

Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors

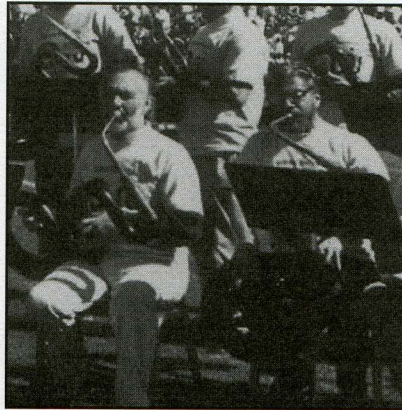
Serpent Exaltations: pedagogical advice from past and present

By Craig Kridel and Dick Fuller

During a recent visit with Dick Fuller, a member of the American Serpent Players, we examined the many serpent treatises of the early 19th century and discussed how the insights from these period documents by Froelich, Hardy, Metoyen, and others as well as the advice from our contemporary serpent professors, Bevan, Fournet, Godard, Lumsden, and Yeo, have so greatly helped us learn to play the instrument. We concluded that while the life of the serpentist can be rather lonely, learning to play the serpent should not be a solitary activity. For this year's serpent dispatches, we thought a collage of instructional excerpts—advice from others—would interest those who are presently attempting “to tame the beast” and serve as a reminder that they are not alone.

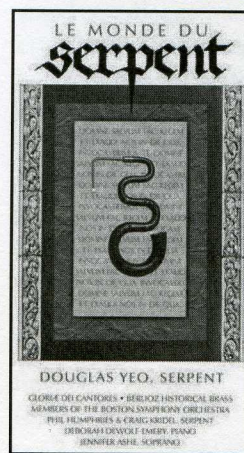
From a wide array of topics we turned to those comments that underscore the dignity of the serpent while also offering specific insights for playing. We begin with selections from Froelich and Hardy. Franz Joseph Froelich (1780–1862), teacher, theorist, and aesthete, was involved in establishing the Akademisches Institut, one of the first state-supported music schools in Germany. His serpent manuscript comes from a larger pedagogical treatise discussing many orchestral instruments. Relatively little is known of Alexandre Hardy (fl. 1793–1815), who served as professor of bassoon and serpent at the Paris Conservatoire from its founding until 1800. His method was intended more for church serpentists than for the typical Paris Conservatoire bandsmen and includes many of the finest duets written for the instrument.

Today's serpent teachers have not gone unnoticed in our overview. We include an excerpt from the preface of Bernard Fournet's *Methode de Serpent*. Fournet, currently professor of serpent at the Conservatoire de



Alan Lumsden and Dick Fuller,
serpentists

Toulouse and a member of the newly formed Le Trio de Serpent de Toulouse, published this 217 page treatise in 2003 (available from the author). An English translation is in preparation; for more information, visit The Serpent Website, overseen by Paul Schmidt. [visit www.serpentwebsite.com] We contacted



two other modern-day virtuosi and sought their advice for the serpent neophyte. Both Alan Lumsden and Douglas Yeo have contributed informal comments to assist with one's initial serpent experience. Lumsden, a founding member of the London

Serpent Trio and member of the legendary David Munrow (early music) Ensemble, conducted classes at the 1987, 1989, and 1990 serpent gatherings. Yeo is bass trombonist, ophicleidist, and serpentist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and has recently released the CD recording *Le*

Monde du Serpent. [visit www.yeodoug.com]

For those who enjoy the “archival chase” and wish to see treatises in their unabridged form, the Conservatoire Imperiale de Musique's *Methode de serpent* (Paris, 1814) has been republished by Minkoff Reprint, and J. B. Metoyen's *Methode de serpent* (Paris, 1792–5), edited by Benny Sluchin, will be released soon. All of the historical serpent treatises as well as many other related publications are discussed in Clifford Bevan's *The Tuba Family*, 2nd edition. [visit www.berliozhistoricalbrass.org/piccolo.htm]

We hope our “pedagogical collage” will interest not only the aspiring player but also those who are considering taking up the serpent. New chamber music editions with designated serpent parts are being released regularly, and there are now many possibilities for the low brass player/serpent enthusiast who wishes to explore the pre-1830s sacred, orchestral, and band repertoire.

from *Serpent schule* by Franz Joseph Froelich

“For the pupil who wishes to specialise in this instrument it would be good to study the instructions on essential and optional ornamentation given in the singing tutor and to apply them to his instrument. That is important, as people still live under the false assumption that there is less to the interpretation of a bass part than there is to other parts, hence the extraordinary and almost total neglect of this matter among students. If such people knew how much a good bass player, string or wind, can influence a piece of music, how he is in a position to lend it a kind of dignity and strength, how essential he is particularly in works where the bass is not a drumbeat but part of the musical thought woven and developed throughout the

orchestra, they would give more careful instruction to those pupils who dedicate themselves to studying bass instruments.

The advice given in discussion about several other instruments is applicable here too: to adapt suitable arias and songs from operas or other vocal music for the instrument (obviously bass arias in this case) and to have the text at hand so that the whole sequence of emotions can be appreciated. In this way the serpent player will certainly be helped towards fluent cantabile playing and towards developing a full round tone.”

(Bonn, Germany, c. 1811)

Translated by
Christopher Monk, England

from *Methode de serpent*
by Alexandre Hardy

6th article: About sounds. “We invited those who want to play the Serpent well to render their sounds absolutely equal, which is rather difficult on this instrument where the open sounds are naturally more resonant. One will admit with us that in a bass, in an aria or even in a piece of plain-chant, that it is very disagreeable to hear some Re, some La of a major strength, and the other sounds of an unbearable weakness.

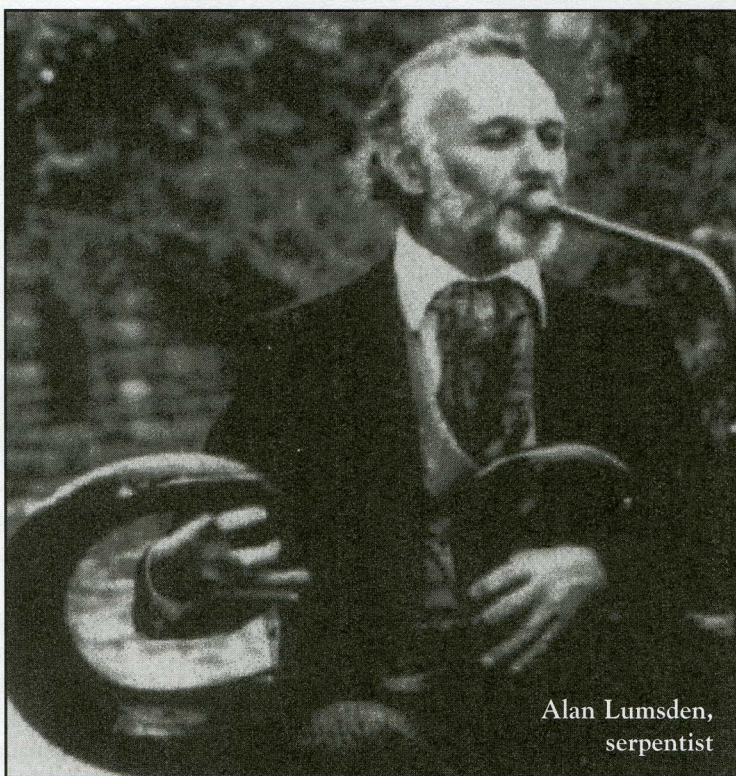
9th article: About transposition. “In order to know the transpositions well, one must practice on all the scales, major as well as minor, particularly when one intends on doing plain-chant. One of the principal functions of the serpentist is to give the pitch to the cantors, he must avoid giving the tone too high or too low.”

(Paris, France, c. 1815)

Translated by Holly Grant
Universite de Haute-Alsace, France

from *Methode de serpent* by Bernard
Fourtet

From the Preface: “This method is intended above all to be practical and requires one to be guided by one’s feeling and intuition, one’s sensations. Serpent playing calls for reflection but also requires plain old practicing, more than any musicological or historical research. My method is based on experience and built on clues



Alan Lumsden,
serpentist

and examples taken from long and varied practice of the instrument, which I have brought together and organised in a intuitive fashion. . . .

Why take on the challenge of learning the serpent? Simply because with an instrument of this sort, one cannot generalise nor are there any absolutes. The techniques of construction have changed very little since the 16th century. Yet, even with mass-produced instruments like those of the 19th century, experience has shown that no two serpents are alike in their sound, their qualities, or even their fingerings The sounds that come from a serpent depend much more on the individual player than as is the case with other instruments.

Does all this sound discouraging? On the contrary, learning the serpent is an enthralling adventure! No, the “tricky beast” doesn’t let itself be mastered too easily. But it’s a great pleasure to learn to tame it . . . [and] some days it practically plays itself Courage; great pleasures will reward your efforts.”

(Toulouse, France, 2003)

Reflection on playing the serpent
by Alan Lumsden

1. Make sure that your instrument is not more difficult than need be. The inexperienced player finds it difficult to know how

much of the poor tone and intonation is the fault of the player and how much the fault of the particular instrument. It’s bound to be a bit of both, but it takes an experienced player to know whether an instrument can be tamed. Sometimes a change of mouthpiece or crook can make a significant improvement, particularly if you are playing at a pitch lower than that at which the instrument was meant to play.

2. Many years ago I remember playing at an orchestral concert in which the principal flute player impressed me enormously, not by his playing in the concert, superb though that was, but by his warm-up routine beforehand. While the rest of us were playing snippets from our party pieces in an exhibitionist way, this player stood well away in a corner

playing some of the longest notes I have ever heard. Each note started pianissimo and grew in volume over twenty or more seconds and then with consummate control of pitch and quality of sound took as long again to fade to a perfect pianissimo. Oblivious to the noise around him, he then repeated the process on the note above, then the note below and so on. The player’s name was James Galway. I could never aspire to that degree of dedication, but it was an object lesson which applies to all wind instruments and perhaps to the serpent more than most. As one gets louder, the aperture between the lips needs to get bigger while retaining the same basic shape, and the reverse of the process is even more challenging. It can be helpful to have a pitch meter to ensure that the pitch is centred, especially on notes such as the D and E in the bottom and second octaves. It can also be good to use a metronome to ensure that you don’t get faster! To help with production, I would suggest four slow beats, during which the mouthpiece is taken away from the lips, from each note to the next. This can be done in a diatonic sequence—CBDAEG, etc.,—or a chromatic one—CBC-sharp B-flatDA, etc. The aim is to listen critically; it is of no use doing such a warm-up in a mechanical fashion.

3. In some ways the serpent is like the natural horn, with good (i.e., open notes) and weaker (i.e., stopped notes). The art of making a good cantabile line lies in making it impossible for the listener to hear any difference between the “good” and “bad” notes. After a while this becomes instinctive. But playing cantabile lines, whether plainchant or folksongs, and trying to emulate the human voice is in many ways what the serpent is all about.

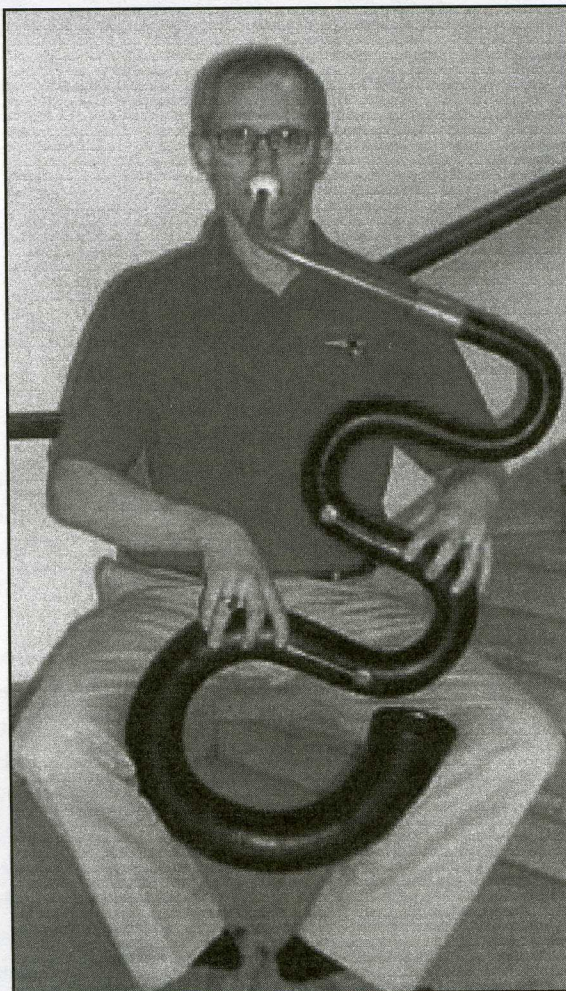
4. To achieve a vocal type of production requires a softer tonguing technique than many players use, which sounds as if the vocal model started each note with a strong consonant. For notes moving in a step-like manner, a gentle “d” attack is best. Anything more forward should be reserved for repetitions of the same pitch or for larger intervals. For fast running passages the tongued legato described in Renaissance and baroque treatises works quite well on the serpent. For the inexperienced, the form “did’ll did’ll” is probably the easiest, or you might try the word “territory” repeated over and over again. The effect is very similar to the doodle tongue of jazz musicians and is particularly effective in transcriptions of flute music.

5. Yes, I did say flute music. With a normal range of two octaves D–D, baroque flute music can be simply read by serpentists who just need to mentally substitute a bass clef and add three flats to the key signature to be able to play a huge amount of baroque flute music. Since much of the baroque flute repertoire is in D and G this opens up a vast quantity of solos, duets and trios in comfortable keys and with a two-octave range of F–F.

(Gloucester, England;
St. Agnant, France, 2004)

First encounters with the serpent by Douglas Yeo

Approaching the serpent for the first time is a task both exciting and perplexing. Job one is to figure how to hold the instrument. Preconceptions are of little help since most museum exhibits display serpents with the bocal pointing either upward or downward when in fact the bocal should be turned at an approximate 90-degree angle from the back of the



Douglas Yeo, serpentist, displaying the vertical playing position

instrument toward the player’s mouth.

This basic fact established, novice serpentists do well to sit in a comfortable chair for their first encounter. Serpents have been held, historically, in two basic positions. The French church serpent posture from 1590 was to hold the serpent vertically between one’s legs like a cello; this position came to be known as “palm down” as the hands cover the six holes of the serpent in a predictable way, with the left hand fingers 2, 3, 4 covering the top holes (numbers 1, 2, 3) and the right hand fingers 2, 3, 4 covering the bottom holes (numbers 4, 5, 6). At least one later French teacher and the inventors of the English military serpent suggested a horizontal position which is known as “palm up,” requiring the right hand position to be reversed and holes 4, 5, 6 covered with fingers 5, 4, 3. If this sounds confusing—well, it is. Suffice to say that most French church serpentists seem to have continued

into the 21st century with the vertical, more intuitive hand position while the horizontal position and fingering seems to have taken hold more with those who prefer a bit of English adventure.

Assuming a preference for the vertical playing position, you should first hold the serpent in front of your body with the bottom bow gently resting on the inside of your calves. Circling your arms around the serpent, the left hand covers the top three holes while the right hand covers the bottom three. This will most certainly feel awkward as the holes are often drilled too far apart to make anyone but the largest hands feel comfortable. That said, work immediately to reduce the tension in the lower arms, neck, and shoulders that will likely ensue. Keep the wrists relaxed as well. Move the arms slightly closer together and further from your body until you can find a position that allows the fingers to cover the holes without feeling as if they are the arms of a spider. Adjusting the instrument up and down on the calves may also help in finding a more comfortable position.

With the bocal and mouthpiece turned toward your head, bring the serpent to the lips. A rotation of the bocal past the 90-degree point might be necessary. Resist the temptation to jut the head forward and move your body toward the mouthpiece. The opposite is critical—bring the serpent toward you, remembering that you are the master and the serpent serves your will. The first day’s lesson will be considered a success without a single note played if you can experiment for a time to find a position whereby you can hold the serpent in a way where all six fingers can move easily over the finger holes, the mouthpiece can be brought comfortably to the lips and there is no palpable muscle tension as a result of the gentle perch of the serpent against your body. As to making the first sound, that is the subject and reward of the next lesson.

(Boston, USA, 2004)

Editor’s note: I appreciate the assistance of my colleague, Dick Fuller, whose last act was helping with this column. Dick Fuller, a former member of the Eastman Wind Ensemble, died on January 25, 2005.