

By Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors

Editor's Note: Through the years I have received many queries from Ebay sellers and bidders requesting an estimate of the worth of certain instruments. My non-committal response is never satisfying to those who wish to determine their next bid or to decide whether to accept an offer. I am so pleased that this

complex topic—the value of an instrument—is addressed by our regular column contributor, Dr. Arnold Myers, Director, University Collection of Historic Musical Instruments and Senior Lecturer in Music, University of Edinburgh.

Museums—What is it Worth?

By Arnold Myers

Museum curators have to field a lot of questions from the public, and a high proportion of these are from people with old instruments trying to ascertain their value. One wonders what they mean by “value.” In many cases I suspect they are trying to work out if it is worth their time selling something they have no use for. So, what is the value of an old tuba? With an instrument used for playing, there is no question: the price of new instruments is set by the makers and as an instrument wears out and suffers damage its value gradually reduces to the price of scrap brass. However, once an instrument is appreciated for its aesthetic or historical interest, its value suddenly occupies a new dimension and is part of a game with completely different rules and players. Instead of its serviceability in music making, a host of other factors comes into play: age, importance as a brick in the wall of musical history, rarity, condition and lack of repair (purity), the cachet of a maker's name, past use by a certain player or group, etc.

A rather ordinary baritone (see photo 1), which as an anonymous antique in a yard sale might be worth \$100, would be valued by an auction house at \$5000 when the inscription of Adolphe Sax is discerned. At a conventional auction (whether live or internet) the rule is simple: the value of a lot is determined by the two people involved who rate it most highly. One of the two could be the seller who has set a reserve price. The law of supply and demand operates in the antique instrument marketplace. The skilled dealer (and several in our field are extremely knowledgeable) when *buying* can emphasize the plentiful supply and



Photo 1. Old baritone or under nourished euphonium. Not worth very much?

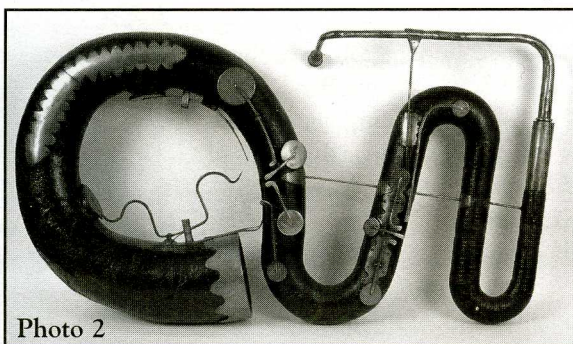


Photo 2

Photo 2. The legendary “Anaconda,” contrabass serpent in 16 ft C, 11 keys. Joseph and Richard Wood, Huddersfield, c 1840. Sold at Phillips, London, in 1989; hammer price £5000 (\$7500). This is a value but is it *the* value?

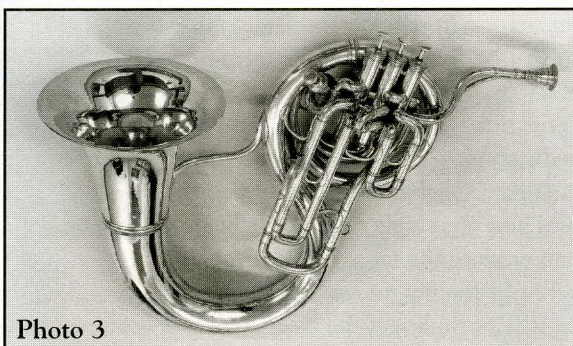


Photo 3

Photo 3. Orpheon bass [antoniophone] in B-flat. Boosey & Co, London, 1888.

What is a fair price for a unique item? The author declines to make a suggestion.

the low demand, and when *selling* might emphasize the object's rarity and unique features and hint at the existence of other potential buyers. This does not help with the value of a unique item. Even an experienced auctioneer is hard pressed to value an item such as the *Anaconda* (see photo 2) or the unique orpheon bass (see photo 3).

Is this sordid money grubbing a matter of concern to museums (and, indirectly, to the player who wishes to sell or to obtain that special historic instrument)?

Yes, because museums (and players) insure their instruments and need to have professional valuations and because museums wish to build up their collections by adding “museum quality” instruments. On the other hand, standard ethical museum policy is not to give valuations but, instead, to refer enquirers to auction houses with specialist musical instrument departments. Ironically, knowledge about money values is the one kind of knowledge about artefacts not shared by museum staff.