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Historical Instrument Section

The One That Got Away

By Clifford Bevan

Around the middle of the nineteenth century the ophicleide was one of the most familiar instruments in a huge sector of western Europe, including France, Spain, Italy, England and Ireland, as well as in the eastern United States, where it becomes increasingly evident that even the smallest settlement in New England seemed to have had a resident ophicleide-player. In 1836, there were almost sixty musicians who considered themselves to be professional ophicleidists in Paris alone. A handful played in opera or concert orchestras, more than twenty of them taught ophicleide, others specialized in the lighter music required at balls and soirees, yet more were members of bands of the Garde Nationale. Only three of these players admitted to playing the alto ophicleide, or *quinticlave*, and one of these doubled on valved horn.

The quinticlave was one of the four instruments named in Halary's original patent of 24 March 1821 (see Fig. 1). Examples of these had been submitted to the Académie royal des beaux-arts and l'Athéné des Arts in 1817 for their comments, which were reprinted in the patent specification. The first, the *clavitube*, was no more than a copy of Halary's keyed bugle, the instrument which Halary had been asked to copy in 1815 for use by the Russian army. The *ophicléide* became the most important of the four, while the *clairon métallique*, as a brass clarinet, is not relevant to the prime interests of *TUBA Journal* readers.

The quinticlave was a small ophicleide pitched in E flat (alternatively F), as the valved alto or tenor horn was to be. It had eight keys, giving it full chromaticism over three octaves and more, and Halary described its mouthpiece as being similar to that of the horn or trumpet. Its sound was claimed to be midway between that of the human voice and the bassoon, though stronger than that of the bassoon.

In comparison with the bass ophicleide, which had a useful range from the B or A below the bass stave upwards, the quinticlave was not a successful instrument. No orchestral parts for it are known, though it did find a place in bands. Three Parisian Garde nationale bands included alto ophicleides and the famous conductor Rivière stated that in his youth he had played one in a band alongside eight bass ophicleides. The scarcity of existing examples of the instrument is testimony to its rarity, however. After the invention of the clavicor in 1838, providing a valved instrument of identical pitch, it fell rapidly out of use, and the clavicor itself was replaced by the alto saxhorn during the following decade.

What was it about the quinticlave that led to its having been largely ignored?

One obvious reason lies in its pitch. As one whose brass-playing experience began on E flat horn, found in a section of three in British brass bands and also present in European bands generally, I can state with some conviction that association with this instrument tends to lead to feelings of inferiority. Although alto parts are necessary, they are rarely of outstanding musical interest, especially in comparison with soprano or bass parts. (A tendency towards exuberance sometimes bordering on arrogance allows those providing the tenor line to cope more than happily with their lot.) The E flat horn is the one with strange names in European bands: *genis* in Italy and *onnoven* (a name only recently explained by Beryl Kenyon de Pascual) in Spain.

Thus, reason number one for the lack of interest in the quinticlave is simply lack of interest. But interest can be generated, or even sparked-off, given the right conditions. Was this just a duff instrument, a non-starter in the great world of lovely noises that we inhabit?

Recently I was given by Arnold Myers, Curator of the Edinburgh University Collection of Musical Instruments, the opportunity to play on a quinticlave from the collection, a nicely-made instrument by Gautrot âiné, Paris dating from around 1844 and thus probably one of the last to be made. One of the problems mentioned by nineteenth-century authorities soon became evident: less-than-perfect intonation. However, any ophicleidist (and most tubists) know that you need to get to know your instrument before you can decide on the best fingering, and all brass players know that no instrument is perfectly in tune with itself. Playing the quinticlave, so long as the ear, embouchure and diaphragm were kept on constant alert intonation was not a real problem. Perhaps it was the actual sound of the instrument that told against it?

The timbre was actually the greatest

Extrait des rapports faits à l'Institut de France, Académie royale des beaux-arts, et à l'Athénée des Arts, en 1817, sur les instrumens de M. Halary.

Ces instrumens sont ainsi classés :

1°. Le *clavitube*, ou trompette à clef ;
2°. Le *quinticlave*, ou la quinte à clef ;
3°. L'*ophicléide*, ou le serpent à clef ;
4°. Le *clairon métallique*, ou la clarinette en cuivre.

Figure 1
The four instruments covered by Halary's French Patent of 1821.

surprise. It was a bit "toy," rather miniature, perhaps inevitably, coming from a dwarf ophicleide. As the blowing characteristics of the instrument became more familiar, the quinticlave began to approach the personality of that other much better-known E flat instrument, the E flat clarinet. It grew mischievous like the E flat clarinet in a Richard Strauss symphonic poem;it became elf-like, agile and cheeky. This was curious, since this particular clarinet is pitched a fourth above the B flat clarinets and normally contributes a part on top of the band where it is always audible, whereas the alto ophicleide's sound places it obscurely in the middle of things, where it is apt to get lost.

Wider recognition for the quinticlave might have been achieved. In 1834, François Fétis, the Belgian composer and musicologist, considered the whole matter of ophicleides and their relationship to the keyed bugle in bands. Having recommended the bugle as an instrument better able to cope with the weaker notes of the clarinet, he suggested that keyed bugles, along with alto and bass ophicleides, formed a "complete system of instruments of the same genre with matching sonorities." For this reason he recommended the construction of a tenor ophicleide since: "As for the use of the bass ophicleide to play tenor parts, this is barbarous; for the big tone of the instrument is not suitable for this intermediate part; the volume of the tube must be proportionate to the character of the voice."

Fewer than ten years later the euphonium was invented, an instrument destined to give even more prominence to the tenor part. Alas, poor Fétis. From a consideration of the one that got away, we have arrived at the one that was never made.

Editor's note: *For the interest of U.S. readers or travelers, an excellent example of the quinticlave can be seen in the Essig Collection of Musical Instruments, which is housed in the University Library at Central Missouri State University in Warrensburg, Missouri.*

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