

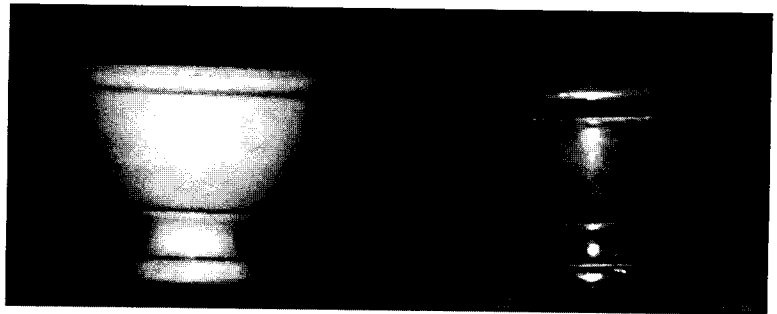
Questions and Answers: What does a serpent sound like?

by Craig Kridel

Editor's Note: Throughout the years we have received a variety of questions pertaining to historical low brass topics, and we continue to address these queries with our periodic Questions and Answers section. For this issue, we return to the topic of the serpent after venturing into the 20th century with a discussion of Vaughan Williams' Tuba Concerto. For future columns, please send your questions to craigkridel@mindspring.com.

This question has been so often posed that I find my response changing in form and function each year. I always welcome the query, never sighing as I do with yet another misplaced serpent pun. It is a good and honest question, a simple sentence that, unfortunately, never elicits a simple response. In fact, an answer requires as much information about ourselves as it does about the instrument. This is not to say that a quick response cannot be made. One-liners abound to this question, and the musicologist has many historic comments at hand, including the famed Berlioz and Handel retorts (mentioned all too many times in rudimentary instrument lectures) as well as other verbal barbs such as Charles Burney (1726–1814) comparing the tone of the serpent to an angry Essex

Two early
19th century
spherical cup-
shaped serpent
mouthpieces



cow (whatever that may sound like!). Fortunately, recordings are now more available than ever, and Amazon.com-inspired readers may form their own answers by ordering an array of CDs with serpent as solo, ensemble, or orchestral instrument.¹

But there is more—much more. Allow me to turn the question back to the reader: “what does a tuba sound like?” For the person on the street, the neophyte, a tuba sounds big and full and brassy and low—why, a tuba sounds like a tuba! Is it not a familiar sound that can be properly described in three to six letter words? Yet, this is where a simple simile becomes quite complicated. Doesn't the tone and texture of a tuba differ according to player and equipment? Can't one differentiate the sound of the tuba, for example, the relaxed clarity of a Gene Pokorny or the commanding intensity of a Roger Bobo?

Weren't decisions made by these players; do not all tubists decide the nature of their sound? Our original question has, thus, transformed from “what does a serpent sound like” to “what does a person want (or expect) a serpent to sound like?”

“in fairness be compared”

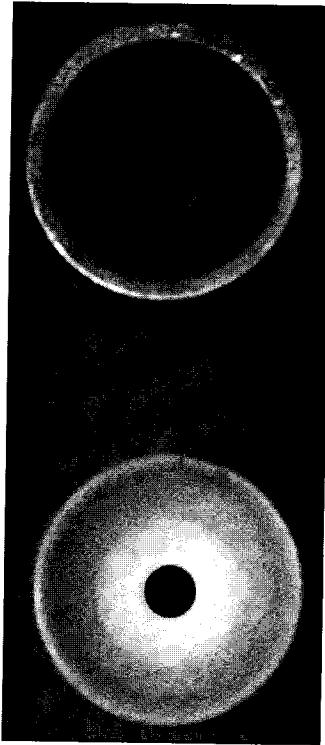
Our knowledge of and expectations for the serpent have been growing rapidly during the past decade, inspired by the release of Clifford Bevan's second edition of *The Tuba Family* (2000). Now, one must describe the serpent's varied, unique tonal colors by defining musical context, variations among instruments, and our expectations and dispositions. The task has been difficult for any 20th and 21st century listener attempting to understand an overlooked instrument from the past, especially since descriptions quickly turn to comparisons. Adam Carse wrote in 1939, “It is hardly possible to describe the tone of the serpent...partly because there is no wind instrument now in use with which it may in fairness be compared (274).” I have witnessed many well-meaning tuba players pick up the serpent and blow the fundamental C as low and loud as possible; I've seen trombonists blow up the harmonic series and attempt to center notes in the third octave. How does one describe these sounds—similar to an Essex cow, or a muffled tuba, or a woody trombone, or an airy bassoon? British serpentist and instrument maker



Serpent
mouthpiece in
relation to a
fifty-cent piece

Christopher Monk once compared the tone of the serpent in the upper register to a cross between a French and English horn in what is certainly a positive account. Carse ultimately describes the serpent in less glowing terms: a pure tone with “a dry and somewhat choked quality which is without the metallic ring of brass-instrument-tone as we now know it (1939, 275).” I recall hearing a wonderful serpent performance in the mid-1980s where my brass colleagues noted the beautifully smooth, mellow sound much like a trombone. As it turned out, the serpentist was using a trombone mouthpiece. Players’ decisions and audiences’ expectations and assumptions may at times be more influential than we recognize.

To understand the tone of the serpent, as Carse stated, “the ear would have to be readjusted to appreciate a shade of tone color which is neither that of any brass instrument nor of any wood-wind instrument now in use (Carse 1939, 275).” This becomes the underlying dichotomy of our simple question—does one see the serpent as a “brass instrument” and



A determining factor in sound: the sharp-edged throat

forerunner of the tuba OR as a more generic aerophone intended to blend with voices, brass, and/or woodwinds, notably the bassoon. Now we begin to enter a relatively unexplored world of

Clifford Bevan Award for Research

We are pleased to announce that ITEA has established the Clifford Bevan Award for Research. This biennial award seeks to foster excellence and to encourage the highest level of research in the area of low-brass scholarship. A \$500 stipend will be awarded to an individual whose original scholarship is significant, innovative, thoughtful, and useful. Low-brass scholarship genres include research on contemporary and historical topics, acoustics, composition, theory, scoring, organology, and pedagogy and may include methodologies of oral history, biographical and ethnographic, historical, quantitative, statistical, and survey research. Application information for this award will appear online with the Roger Bobo and Harvey G. Phillips Awards. For more information, send inquiries to craigkridel@mindspring.com.

tone and timbre in our effort to describe the sound of the serpent. Fortunately, there are those exploring these areas. The serpent's tone color has become a topic of interest, described and "situated" in the Romantic era by Richard Morgan. Seeking to understand what composers expected to hear from instruments, Moran analyzed Mendelssohn's and Berlioz's scoring, noticing that they drew upon the descriptive personalities and unique timbre of the serpent. He quite convincingly argues that the serpent did more than merely strengthen the orchestral bass sound but also offered unique, expressive tonal characteristics and colorings (Morgan, 2006).

Volny Hostiou is currently examining the distinctive timbre of the serpent in the church, concert hall, and laboratory. Experimenting with the large and pure sound, "close to that of the human voice," he is comparing the timbres produced from the now more commonly-used semi-hemispherical and rarely-used hemispherical cup shaped mouthpieces. As today's players have become more accustomed to the narrow rim, we are finding that early 19th century mouthpieces varied in the sharpness of the throat's edge. Hostiou is documenting the effects on sound of the traditional sharp-edged throat with the cup of the mouthpiece meeting the back bore at a 90 degree angle. This type of mouthpiece creates a diffuse texture that, when placed in large acoustical spaces, "forms a warm bass enveloping the sound of the voices without supplanting them (the original reason for the instrument) (Hostiou, 2005)." Yet, the timbre of a serpent with a spherical, sharp-edged mouthpiece is dramatically different from the more commonly used (and historically authentic) rounder-edged throat. Even if we put aside our expectations in relation to modern brass or woodwind instruments, a player's decision to use one of these two dissimilar, authentic mouthpieces offers quite contrasting sounds, colors, comparisons, and descriptions.

So, what does a serpent sound like? Well, what do you expect a serpent to sound like? As my friend and teacher Ronald Davis of University of South Carolina reminded me, "As long as people are passionately devoted to any musical

instrument, the answer to 'what does it sound like' is always a work in progress." I believe the upcoming decade will have much more to tell!

Notes

¹ Random recommendations: Charpentier: *Te Deum & Grand Office Des Morts* by Les Arts Florissants, Stephen Wick, serpent [Virgin Classics 7243 (5 45733 2) 3]; *Charpentier: Te Deum & Messe pour plusieurs instruments* by Choeur de Chambre de Namur and La Fenice, Volny Hostiou, serpent [Ricercar RIC 245]; *Fill Your Glasses* by The Canterbury Clerkes and London Serpent Trio, Clifford Bevan, Christopher Monk, Andrew van der Beek, serpentists [CD-SDL 361]; *Glad Tidings: A West Gallery Christmas* by The Mellstock Band, Philip Humphries, serpent [Serpent Press, www.mellstockband.com]; *Harmonie und Janitscharenmusik* by Octophoros, Andrew van der Beek, serpent [Accent ACC 8860 D]; *Le Livre d'Orgue de Montreal* by Matrise de la Cathedrale d'Angers, Bernard Fourtet, serpent [Ateliers du Fresne #300 002.2]; *Le Monde du Serpent* by Douglas Yeo, serpent [BHB 101; www.yeodoug.com]; *Sous Les Voutes-Le Serpent* by Michel Godard, serpent [Ma Recordings 8004825]; *Une Messe pour la Saint-Michel* by Ensemble Vocal Ludus Modalis, Michel Godard, serpent [Alpha 514]. The brass world is indebted to the conscientious efforts of Paul Schmidt who maintains the most up-to-date serpent discography [www.serpentwebsite.com].

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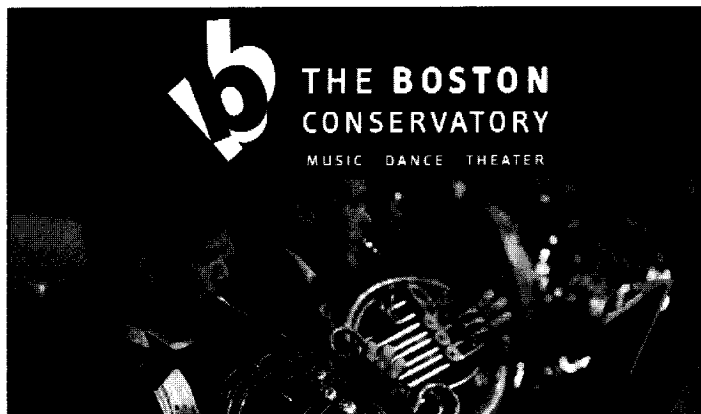
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