By Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors

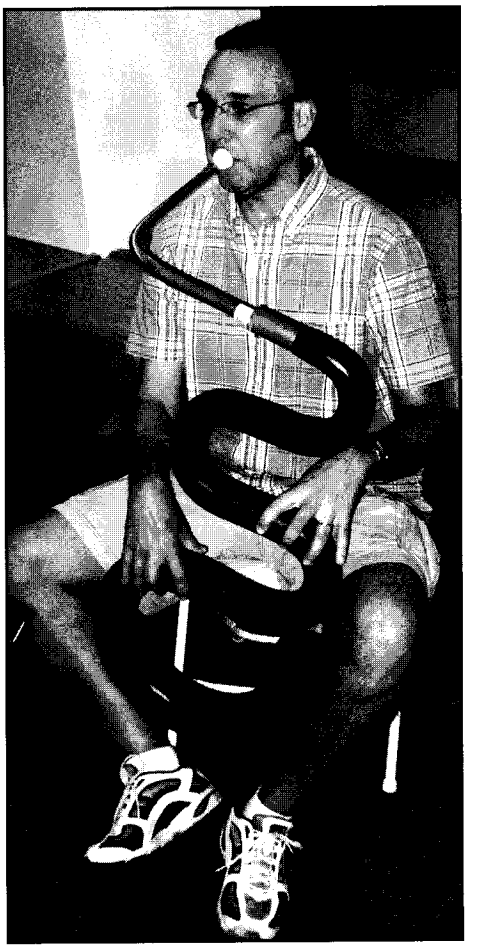
From spectator to player: A tuba player's encounter with the serpent

by Craig Kridel

I don't know how it came about. Extending an invitation to blow one's serpent is always a dangerous act. What if the instrument is tilted improperly and the mouthpiece falls off? What if the invitee blows too loud and delights in making obnoxious sounds? Worse, what if the serpent moment elicits more puns than sounds, those most mundane and predictable jokes that have surrounded the serpent since 1590 when Canon Edme Guillaume of Auxerre (Burgundy) commissioned the construction of the wind instrument that was meant to bring zest to the singing of plainchant.

Yes, I've experienced all of these scenarios. The serpent sounds of flatulence as a self-indulgent tubist blows excruciatingly "how low can I go" noises. Or, the "oh, that's funny. I've never heard that one before" retort as yet another stale witticism is tossed in the air accompanied by snorts and chuckles. But when Daniel Green held the serpent, the experience was different. He seemed not to be attempting to attract attention from those standing nearby but, instead, to be asking the instrument to introduce itself to him. The serpent responded with charm and grace.

I have been attending the Amherst Early Music Festival for many years and have enjoyed my times with Green as stand-partner, playing 17th and 18th century, double and triple choir canzonas under the direction of Bruce Dickey, Wim Becu, and Kiri Tollaksen.[1] His Renaissance trombone playing is brilliant, and I continued to be amazed as he would then appear on stage as Renaissance chorister or viola da gambist. But I was most surprised to learn that "in real life" he was a tubist, having graduated from the Hartt School of Music and having developed a rewarding career as a music educator in the West Hartford (CT) Public Schools.



Dan Green first encounters the serpent

His modern brass credits are as extensive as his early music recordings, performing regularly with the Hartford Brass Quintet and regional orchestras and bands and recording with The Grande Bande, ARTEK, and Spiritus Collective.

As curious as I was about his modern brass background, I soon recognized that it was *his* curiosity that was most interesting. Green embodied Alfred North Whitehead's comment of the importance of educators "wearing their learning with imagination." Music was not merely to be performed but served as an opportunity for adventure, a time for intellectual exploration of other cultures, other time periods, and other sensibilities.

After years of listening to serpentists (many have participated in the Amherst Early Music Festival and the Historic Brass Festival), Dan was ready to shift from spectator to player. During the 2007 Festival, I suggested that we talk about the serpent and he make his debut as a player. He could borrow a spare instrument and describe his impressions as a brass musician. Five days remained, and I wished to witness a tubist's first encounter with the serpent. My intent was not to convert, however. I swore years back that this column would not seek to proselytize, nor would I begin to do so at the Amherst Festival. I merely wished to talk about the serpent d'eglise with a trained musician with substantial brass background.

Dan was delighted to discover that the serpent was much easier to hold than a tuba, ultimately better balanced even after a few moments when he thought the horn would slip through his hands (the 2nd octave b-flat is an open fingered note that calls for poise and well placed palms). And he enjoyed what he described as the "nearby resonance" of the serpent rather than the distant and immediately dispersed sound of the tuba. His interest grew as he became intrigued with the many different textures and articulations that were readily accessible. Our first discussion became an occasion to decide what type of sound he wished to produce. Ultimately, he sought out a distinctive tone and articulation that would blend with other instruments. He sought to become an ensemble player rather than a soloist. We talked at length about the differences between fingering charts and serpents, and he enjoyed trying "undesignated" fingerings that bring out more resonance to certain pitches (in

contrast to a typical reaction of the neophyte—scoffing at irregularities between actual pitch and specified fingering). Our conversation continued to remind me of the serpent's flexibility—*and advantage*—for centering notes and adjusting pitch in relation to tonal color. While others have viewed this as an indication that the serpent "just can't be played in tune," Green reveled in what became the grand puzzle, using the finger chart as a mere guide and then pursuing what fingerings would be best for this non-standard, one-of-a-kind instrument. Mastering intonation remains the eternal quest for any serpentist; however, Dan's background as a chorister quickly brought him to an acceptable level so that he could begin to "get inside" his pitches and engulf the sound of another instrument, the ultimate goal of any ensemble serpentist.

Our subsequent sessions addressed a variety of topics. Dan was seeking the best means to balance the instrument, ultimately deciding to hold the serpent in a French playing position (palm down style). He was struck by how little air the instrument required and noted that his vocal ability of breath control became as important for pitch as the many hours he had spent with the tuba developing his chops. By our fourth session he had learned his fingering patterns and decided upon his sound. That is when I suggested that he perform the five part fantasia by Henry le Jeune for four cornetti and serpent, published in Marin Mersenne's 1636 book on instruments, *Traité de l'harmonie universelle*.

The Amherst Early Music Festival brings together professional/semi-professional players and young, conservatory-trained musicians who are exploring the possibility of careers in early music. The 2007 Festival's brass faculty included the distinguished American cornettist, Kiri Tollaksen, whose methods class displayed the finest aspects of exemplary teaching with her willingness to explore novel repertoire and her ability to convey technical information to both the novice as well as seasoned musician. Kiri gladly welcomed the serpent into the cornetti class to perform this rarely heard five-part fantasia. Dan's earlier decisions of what type of serpentist he wished to become

Amherst Cornetti Ensemble rehearsal, Kiri Tollaksen, director; first row: Dan Green; second row: Donald Boekelheide, Dawn Webster, Douglas Young, Rigel Lustwerk, Kiri Tollaksen.

came to fruition as he sat, surrounded by cornetti, and read through the work. The serpent's magic is its ability to blend, either with voice, cornetto, bassoon and contrabassoon, as the instrument becomes both inaudible to the ear and simultaneously dramatically present. This proved so true with the 2007 Amherst Cornetti Ensemble.

As the ensemble read this piece, Dan Green's serpent playing had its moments. A few B naturals were somewhat sharp (in this arrangement, transposed to C), certainly understandable since the note is fingered as a C and lipped down. And a pitch was slightly scooped here and there. But many more moments included the warmest sounds, and chords became so full that the light fixtures resonated. The cornetti players, engulfed by a solid, full bass, began to ease into their playing and relax. The cadences resounded and the final chord surrounded the room. In the same treatise in which this piece is published, Mersenne states, "But the true bass of the cornett is performed with the serpent, so that one can say that one without the other is a body without a soul." Dan Green proved the truth of that statement to the assembled group of cornetto players, many of whom had never heard a serpent before and none of whom had previously played this piece.

My account ends with no moral. I wish not to conclude with the suggestion for *ITEA Journal* readers to run out and purchase serpents. Yet, the tale does have rather interesting implications. Within a matter of days, a well-trained tubist was able to engage in music making in realms unknown. With more experience on the instrument, the 18th and 19th century harmoniemusik literature would become accessible for Green, introducing him to 9-part, period wind arrangements of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven symphonies that are certainly not in the standard tuba repertoire. And while I dispute the claims of "transference of knowledge" in relation to learning the serpent and tuba playing, there is no denying that the tuba will never quite be viewed the same after Green's experiences on the precursor of the instrument. This is to say that only he someday will know if his serpent playing made him a better tubist, but I sense he would immediately concur that the experience made him a more thoughtful musician.

But...there is more. I kept asking Dan Green "why do you do these many things?" In short, I was asking how music continues to enrich his life rather than becoming habitual? His retort was quite simple but profound: he mentioned that while in college, he was ingrained to play for pay.

Now he plays for himself, and many more opportunities that have broadened and enhanced his musical life are the result. Through my many years as educator and academic, I have seen too many individuals lose sense of why they play music. Habit overwhelms and musicians turn into clerks going through their rounds of "routinized" play. Dan Green is different. His is a life of summer band concerts, brass quintet and symphonic performances, early music recitals, and for one week in July 2007 a grand adventure with the serpent. My hope is not that all readers experience the glories of the serpent, as did Dan Green. My wish is, instead, that all musicians could live a life of curiosity that I witnessed from this inquisitive, thoughtful tubist whose musical world is that of adventure and exploration.

Notes:

[1] Staged each summer in July, the Amherst Early Music Festival is now held at the Connecticut College campus. For more information, visit www.amherstearly music.org. The Festival serves a distinguished role in the history of the serpent in America, in part, through the efforts of Benjamin Peck, former coordinator of the brass program and founder of the Early Brass Festival (as well as director of the legendary New York Cornet & Sacbut Ensemble). The Amherst Festival held the first serpent classes of the 20th century, in 1986, when Christopher Monk was invited to teach. This event led to the publication of the 20th century's sole treatise, *The Serpent Player* by Monk, and the world-premiere performance of the *The Amherst Suite for Eight Serpents* by Simon Proctor. Tangentially-related, Monk's presence at the 1986 Festival led to the organizational meeting of the Historic Brass Society, founded by Jeffrey Nussbaum.

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Editor's Note: We are pleased to announce that past Historical Instrument Section columns of the *International Tuba and Euphonium Association Journal* are now available on line at www.berliozhistorical brass.org/itea.htm. These past columns are presented with copyright permission. We wish to thank Jason Smith, editor of the *ITEA Journal*, for his support of the Historical Instrument Section.