in a small town in Yorkshire in 1912, and it was therefore probably played in that band. How is this to be named on a label in a Museum?

According to the classification most frequently used by music museums (Hornbostel-Sachs), it is a kind of TRUMPET, or more specifically a VALVE BUGLE. Scientifically, it could be a LIP-VIBRATED AEROPHONE. Its makers called it "BB^b MONSTER BOMBARDON" as can be seen from a Besson trade catalogue of the period – no-one else called it this, however. To a player or

bandmaster it will have been "BB^b BASS" or just "DOUBLE B," the terms used throughout the brass band movement. The scoring of most of the pieces in the repertoire will have been for "B^b BASS." The original name of this type of instrument was "CONTRABASS SAXHORN": it is a direct descendant of Adolphe Sax's larger saxhorns. The obvious choice for a museum might be appear to be "TUBA" or "TUBA in 18-ft B^b", but on what flimsy grounds since it has never been called this by any of its owners.

It can be seen that "TUBA" would actually be a classification, not a historical

name used by the instrument's maker or players. If we were to unpack our message in calling it "TUBA," we would be saying that there is a class of instruments called tubas, of which this is an example.

None of these names is the single correct one, and different names might be appropriate in different museums, or even in different displays in the same

museum. In the acoustics section of a science museum, "VALVED BUGLE; Europe, circa 1900" might be appropriate. In a brass exhibition "BB^b BASS; Besson & Co, London, 1901 or just before" would be a good choice. But labelling it "TUBA" is a bit dodgy!

Let's look at a further example taking its overall shape or "wrap" from the tuba family, the imposing instrument in **Figure 2**. This is an example of a model of valve trombone developed for military bands in Eastern Europe, and typically used only in German-speaking countries. This particular instrument, made in Prague around 1880, was, however, used for its

playing life in the private band of the Marquis Adhemar de Foucault in France. So, should a museum call it by its original name "ARMEEPOSAUNE" or translate it into its own language, in our case as "MILITARY TROMBONE"? Or surmise that this particular instrument was in its active life mostly called by the French name "TROMBONE"?

If in an English-speaking land we called it simply "VALVE TROMBONE" this is only placing it in a class of instruments called "TROMBONE," disregarding its history. It may not look like a typical trombone, and many visitors will be surprised to see this label, but if it were used to play trombone parts (as its maker intended) it would be capable of giving the desired effect and be recognisable to the player by its response and to an audience by its sound as a trombone.

Figure 3 shows a more difficult example. This is pitched in 6-ft F and was made by Hawkes & Son in London around 1910. This instrument is hardly a recognisable type, and does not have a generally accepted name. In one catalogue a similar instrument has been called a "BUGLE ALTO"; in its makers catalogue something looking like this is a "CAVALRY MODEL TENOR SAXHORN." We might decide that it belongs to that large and hardly differentiated group of instrument models, intermediate between horns and trumpets, intermediate between "cylindrical" and "conical," which includes clavicorns, saxhorns, saxotrombas, koenig horns, antoniophones, sonorophones, orpheons, and many others. This is fertile ground for mistaken museum labels.

If we cannot find a good name, what do we call it? Writers in the past such as Adam Carse or Nicholas Bessaraboff, struggling with classifying brass instruments, have relied on the terms "cylindrical bore" and "conical bore," yet give no rigorous definition of these terms (well, actually no

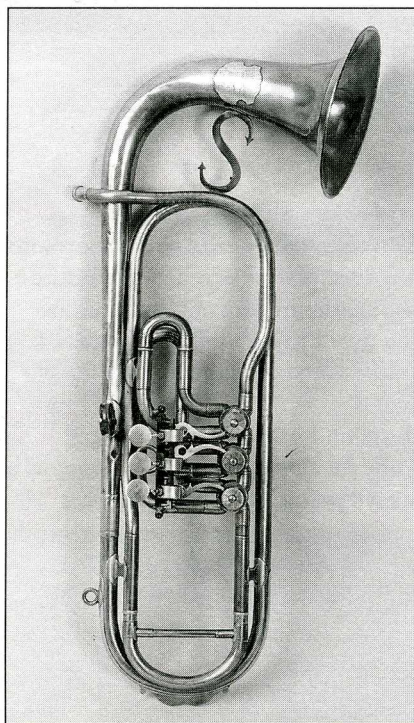


Figure 2.
Edinburgh University Collection of Historic Musical Instruments, item No. 3472. Nominal pitch: 9-ft B^b. Made by K. Schamal, Prague, circa 1880.

definition at all!). Suppose a museum is donated an object, such as the Hawkes instrument. If it cannot be played (either because of museum policy, lack of mouthpiece, or because it leaks), how do we know what it is? Some we can recognise from overall appearance, but this can be misleading.

Research I have been working on over the last 7 years has been aimed at developing a taxonomy of brasswinds based on acoustics—that is, the physical factors most likely to determine the response to the player and the timbre as

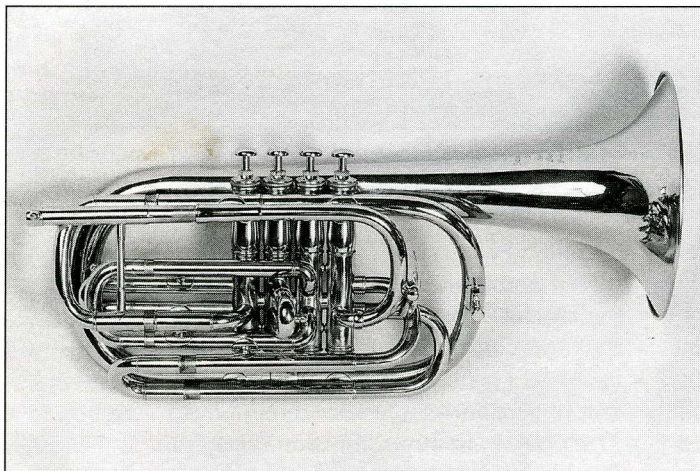


Figure 3.
Edinburgh University Collection of Historic Musical Instruments, item No. 3484. Nominal pitch: 6-ft F. Made by Hawkes & Son, London, circa 1910.

perceived by an audience. This is, of course, only one of many possible ways of classifying musical instruments. I had hoped to discover some kind of hidden code relating simple measurements to generally recognised characteristics. Unfortunately I was unable to find such a "natural" classification, and I was only able to suggest taxonomic parameters that

require quite detailed measurements and subsequent computation.

To place the whole population of brasswinds in distinct classes I had to replace vague terms like "cylindrical bore" and "conical bore" by several (at least six) measurables. Only by using a system with this number of parameters do we

get sufficient resolution to separate classes of instrument which the majority of makers and players would recognise as being distinct classes. With such technical subtleties added to historical complexities, even the most academic museums face problems writing labels.

Over the last year, museum developments have not been so much in the galleries as in cyberspace. The Musée de la Musique in Paris is augmenting its website with literally thousands of pictures, a most impressive and ambitious project which is still under way. Browse at <http://www.cite-musique.fr/> and look for "SAXHORN" rather than "TUBA."

The Leipzig University Musikinstrumentenmuseum has a beautifully designed virtual visit with pictures and sounds at <http://www.unileipzig.de/museum/musik/> where searching for "TUBA" leads you to the serpents.

Edinburgh University has added a sample of sound files to its website, including the unique original contrabass serpent in 16-ft C (circa 1840) introduced and played by Andrew van der Beek, at <http://www.music.ed.ac.uk/euchmi/>