Winter 2015

ITEA Journal
Historical Instruments

By Clifford Bevan

Looking At The Past: Why Play Historical Brass?

Of course you would expect the Historical Instruments column to look at the past, but the past stretches from the moment that you've read the word "moment" back to the beginning of time. At the more recent end of this time-scale, within the space of four weeks, three things occurred to me that at first seemed totally unconnected. Two of them were emails—one from 180 miles away, the other from over 10,000 miles away—while the third was a move of house. It was some time before I realised that all of these events related to each other, and that they all also related to historical musical instruments.

Since you are reading this article, it is likely that you play one or more of these yourself, or that you're interested in the possibility of playing one, or that you can't understand why other people play them and you'd like to discover the reasons why, or that you've read everything else in this issue of the Journal and you're in the middle of a very long tacet with nothing else left to do.

If you are in the first category, have you ever thought about why you play an historical instrument? If you are in the second or third category read on, because I hope that I may be able to help you. If you are in the fourth category, well, we've all been there so you certainly have my sympathy.

A Player of the Serpent (from Bonani, *Gabinetto Armonico*, 1723).

In the first of a series of three articles I would like to explore the phenomenon of early music performance on low brass, and I must ask if you will bear with me in making excursions through such apparently unrelated matters as an eighteenth-century fire, heritage railways, Venice, and Queen Victoria's coronation. The reader who is patient and forbearing will see the reasons why.

Let's assume that you play a serpent, bass horn and/or ophicleide. Almost everyone who plays one or more of these will have come to them by way of a modern instrument, often tuba or euphonium, and there will have been times when you've wondered why you bothered to aim to achieve on the early instrument something like the standard of performance that you had reached on your main instrument. This is inevitable, because over the years you will have taken steps to improve your technique on that instrument, from the earliest stages constantly bearing in mind such matters as attack, tone, facility, intonation, etc. This question was the subject of the first email I received, from a young tuba student who had been beguiled by the ophicleide, had found an instrument and begun to learn to play it.

He'd had some success, but was frustrated because of problems with intonation. Why couldn't he play it as in tune as his tuba, the instrument that he was studying seriously (under an excellent teacher, by the way, and one who didn't exactly approve of his young charge's interest in ophicleide). When considering this question we should remember that, like the tuba, the ophicleide was invented in the nineteenth century. But although it quickly became popular in bands and orchestras only seventy years or so after its first appearance, it virtually disappeared, superseded by the tuba. Why? To try to find out why, we might begin by exploring historical performance standards.

Historical Performance Standards: In General

Before looking at some specific performances it is helpful to look at an event arguably even more important than the performing of a piece of music: a British coronation, and particularly that of Queen Victoria in 1838. A biographer recalls:

> The elaborate rehearsals of our own times did not find a place in Queen Victoria's Coronation. Only [Lord] Melbourne seems to have thought of making her try the height of two thrones when she visited the [Westminster] Abbey the day before. Both were too low.

As for the event itself—although only nineteen years old, the new queen had a stubborn intention to face facts, which was already becoming clear:

> "Pray tell me what to do," she had implored Lord John Thynne, the Sub-Dean at one point, "for I don't know." The Bishop of Durham, who stood near the Queen, could not help her for he himself was quite lost. Before the Crowning he and his colleagues began the Litany too soon, and near the end of the service the Bishop of Bath and Wells turned over two pages at once. He did not notice his error, told Her Majesty the service was finished, and had to fetch her back from St Edward's Chapel whither she had retired.

And so it continued, the literal low spot being reached during the Homage when Lord Rolle, nearly ninety, caught his foot in his robes on the steps of the throne and rolled to the bottom . . . "frantic cheering broke out" as Lord Rolle was seen to have taken a toss.[1]

If this is a royal coronation, what of mere musical performances? The nineteenth-century music authority David Cairns points out: "Fidelity to the score is very much a late twentieth-century preoccupation, foreign to the nineteenth."[2] There are sufficient references to musical performances by contemporary listeners to enable us to get some sort of idea of what went on in earlier times. And as the following chronologically-arranged extracts show, "earlier times" went on until a surprisingly recent date.

1791. In a letter to his wife written in October 1791, two months before his death, Mozart tells her how he played a trick during a performance in Vienna of one of his own operas:

> But during Papageno's aria with the glockenspiel [in *The Magic Flute*] I went behind the scenes, as I felt a sort of impulse to-day to play it myself. Well, just for fun, at the point where Schikaneder [baritone singer, and also the librettist] has a pause, I played an arpeggio. He was startled, looked behind the wings and saw me. When he had his next pause, I played no arpeggio. This time he stopped and refused to go on. I guessed what he was thinking and again played a chord. He then struck the glockenspiel and said "Shut up." Whereupon eveyone laughed. I am inclined to think that this joke taught many of the audience for the first time that Papageno does not play the instrument himself.[3]

1808. Première of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, conducted by the composer, who subsequently wrote to his publisher:

> To begin with, the musicians had lost their places and made a mistake in the simplest passage imaginable. So I stopped them sharply and cried out loud, "Begin it again!" It had never happened to them, and the public signified its satisfaction thereat.[4]

1820. The German composer and conductor Ferdinand Ries makes his first visit to London and finds that at the Philharmonic (then the leading British orchestra):

> It was still the custom at that time, when symphonies and overtures were played, for the pianist to have the score before him, not in order to conduct, but to read along and join in at will—which, when it was heard, produced a deplorable effect. The real conductor was the first violin, who gave the tempi and who, when the orchestra began to falter, gave the beat with this bow.

At the following concert, for the first time a London audience saw a conductor (Ries) use a baton.[5]

1828. During a performance in Paris of Berlioz's "Mélodie pastorale" from *Les Francs-Juges* the chorus . . . miscounted their bars and, getting no help from Bloc [conductor at the Salle de l'Odéon] failed to come in and uttered no sound. Bloc also conducted the opening trombone motif of "Des Sommets de l'Olympe" from *Scène héroïque* at the wrong speed causing confusion amongst the violins when he adjusted the tempo.[6]

1830. At the première of Berlioz's *Sardanopole*, conducted by Grasset [conductor at the Théâtre-Italien] the horns missed a vital cue, the percussion, relying on them, were afraid to come in and the composer, who was standing by, literally threw the score at the orchestra.[7] Little wonder that on another occasion Berlioz expressed his wonder at Liszt's playing Beethoven's *Hammerklavier Sonata* with "not a note . . . left out, not one added."[8]

1837. Mendelssohn on Italian orchestras:

> The two or three violinists play in quite different styles and come in when they please; the wind instruments are tuned either too high or too low; and they execute flourishes in the lower parts like those we are accustomed to hearing in the streets, but hardly so good. . . . I heard a flute solo in which the flute was almost a quarter tone sharp . . .[9]

His comments are backed up by those of Berlioz, in Italy at the same time:

> At the Teatro della Valle [Rome] (a theatre where several Rossini and Donizetti operas had their première) the cello section numbers precisely one player, a man who earns his living as a goldsmith, in which respect he is better off than a colleague in the same orchestra who earns his [living] repairing cane-bottomed chairs. The Apollo is no better appointed except that it boasts two bass drums . . . one in the pit and one on the stage (but as they are hardly ever played in time with each other the effect was like being present at a siege, the cannon from the ramparts replying to the artillery of the besieging army). None of

this is surprising when you consider that the musicians' pay does not exceed three paoli (thirty-three sous) for a session.[10]

1893. A correspondent of *British Bandsman* gave an account of a performance by Old Willesden Brass Band: "To a listener it appeared that several players had the parts of different compositions given to them . . ."

c. 1894. The Arthur Rousbey Grand English Opera Company, one of Sir Henry Wood's first engagements to conduct opera. Prior to joining the company he went to one of their London performances of *Faust*:

> The orchestra was deplorable, the most important instruments being absent; but the conductor attempted to fill in the gaps with his left hand on an upright piano which was not even in tune.[11]

1900. The première of Elgar's *The Dream of Gerontius*, at the Birmingham Festival. The conductor, Richter, was the best in the Britain at the time and anxious to ensure that the choir should understand the unusual character of the writing he had demanded numerous rehearsals. As a result they were over-tired by the performance. "The pitch began to drop and by the time the end of the first part was reached the chorus was about half a tone lower than the orchestra."[12] Mrs Richard Powell ("Dorabella" of *Enigma Variations*) was in the audience and later wrote (having heard the same things but drawing rather different conclusions):

> The chorus had not had enough time to learn their music: the Elgar idiom was like a foreign tongue that cannot be mastered in a few weeks. To crown all, a soloist began one of his "pieces" a semi-tone flat—or was it sharp?—and stuck to it—(bless his heart!).[13]

1913. Distinguished pianist Max Pauer, hearing for the first time a recording of himself, commented:

> Was I, after years of public playing, making mistakes that I would be the first to condemn in any one of my own pupils.[14]

1930s. Of Charles Collier, harpist of the Scarborough Spa Orchestra:

> . . . a close observer of the programmes would note that items, such as "Swan Lake," which included harp cadenzas always came in the second part. This dated from the evening when Collier enjoyed himself too much in the bar during the interval. Caught unprepared for his cadenza in the second half, he made a wild dive for the harp and fell through the strings, being extricated with great difficulty.[15]

1954. Entry in *Grove's Dictionary of Music & Musicians* for the "foremost English trumpeter of his day", Walter Morrow (1850-1937):

> To [the Bb trumpet] , which has merely the tube length of a cornet, Morrow was opposed from the beginning, and although his colleague John Solomon eventually persuaded him to use it and thereby avoid most of the missed notes which not infrequently marred Morrow's performances on the F . . .[16].

For anyone with an interest in the different aims and concepts in the periods before recording (prior to 1895)[17] and those after, particularly regarding brass, Robert Philip's book chapter, "Playing Before Globalization," is required reading.[18] He points out that the result of hearing one's own recordings is that the performer becomes highly self-critical about details. Even in the concert hall musicians aim for technical perfection above everything else. This is also because musicians have to give performances that work for a modern audience.

Philip points out that the practice of playing Bach's high clarino parts on clarinet instead of trumpets goes back to Mendelssohn at Leipzig.[19] He also states that despite the dangers and the inability to edit, recordings from the 1920s and 30s (when musicians had not yet fully developed the modern attitude to technical perfection) have, on the whole, a feel of tremendous liveliness and abandon. He gives examples of this[20], emphasizing that a hundred years ago a musician's task was not the perfect rendering of a score but putting over to the audience what is happening in the music.

This is not to say that all musicians accepted performances in which the composer's intentions were not rendered as faithfully as possible. Outstanding in this regard was Hector Berlioz who from his student days was highly critical of divergences from the written score and was not slow to let everyone know about it. It was also Berlioz who replaced serpent with ophicleide (in the revised *Messe solennelle*) and ophicleide with tuba (in *La damnation de Faust*), although we can only guess his reasons.

To be continued: "God Save Us from the Ancient Serpent," the second in a series of three essays

Notes

1. Longford, E. *Victoria R.I.* London, Weidenfeld/Heron, 1964, pp 81-82.
2. Cairns, D. *Berlioz*. Vol. I: *The Making of an Artist 1803-1832*. London, Cardinal, 1990, p. 138.
3. Quoted in Blom, E. (ed.). *Mozart's Letters*. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1956, p. 262.
4. Quoted in Barzun, J. (ed.). *Pleasures of Music*. London, Readers Union/Joseph, 1954, p. 301.
5. Barzun, 310.
6. Cairns, 259.
7. Cairns, 378.
8. Quoted in Walker, A. *Franz Liszt*. Vol. I: *The Virtuoso Years, 1811-1847*. Ithaca, NY, Cornell, 1987, p. 236.
9. Quoted in Cairns, p. 437.
10. Quoted in Cairns, pp. 474-5.
11. Wood, H. *My Life of Music*. London, Gollancz, 1938/1946, p. 52.
12. Bacharach, A. L. *The Music Masters*. III: *The Romantic Age*. Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1958, p. 144.

13. Powell, M. *Edward Elgar: Memories of a Variation*. London, Methuen, 1937/1949, p. 32.
14. Quoted in Philip, p. 276.
15. Young, K. *Music's Great Days in the Spas and Watering-places*. London, Macmillan, 1968, p. 93.
16. Blom, E. (ed.). *Grove's Dictionary of Music & Musicians*. (5th edn), London, Macmillan, 1954, V, p. 901.
17. The first ever recording was made in 1878 by cornet-player Jules Levy who performed "Yankee Doodle." The first gramophone record was produced in 1895.
18. Philip, R. "Brass Playing Before Globalization," in S. Carter (ed.) *Brass Scholarship in Review*, Hillsdale, Pendragon, 2006, pp. 275-288.
19. Mendelssohn's first Bach performance there was in 1835, the year in which 200 km. away Wieprecht patented the Baß-Tuba.
20. Philip, p. 279.

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