

Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors

America's First Serpents: Travels through the Moravian Communities of Pennsylvania

by Craig Kridel

This past summer I embarked on a grand adventure, deciding to visit those areas in the United States where the serpent had appeared in its original historical context. Serpents are on display in countless museums and archives throughout America. But instances of "serpent sightings" during its original period of use (pre-1850s rather than post-1920s) are not that numerous. I am aware that a serpent virtuoso, Mr. Young, performed a concerto in 1835 in both New York and Philadelphia, and I have actually held the Amherst Serpent, an instrument used, we suspect, in the Amherst College band during the 1830s which, after being recently rescued from the top shelf in the old campus natatorium, has become the best guarded instrument in the United States. But my colleague, Stewart Carter of Wake Forest University, had always told me of serpents at the historic Moravian communities in Pennsylvania. An East Coast drive afforded me the opportunity to visit sites that I am now convinced clearly represent an overlooked heritage of low brass playing in America.

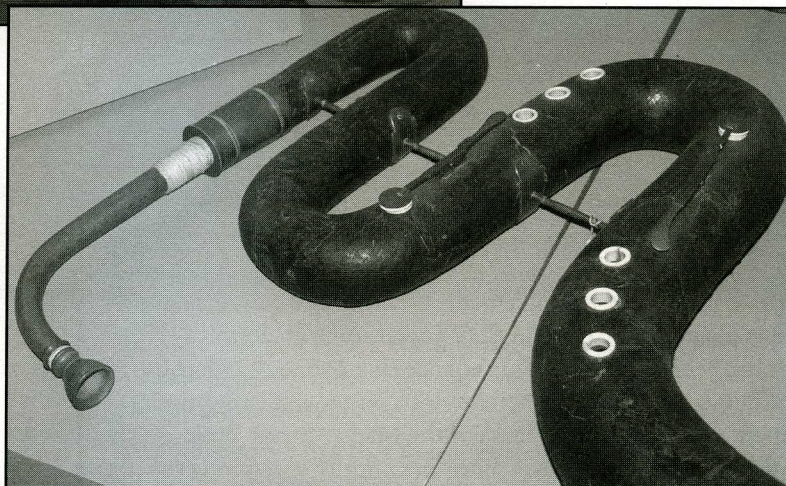
The Moravian Church arose from the work of Protestant reformers from Bohemia and Moravia in what is now the Czech Republic. In the mid-18th century, Moravians began settling in the United States and forming communities in east-central Pennsylvania, Ohio, and North Carolina. My three destinations, each in Pennsylvania, have a distinguished history: the Moravians first arrived in the United States at Nazareth in 1740. They moved on to Bethlehem in 1741 to form their first permanent settlement in America. The Lititz Moravian Church, further southwest, was formed in 1749 and continues to this day to serve as a place of worship in what is one of the oldest Moravian congregations in the country.

Music represented a significant component of Moravian life, and those who colonized Pennsylvania formed collegium musica and chamber ensembles performing hymns, anthems, and solos for liturgical and community settings. Moravians did not distinguish between sacred and secular music. Their composers, well versed in Western European classical repertoire, are viewed as writing the earliest, most sophisticated musical compositions



Left: The Lititz Serpent: the first American-made serpent?

Below: An instrument display at Moravian Historical Society, Nazareth

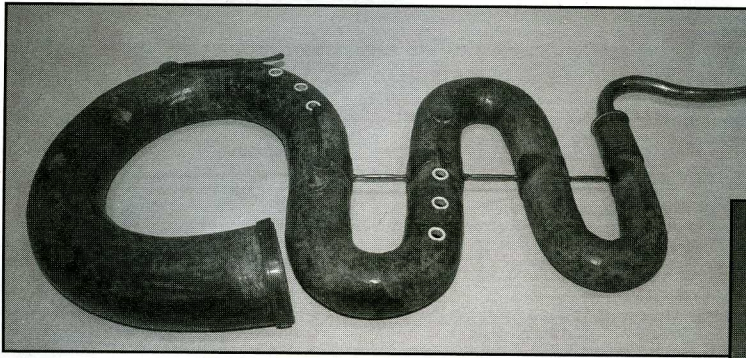


in the United States. While most modern brass players are well aware of the tradition of Moravian trombone choirs (termed "the ecclesiastical ensemble"), other low brasses—the serpent and bass horn—seem to have been represented in these musical settings.

Yet, having made such a claim, I am sorry to say that I cannot cite score after score with serpent parts. Guided by the research of Jon Gillespie and his colleagues, and with the kind on-site assistance of Nola Knouse, Director of the Moravian Music Foundation, I had previously pored through catalogs and manuscripts only locating a few compositions with designated bass horns lines and none with an acknowledged serpent part. Clifford Bevan, in *The Tuba Family*, notes only one Moravian piece with serpent, still exceeding my grand total of zero.

But, serpents were there ...and, in fact, historical serpents are still there in the Moravian communities of Pennsylvania, beautifully displayed at historical societies and museums in

Lititz, Bethlehem, and Nazareth. This leads to an interesting speculation and a conceptual “orchestration leap”: Since we can confirm that serpents appeared in Pennsylvania Moravian communities in the early



Left: The Bethlehem Serpent

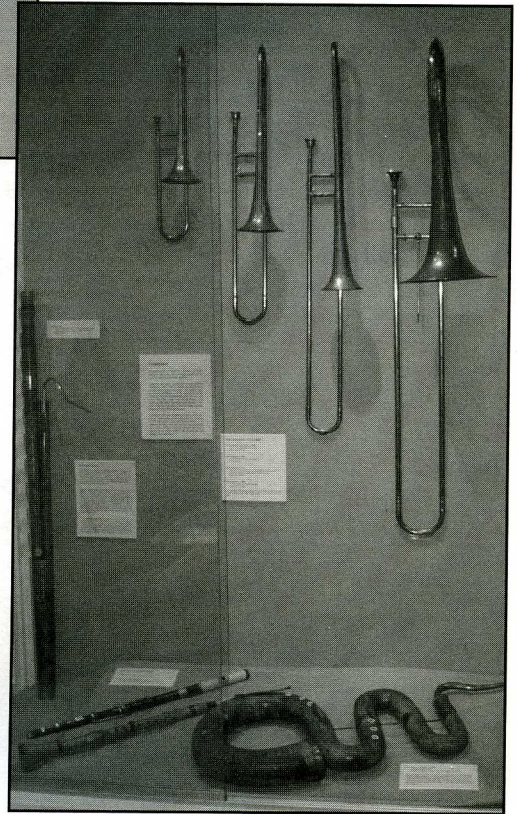
Below: The Nazareth Serpent

19th century but are not designated in scores, were they indeed played? While there are no serpent parts, there were serpents... and there were serpentists. In fact, during my travels, I was informed of one early 19th century Moravian serpentist who, due to late night activities, was excommunicated from the Lititz Congregation. Clifford Bevan has taught us that bass instruments were not necessarily designated in scores and, in fact, one horn took on the name of manuscript marginalia (i.e., cimbasso). Since three historical serpents are known to have existed in the Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Lititz communities, and three bass horns now reside in Bethlehem, can we assume that they would have been played in the orchestral, collegium musica, and/or harmoniemusik settings? My comments may seem too simple to some readers and blasphemous to others. At issue, of course, is the question of the significance of documentation and deduction when considering performance practices. For some scholars, historical practices can be asserted only when officially documented. I believe my summer travels have uncovered a topic—low brass instrumentation in some of America’s first classical music communities—that is ripe and awaiting further study.

In terms of actually seeing the instruments and enjoying the living-history settings that have come to represent many of the religious communities of east-central Pennsylvania, performance practice and orchestration were far from my thoughts. Instead, I found myself enthralled with the beauty of the historic districts of Bethlehem, Nazareth, and Lititz, with each setting offering its own unique delights. First, I must add that as a museum curator and archivist myself, I know the drill: look and ask but don’t touch (and, for musical instruments, don’t even think of blowing). For these visits, the visual rather than tactile more than sufficed. The Lititz Moravian Congregation is a breathtaking complex. The sanctuary, first built in 1787, was destroyed by fire in 1957 and completely reconstructed to its earlier glory. The architecture is stunning and the buildings are beautifully maintained. Next to the sanctuary on Church Square is the Congregation’s archives where I looked forward to seeing one of the few (the only, to my knowledge) American-built period serpents, a pearwood instrument in C made ca. 1823 by Heinrich Gottlieb Guetter. The leather-covered bell has been painted so that the instrument appears as a serpent with open jaws. When I first saw the horn, the formation of the crook suggested that the instrument would be played in horizontal (English style). But a C-sharp key and bottom brass neckstrap band indicate that the serpent was played upright, not unlikely for such a French-looking serpent d’eglise. The instrument is absolutely stunning, in perfect condition, and is surrounded by a substantial instrument

collection.

I continued my travels to Historic Bethlehem, the American bass horn mecca, but more popularly known as a beautiful tourist destination for those interested in Moravian culture. The serpent, however, was my destination, and the Bethlehem instrument, housed in the



Moravian Museum, appeared to be a fine English imported horn, military-orchestral in nature with brass braces and ivory bushings. The horn looks as if it has had its share of repairs (an indication of a good instrument that a serpentist wanted to keep) and no doubt could have been played for the first American performance of Haydn’s *The Creation* at Bethlehem in 1811. My final stop was in Nazareth where the Moravian Historical Society is housed in the magnificent Whitefield House, one of the oldest Moravian buildings in America. I found the instrument collection to be quite extensive with a lovely set of trombones. But seeing the Nazareth serpent proved to be the dénouement for my trip. I believe I may have seen a unique American instrument, a true blending of the French and English style instruments into what I now term a Moravian serpent.

The instrument appears at first glance to be an English-style military serpent with rods and footplates (even though the bends are more suggestive of a French instrument and less tightly curved than the typical British horn), and the bocal, similar to the Lititz serpent, suggests English, palm-up (horizontal) playing. But after measuring the instrument, I realized that this bocal style actually centered the instrument much better for a horizontal playing position, and the C# key necessitated an upright style. The Nazareth serpent maintained an English look with a French playing position. This instrument, along with the American made Lititz serpent, were certainly rare in their own right, but the key work of the Nazareth serpent convinces me

that we have so much more to learn about low brass instruments from the early 19th century.

While I do not expect ITEA members to plan summer pilgrimages to these sites, I would encourage those neophyte, low brass researchers, the summer vacationer whose venue is anywhere East of the Mississippi, and the generally curious traveler to journey to central and eastern Pennsylvania for a lovely occasion of living history and the joy of seeing instruments that were part of a culture that truly prized music.

Notes: I wish to extend my appreciation to Ms. Pat Hartzell and Mr. Wayne B. LeFevre of the Lititz Moravian Congregation Church Archives; Ms. Susan M. Dreydoppel of the Moravian Historical Society, Nazareth; Mr. Noel Poirer of the Moravian Museum, Bethlehem; Dr. Hilde M. Binford of Moravian College, Bethlehem, Dr. Stewart Carter of Wake Forest University, and, as always, Dr. Clifford Bevan.

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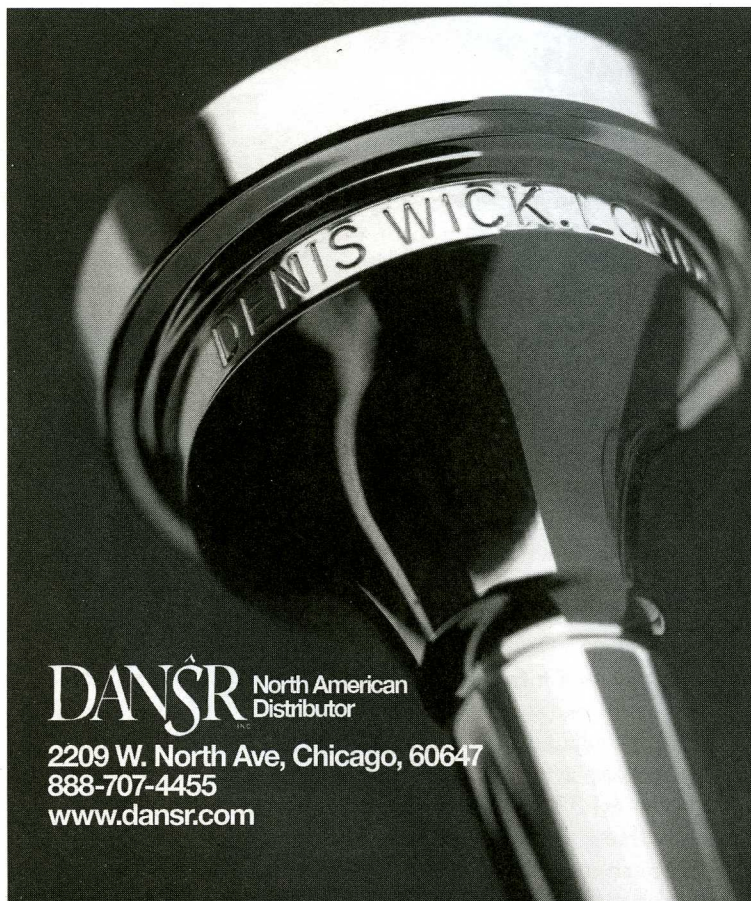
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