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The Living Role of Historical Instruments

By Arnold Myers

What use are museum instruments? Not long ago just about anyone who had a tuba or other large instrument which was no longer capable of fulfilling its function would scrap it, re-build it, or maybe just put it on one side. Putting it on one side would be more likely if it were a bit of a curiosity such as a member of the serpent family. Now these "old instruments" are regarded as "historic instruments" and find their place in many museums.

They are used in displays to help tell the story of the development of instruments, or of the bands and orchestras they were used in.

But is this all? In a showcase they can illustrate a history. They can also be appreciated as sculpture. Adolphe Sax in particular made a large contribution to the invention of brass instruments with decidedly sculptural qualities. But of course they are primarily MUSICAL

instruments, tools. We can learn much from playing historic instruments or copies of old instruments. And the most obvious use of playing old models of instruments is in historical performance.

The practice of playing serpent parts and ophicleide parts on modern tubas is still prevalent, though declining as it is realized how completely different in sound these instruments are. Even parts marked "cimbasso" are more likely to be



THE EARLY VICTORIAN BRASS BAND

All-brass bands became popular in Britain in the 1830s and 1840s. At this time, the range of valved instruments used in present day brass bands had not been fully introduced, and the first bands relied largely on keyed bugles, ophicleides and serpents, together with trombones and cornepeans. The Early Victorian Brass Band uses these instruments to re-create the sound of a village brass band of 1845-50.

The instrumentation of the EVBB was determined after study of many museum instruments, documented accounts of early bands, corroborated by practical experimentation to achieve a good balance. The line-up is: 2 Keyed bugles; 2 Cornepeans; Valved french horn in F; Tenor saxhorn in F; Alto, tenor, bass slide trombones in E-flat, B-flat and G; Ophicleide; Serpent; Side drum; Bass drum.

The EVBB was formed in 1983. The period instruments all belong to members of the Band, some of them are normally part of the substantial collection of brass band instruments at Edinburgh University. The low brass players in this picture (taken in Bradford, Yorkshire in 1989) are: Bass trombone in G – Arnold Myers, Ophicleide – John Webb, Serpent – Murray Campbell.

THE WALLACE COLLECTION

John Wallace's London-based brass group equipped itself with original instruments corresponding in tonal characteristics to the instruments of the famous Cyfarthfa Band of South Wales for recording session of the original repertoire of this band. The recording, conducted by Simon Wright, was published by Nimbus Records (NI5470) under the title "The Origin of the Species" in 1996.

Most of the research into the fascinating history of the Cyfarthfa Band which formed the basis of this admirable project was



carried out by Trevor Herbert, and has been published in various journals over the last ten years. The recording sessions were described by John Wallace in *Historic Brass Society Newsletter* Number 8 (1995) pp.58-60. The full line-up of the band is: D-flat Primo Bugle, D-flat Repiano Bugle, B-flat Keyed Bugle, B-flat Keyed Bugle, Solo A-flat Cornet, 1st A-flat Cornet, 2nd A-flat Cornet, E-flat/D-flat Saxhorn 1, E-flat/D-flat Saxhorn 2, Solo Ophicleide, 1st Ophicleide, Baritone, Euphonium, Tenor Trombone 1, Tenor Trombone 2, Bass Trombone in G, Bombardon, F Bass, B-flat bass, Percussion.

The Wallace Collection uses these instruments to re-create the sound of a professional brass band of 1850-1870. Many of the original Cyfarthfa Band instruments survive in the Cyfarthfa Castle Museum, Merthry Tydfil; these museum instruments were not used in the

recording, but careful study of the original instruments guided the selection of the instruments used, which were drawn from private collections. The 'bass end' is nearly half of the band, a balance reflected in the resulting rich sonority! The low brass players are: Ophicleides – Stephen Wick and Tony George (shown in this picture), Euphonium – Andrew Fawbert, Bass Trombone in G – Ronald Bryans, Bombardon – Robin Haggart, F Bass – Phil Parker, B-flat bass – Martin Douglas.

played on a contrabass trombone (this can be misguided authenticity if the parts were really meant for bass horn). It is still rare to find early models of tuba used for early tuba parts, although it is obvious that the instrument has developed.

But, what is an authentic performance? Let us imagine an ideal historical performance of a Berlioz overture or a Bruckner symphony. The parts are carefully edited; the players use the right instruments and (by a miracle) the right mouthpieces; they are immersed in the style of the period and place of the original and use informed performance practices; we have appropriate room acoustics and even the right social occasion. It is all as the composer expected or would have liked or heard at the first performance (or some such criterion). Wonderful! What would we have achieved (apart from the impossible)? It might or might not be what would give the most pleasure to the biggest audience.

It almost certainly would not be the way the performers could best earn a living. It would, however, be a tremendous piece of research, very educational - a laboratory experiment deserving research funding. It would also provide an experience of sonorities which practical musicians could draw on, and make better compromises in the real world.

Compromises, however, do have to be made. If audiences prefer old music played on modern instruments, there is nothing wrong with that! Arrangements have a long tradition in music. They have been the staple diet of brass bands from the beginning. A Gabrieli canzona played by a modern brass group with tuba is just as much an arrangement as the same canzona played on kazoos. In many cases, however, the use of appropriate instruments and performance practices has revealed new (to us) beauty in old music, but anyway is worth the trouble for the information

gained alone.

Compromises inevitably have to be made in practice even when aiming at historical performance, but it is obviously better to make the compromises with as full knowledge of the facts as possible. This is where museum instruments provide valuable evidence, just as much when they are studied and copied as when they are taken out and played. Not that an old instrument has any authority of its own. The authority comes from organological research, which assembles the evidence that such-and-such an ophicleide is "right for Berlioz" or such-and-such a tuba is the kind used in Austria when Bruckner was mastering the orchestral palette. Although organology can only suggest that an instrument model is possibly (at best probably) what a composer had in mind, the suggestion is the irreplaceable contribution of museum instruments to music making.