

Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors

## As Time Goes By

By Clifford Bevan

Recently I had to intercede on behalf of one of my tuba students with the conductor of her band. Kim had been a loyal member for many years, had worked her way up through the section to become principal, and he decided that she should be rewarded by playing on a better instrument than her present model. The problem was that she was booked in to do her Grade 8 tuba exam (the highest grade under the British system) a couple of weeks later and then, a month after that, her A Level recital. (A Levels are the all-important final school exams, the results determining if the candidate will be eligible to go to university or not.)

Forty years ago, when I was planning to audition for the post of Principal Tuba with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, I decided that it would be a good idea to play on a really good instrument. I put aside the ancient E-flat tuba I'd been using, obtained a large-bore rotary-valved German F on approval for a fortnight, played the audition on that, got the job, and kept the tuba.

I must say that now I can't believe what I did. My student and I were at one in not wanting to change her instrument at that precise time because we foresaw the problems that would be posed by having to become accustomed to new blowing characteristics so quickly, getting over the automatic compensation at the embouchure for certain somewhat out-of-tune notes (probably in-tune on another instrument so they would in turn become out-of-tune because of the instinctive adjustment) and the need to get to know the new tuba well enough to cope with its own particular suspect notes. I would reckon up to six months for a thorough program. Yet I had aimed (successfully, as it happened) to achieve all this within a couple of weeks, plus reading with the different transposition required on changing from an E-flat to an F tuba. Of course, nowadays I would also need at least one other tuba, a BB-flat or CC, to

cope with the Teutonic romantic repertoire where depth of tone is of such importance. In the 1960s we played everything on one instrument, from Wagner to cimbasso, even "Bydlo" (at first . . .).

Something else I didn't know at the time was sixty years earlier in the U.K. I would probably have played it all on euphonium anyway—including Wagner: possible with four valves, even if the quality of tone was not as full as the composer would have desired. But since the trombone section was two peashooter tenors and a G bass and the horn section was four narrow-bore piston-valved F horns, it's not so crazy as it sounds. And my predecessor in Liverpool had played everything on a smaller Barlow F of the type described in *The Tuba Family*.

"It's not so crazy as it sounds?" So how did it sound? And what happened in the low brass department before the nineteenth century became the twentieth?

Outside German-speaking Europe the ophicleide was pervasive. And not just in high-art music. There's plenty of evidence to show that it was found in town bands, the military, even amongst street musicians, and as late as fifty years after valved basses had come into existence. Here again the big question is "Why?" Why didn't ophicleide players jump at the chance of the playing the valved tuba? The only thing arguably easier on ophicleide than on a valved instrument is the wide leap (presumably something to do with the pitch-change system relating to that of woodwind instruments), but parts for the lowest of the brass don't often contain big leaps. To find the answer to the question it's helpful to consider for a moment the apparently bizarre events at the Paris Conservatoire over a period of seventy years.

When Pierre Joseph Meifred was appointed horn professor in 1833 he taught valved horn, but, on his retirement in 1864, the Conservatoire reverted to offering only natural horn classes. It was

not until 1903 that the valved horn was finally given official recognition again: just over a century ago! Imagine being a player who had been taught natural horn in, say, the 1890s and then, in your first orchestral job, having to learn to play valved horn. Imagine the situation of all horn players back in the 1820s when valved horns gradually began to appear in Europe. You would have spent your professional career taming your instrument, matching the stronger and weaker notes, subtly manipulating your right hand in the bell as you aimed for the best possible intonation. What then with the revolution wrought by the mechanical juggernaut? Even the Paris Conservatoire couldn't turn back the march of time. Remember King Canute who, tired of being sweet-talked by toadying courtiers, got them to take him down to the sea at Southampton, sit him in a chair with his feet in the water, and command the incoming tide to stay back, which, of course, it refused to do. After all, we humans have only limited powers in the great scheme of things.

The Paris Conservatoire episode demonstrates the powerful influence of history—not just on French horn students of the time but on each and every one of us who has been taught. Anyone in any trade or profession who has served an apprenticeship (in England musicians were indentured into the nineteenth century) and then spent a working lifetime mastering a craft will not want to lay aside those painfully acquired skills and learn new ones. (My favorite analogy is the skilled joiner who, hired to carry out improvement to your house, will often use a handsaw while you and I, the amateurs, will achieve far less good results with our expensive Black & Decker power tools.)

Ophicleide players were naturally reluctant to learn the totally different fingering systems of the new valved instruments. In one instance a conductor actually presented his ophicleidist with a

tuba along with the message "learn this or else." [see *The Tuba Family*, pages 376-7] How would you, as a tuba player, react if the government suddenly required all tuba parts to be played on slide contrabass trombone?

I am more than fifty years older than Kim and thus, despite my keenness on keeping up-to-date (e.g., not playing Wagner parts on euphonium!), I am bound to pass on to her certain approaches characteristic of someone old enough to be her grandpa who was himself taught by a person whose own attitudes and technique were formed early in the twentieth century. Kim will have inherited these as well, just as she will have inherited some of the genetic make-up of her great-grandfather.

Are we thus better players than those who came before, are we the same, or are we worse? We are in general far better taught (there are instances of earlier successful tubists not being taught by tuba-players even at music college level in *The Tuba Family* and biographies of the great and famous in the *ITEA Journal*), and by and large we play on instruments with fewer mechanical and acoustic deficiencies than those in days of yore. The answer might appear to be that we are better players, until we listen to some of those early recordings. Wagner, Verdi, Toscanini—these were not the kind of people to tolerate poor intonation and sloppy ensemble. Through recordings, especially those skillfully transferred to CD with like-for-like sound, we can hear

with our own ears just how good many early twentieth-century players were. But what has changed is the overall standard of playing. There always will be the outstanding artist of any generation, the Bill Bell, Arnold Jacobs, Harry Barlow, John Fletcher, but now there is also an amazingly high general level of tuba-playing.

It's certain that these days I wouldn't get a full-time professional orchestral position after auditioning on an instrument I'd played only for a fortnight. But I'm pleased to be able to tell you that Kim was awarded an excellent mark for her Grade 8 exam. And as a reward, she's now looking forward to getting intimate with her own brand new Yamaha.

4x24

TOUR DATES—PHOTOS—SOUND FILES—GREAT LINKS

# www.patricksheridan.com

## Houser

Custom  
Horn Mouthpieces and  
Services for:

...The Pro

...The Teacher

...The Serious Player

...The Student

www.housermouthpiece.com

Custom & Stock Rims and Cups  
available in a variety of materials:

- Brass (gold or silver plate)
- Stainless Steel
- Delrin plastic (rim only)

## Houser

HMW  
10 Clyston Circle, RR#2  
Norristown, Pa. 19403

dave@housermouthpiece.com  
610 584-8939 office  
610 505-5924 cell

Looking for an  
accurate copy of a  
rim or cup?

The best copies require  
digital measurement  
techniques as well as  
computer-controlled  
lathes. We use them both  
to produce outstanding  
duplications.  
Modifications are  
precisely controlled and  
permanently  
documented.

If hand-made copies  
have been a source of  
frustration to you, please  
give us a call.

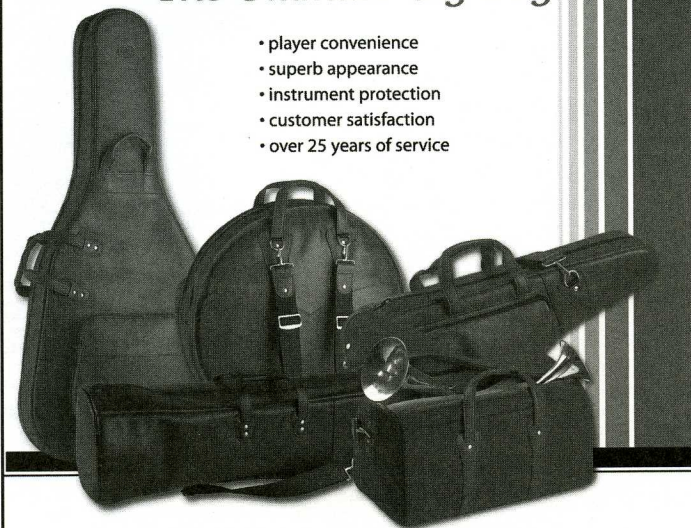
- Re-Plating—  
Gold & Silver
- Threading
- Alterations

## Reunion Blues®

www.reunionblues.com

### The Ultimate Gig Bag

- player convenience
- superb appearance
- instrument protection
- customer satisfaction
- over 25 years of service



tel: 415.826.8811 | fax 415.826.3161 | email: sales@reunionblues.com