Historical Instrument Section

By Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors

The Start of Something Splendid

by Clifford Bevan

Editor's Note: With this column we continue (and conclude) our two-issue reflections and reveries on the topic of "sound." We invite your comments and reactions. Send those to Craig Kridel at craigkridel@mindspring.com

It is generally accepted that Harry Barlow (1870–1932) was the first great British tubist. Like the majority of English brass players, he began playing in the band of the village where he was born, Besses o th' Barn, a few miles north of Manchester. The village (and its distinguished band) still exist. Again, in common with most British professional tubists until a generation or two ago, he initially played euphonium, though shortly after joining Manchester's Hallé Orchestra in 1894 he purchased a tuba in F from the local firm of Higham. It is thought that he may have been involved in its design, as he certainly was that of the later series of uncompensated F "Barlow Tubas" made by Besson. In addition to playing in the Hallé (which at that time was a seasonal job), he was in Richter's orchestra at the Royal Italian Opera in London and was also invited to play at Bayreuth. By then he had conducted Besses o' th' Barn Band and led a cinema orchestra in Manchester. On joining the newly formed BBC Symphony Orchestra in 1930, he became the first Professor of Tuba at the Royal Academy of Music. He was clearly a man of accomplishment (including reputed advice to Elgar on how to write for tuba; Barlow played in the premières of his First Symphony and *Pomp & Circumstance Marches 1* and *2*).

While Harry Barlow participated in orchestral recordings, they give us few clues as to his tone (although we can get some idea by playing instruments that he actually used), but those demanding Elgar tuba parts make it clear that he was technically extremely able, while his reputation with composers like Elgar and conductors like Richter confirm the musicality of his approach. What we do not know was the basis of his technique. He is on record as stating that he considered the most important aspect of playing as being the use of the tongue, a comment that may seem surprising in the light of present tendencies.

Emphasis on tonguing seems to have been common during Barlow's time. The Editor of the Brass Band News in his manual *Brass Band Tuning*, published in Liverpool by Wright & Round in the 1920s, wrote:

> "Place the tip of the tongue to close the aperture of the lips, then draw the tip of the tongue back sharply, and downward, as if spitting a hair off the lips. Be careful to draw the tongue downward, flat, so that the air passes freely over it. Some players strike the tongue upward, and it obstructs the passage of the air."

This was the way that I was taught to tongue in the late 1940s, and I have found evidence in traveling around the United Kingdom as an examiner that it is still practiced in some places. But the idea of placing the tongue between the lips for the actual attack and then raising it to the roof of the mouth immediately afterwards may well be thought not only bizarre but counter-productive.

What method of tonguing was recommended by the great instructors of the nineteenth century? The most familiar to us today is Jean-Baptist Arban (1825–89), whose cornet tutor is still in print. The English-language translation of his comments on "Producing the Sound" reads:

> "The tongue should be placed against the teeth of the upper jaw in such a manner that the mouth may be completely closed. At the moment the tongue is drawn back, the column of air, which is pressing against it is, precipitated violently into the mouthpiece and produces the sound."

This just about conforms to modern practice, although his recommendation for playing notes in various registers may be thought more contentious: "The exercises from page 11, onward will gradually lead the student to reach the higher notes, always bearing in mind that the pressure of the mouthpiece upon the lips must be increased.... When playing in a downward direction, the pressure of the mouthpiece upon the lips must be decreased." Those coming after Arban mostly followed his recommendations about tonguing, like Lieut. Col. H. Adkins of Britain's Royal Military School of Music. In his cornet tutor he warns, however, that, "The mouth-piece ought not to be pressed too hard on the lips." He follows this with: "To produce the sound, the syllable "tu" must be pronounced, as if blowing a hair from the tip of the tongue."

In his *Méthode complète de Saxhorn-Alto* (E flat horn), Clodomir echoed this advice, with (in translation): "To obtain a high note, it is necessary to exercise a light pressure on the mouthpiece on the upper lip and bring the lips towards each other. For a low note on the contrary, it is necessary to reduce the pressure on the mouthpiece and separate the lips." In discussing the *Emission du son* he recommends moving the tongue "as if wishing to eject a piece of paper into the instrument while pronouncing the syllable *tu* or *fa* for each new note. This movement is called *coup de langue*'" ['blow of the tongue']. The *tu* is understandable, but adopting the *fa* would have an unfortunate effect on the embouchure. (Try it!) Lagard's method for the same instrument is rather more precise about the position of the tongue: "After having breathed in sufficient air, the tongue is quickly retracted into the interior of the mouth, as if one wished to shoot out a pip,

while pronouncing the syllable *tu*.... The air from the lungs is violently precipitated into the mouthpiece, producing the sound." He conforms to modern practice in his advice to breathe from the diaphragm and not to raise the shoulders while breathing in.

Traveling back in time, the eminent German trumpeter Johann Ernst Altenburg (1734–1801) summarized his experiences as teacher and player of the natural trumpet during a long career in *An Essay on the instruction of the Noble and Musical Art of Trumpet and Kettledrum Playing, Historically, Theoretically and Practically Described and Illustrated with Examples*. Published in 1795, Altenburg recommends, "That the proper embouchure is formed by a certain position of the tongue and a tight closing together between the teeth and lips, so that only a small opening is left between them." But he warns that, "The lips and cheeks must not be puffed out because then only a hollow, weak thrust of air will be produced...and besides it doesn't look good."[!] (I refer to the English translation by Mary Rasmussen published in *Brass Quarterly* Vol. 1, 3 & 4; Vol. 2, 2.)

Altenburg makes a clear distinction between tonguing and *Haue*, or huffing: "The first is so designated because one can perform it only by a certain stroke and thrust of the tongue and by pronouncing certain short syllables in the mouthpiece. This tongue stroke is of different kinds, for in single as well as double tonguing one uses different kinds of syllables... in single tonguing one uses only the four syllables *ritiriton* or *kitikiton*." (This latter pattern may be considered more accurately as a form of double tonguing.) "Huffing" is a method of playing legato or slurred passages. After giving a number of music examples he concludes: "Out of consideration for the fact that it is the custom of trumpeters to learn the *Feldstücke* [defined elsewhere as 'an artistic variation of the major triad'] by ear from their colleagues, and fearing reproach for the revealing of their secrets, I have refrained from setting them down in notation."

Arguably of more relevance to modern tubists are the methods used by their predecessors who played serpent and ophicleide. Clodomir's ophicleide method defines the *coup de langue* as being produced by the syllable Tu. Around 1811 Froelich stated in his *Serpent-Schule*: "Every effort should be made to achieve a singing tone which can be done when the hard sound produced by a tight embouchure is moderated... the required sound, irrespective of the fingering, cannot be blown unless the player has grasped what he wants to reproduce on the instrument." After this excellent advice he disappointingly fails to mention the actual technique for initiating notes, although Métoyen, in his undated serpent method, suggests that during the later eighteenth century the syllables *Tu* and *Lu* were adopted. Hardy's serpent method (also undated) states: "Without the tongue it will be impossible to play many just notes in succession on the Serpent. One must apply the *coup de langue* to every note...." Hermenge (c. 1817) agrees with this, in conjunction with using the ears (!), repeating the same advice in his Serpent Forveille method of 1835. Schiltz's serpent method (no date) recommends developing a good tone by beginning notes quietly, following with a crescendo and ending with a diminuendo. The Paris Conservatoire *Méthode* of 1815 explains that, "The sound is the result of the introduction of the breath of the player into the tube of the serpent via the mouthpiece. This breath produces a column of air which responds to the action of the tongue, those of the lips and those of the fingers, diverse modifications which determine the sounds that can be obtained from the instrument."

It seems that present-day good practice in the production of sounds on the tuba has roots that go back a long way in history. The concept of a full and broad tone, not necessarily sharply initiated, appears very similar to that adopted by early players of the serpent. Significantly, the first of these learned their art amongst the choristers in the great French cathedrals, without either printed methods or tutors. Their approach was thus quite different from that of other brass instrumentalists of the time. Today, those of us who play both tuba and cimbasso, or bass trombone, need to be aware of this every time that we play one or other of these instruments.

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