

## Looking At The Past II: “God Save Us from the Ancient Serpent”



An historically-informed performance? Massed serpents before a University of South Carolina football game, 1987.

### Historical Performance Standards: Low Brass

Was Berlioz unique in having “modern” standards? That he was not a lone voice is demonstrated in many of the comments made about the serpent and ophicleide. Several of these are well known, but perhaps their most striking aspect is not so much their gratuitous rudeness as the fact that they were made over such a long period of time.<sup>1</sup>

#### On the serpent:

- c. 1614: “. . . most unlovely and bullocky sound . . .”
- c. 1710, attributed to Handel: “Aye, but not the serpent that seduced Eve”
- 1773: “A great hungry, or rather angry, Essex calf . . .” The writer, Burney, also heard one “over-blown and detestably out of tune.”
- 1830: “the disagreeable effect of which [French provincial choirs] is augmented by the serpent.”
- 1844: “The truly barbaric tone of this instrument would be more suited for the bloody cult of the Druids than for that of the Catholic church . . .”

1845: “the disastrous machine called the serpent . . .”

1859: “produced a howl rather than an intelligible scale . . .”

1883: “the serpent continued its mooing . . .”

? late 19th century: “such an odious affair that nothing short of compulsion could explain its employment . . .”

late 19th century: “God save us from the ancient serpent.”

1986: “a type of ugly and clumsy cornett . . .”

#### On the bass horn:

1844: “might be dropped from the family of wind instruments without the least injury to art . . .”

There is evidence that some of these commentators may not even have heard a serpent. The most breathtakingly arrogant claim was made by Jack Westrup, destined to become Professor of Music at Oxford in 1947, who commented: “Stalwarts . . . are sometimes heard to say that the tone of the serpent was ‘rich.’ But they remain an heroic minority, and I am more inclined to trust the result of my own experiments than a tradition which is probably due to professional pride.”

**On the ophicleide:**

- 1827: "the balance and tone of the basses even at the [Paris] Opéra. . . are smothered by the ophicleides and trombones . . ."
- 1845: "the most foreign sounds to the key of the piece . . ."
- 1846: "produces such an unpleasant sound that it cannot be used indoors because it cannot modify its tone . . ."
- 1849: "eternal boo-boo of a wretchedly-played ophicleide . . ."
- 1850: "playing the ophicleide [,] which obliged Farmer Pinnell to go out of church . . ."
- ? late 19th century: "a chromatic bullock . . ."
- 1902: "its croaking, unmusical and false tones are, to say the least, quite disagreeable . . ."
- 1914: "shockingly defective in intonation . . ."

**Reasons for the Tuba**

It is a truth universally acknowledged that inventions are rarely devised in order to make life more difficult. The bass tuba is a case in point. Another familiar example is given by the humble handsaw and the electric power saw. I have long been aware that while as a Do-It-Yourself enthusiast I use the latter, craftsmen doing similar jobs tend to use the former. Craftsmen have benefitted from tuition, may have served an apprenticeship of some years, and are working with these tools day by day. Constraints of time and ability make it necessary for those like me to adopt the easier Black & Decker way out to have a hope of achieving something reasonably close to their standards.

In light of this, Alan Lumsden, one of the first tutors of historic low brass in modern times, expressed his bemusement when considering that he was often faced with a new student who had no experience of brass playing whatsoever and yet for some reason had formed the idea that it was going to be easier to play serpent or ophicleide than it was to play tuba or euphonium. As many of us have learnt the hard way (a very hard way), there is nothing farther from the truth. No skilled performer on a modern instrument takes up an early one because it's easier to play. The would-be players had perhaps confused the concept of a simple instrument like a serpent with a complex one like a tuba. But they got it completely wrong: while the tuba player is assisted by all those valves and bits and pieces, it is the player alone who has to atone for the deficiencies of the simple serpent.

In the introduction to his 1835 Patent for Baß-Tuba Wilhelm Wieprecht, in charge of Prussian army bands at the time, wrote:

For 10 years now I have been working with military bands, and have felt, I suppose, most sorely the need of a true contrabass wind instrument. None of the bass wind instruments [and he then describes English bass horn, serpent and bass trombone] could fill the place of the wanting contrabass which wind band music demanded. Proof that this need was felt in all countries is offered by the invention of the ophicleide. Although the latter can go only one and one half tones deeper than the English bass horn and the serpent, this instrument was still looked upon as a major advance . . . this would surely indicate how important and advantageous for music is the invention of the chromatic Baß-Tuba, which can descend one octave

lower than the serpent and English bass horn, and six notes lower than the ophicleide, while yet retaining the high notes of these three said instruments.<sup>2</sup>

Here is a perfect example of an invention that not only made things easier but also improved the quality of life (another prerequisite for any successful invention), particularly for low brass players of the time and later—and also for those who had to listen, or march to, Prussian military bands as well as for the composers writing for them. Having heard the instrument for the first time, while on a conducting tour of the German States, Berlioz reported from Brunswick: "as to the ophicleide, there was none of any kind . . . I was offered as a substitute a bass tuba (a magnificent instrument . . .) but the young man who played it did not seem to have thoroughly grasped its mechanism, being uncertain of the true range."<sup>3</sup> He first scored for it in 1846, only three years later (in *La Damnation de Faust*).

No instrument exists in total isolation and the ophicleide suffered as orchestras became bigger and other instruments more powerful in tone, in some cases leading to overblowing and unfavourable comments on the ophicleide and its players. There are, in fact, relatively few orchestral (or other) parts for ophicleide. It is however striking that in the patent specification quoted above Wieprecht is quite generous about the instrument, describing it as "a major advance" over previous low brass. So what was the ophicleide's problem? It was simply that it used a compromised acoustical system, one doomed never to produce the best results because of the inevitable incompatibility of cup-mouthpiece and side finger-holes. Paradoxically, the reverse procedure, fitting a clarinet mouthpiece onto an ophicleide, works well. Horwood<sup>4</sup> is shown playing an ophicleide fitted with a bass clarinet mouthpiece, demonstrating an experiment which may have led Adolphe Sax to his invention of the saxophone. The type of acoustical system predicated by lip vibrations amplified by a cup-mouthpiece and vibrating air-column (a "brass" instrument) requires extra lengths of tubing for changes in pitch (lowering the basic pitch) while a tube vibrated by either a single- or double-reed (woodwind) demands shortening of the tubing, using holes in the side, to raise the basic pitch. The two parts of the generating system need to be compatible to work efficiently.

Why, then, did the serpent remain in use for four centuries? In a sense it was a lucky instrument, beginning life explicitly as an aid for church choirs (in France initially training alongside the singers) and living through the period when the wind band developed in Europe and North America and there was a requirement for strong bass instruments to balance the more audible higher winds. While the serpent may not have been the perfect solution it benefitted from being playable on the march and its ability to join with bassoons, reading from the same music.

**The Act of Performance**

A performance only occurs through quadripartite agreement: instrument-maker, composer, performer and audience. Several of these factions may be represented by the same individual, but in this day and age that is unusual, although in times past a fusion of the first three has been relatively common. The greatest

problem for the historically-informed performer is his or her audience. How historically-informed are its members? Some may be more informed than the performer, but often they are less and frequently their expectations are quite different. Reactions may vary from the audible titters of the unsophisticated through the delighted applause of players of modern valved instruments to the open mouths and wide eyes of children to whom the world is still full of unexpected delights.

As a working volunteer on a heritage steam railway, I share pride in our record of awards for customer service and delight in customer comments on our website. But there is one remark that stays in the memory. This was from a disgruntled individual who complained because a train waited outside his destination station for twenty minutes and, not only that, there was no announcement or explanation from train staff. When I think of the days of mainline steam, one of my strongest recollections is of those mysterious pauses en route, often considerably in excess of twenty minutes. (One that I remember in particular lasted two hours at Newton Abbot on a train from Cornwall to London, causing me to miss a live broadcast.) There is even a well-known poem, by Edward Thomas, inspired by such an event, in which the poet expresses delight with the bird-song he hears during the ensuing silence.<sup>5</sup>

Our complainant had paid to recapture, or discover anew, the delights of an earlier age, but he clearly found one that hadn't met with his approval. He didn't realise that an earlier age may not necessarily also be a Golden Age. Can we actually pick and choose which bits of historical performance to include at our whim as performers?

The answer is "yes." For example, despite the booking office's wall being decorated with Air Raid Warning notices and other 1940s memorabilia, and despite our passengers' delight at being issued with pasteboard tickets date-stamped with an Edmondson finger-cruncher, if we didn't provide a credit-card reading machine for their benefit, we'd soon follow many railway precedents in becoming bankrupt.

There is another instance, literally closer to home, in the house where I now live. It is in a small market town largely destroyed by fire in the eighteenth century, so when rebuilt this was done in the style known as Georgian. When my own house was built eight or nine years ago, it followed this same style: different building materials but similar details, sash windows, pillared porch for the front door and so on. Inside it's up-to-date, as is to be expected. In other words, Georgian exterior, twenty-first-century interior—a pastiche house, hopefully satisfying both passers-by and those who live in it. And that is what we are likely to have to accept if we are aiming for an historically-informed performance, not least because we have to remember that overwhelmingly important element: the equivalent of those who walk by my house, the changing audience.

I remember the comment made by a singer friend, member of a medical family, who remarked that for her to take part in an authentic performance of nineteenth-century Italian opera, most of her audience would need to be suffering from tuberculosis. Maybe a bit overstated, but you'll understand what she meant. Let's assume you're playing ophicleide in a performance of Mendelssohn's *Elijah*. How many of your audience will have

walked the twenty miles there and the twenty miles back home in the way that poor music-loving Lancashire mill-workers were said to do in order to attend oratorio performances in the nineteenth century?<sup>6</sup> How appreciative would they have been after making all that effort, but how physically uncomfortable? Would they have acknowledged the performers' efforts more after, as it were, paying extra for admission through their own physical discomfort, or would their cold and aching feet (think northern England for traditional Christmas performances of *Messiah*, for example) have made it difficult to concentrate on the glories of Handel's majestic choruses? The truth is that we don't know, so we can't factor in any of this to any kind of historically-informed performance. But let us assume that the audience so keenly anticipated the pleasures of the performance that they would accept something less than perfect. What was a 'perfect' performance for them?

And this brings me to the second email, one from a professional tubist/ophicleidist who was involved in an opera production with a score including ophicleide which the enlightened conductor wished to have played on the correct instrument. The first trombone player took strong objection to the decision and mounted a campaign of constant criticism of all aspects of the ophicleide (and its player). Here was someone with entrenched ideas, including one that the lowest part in the low brass section should be played on a tuba. And this is, of course, often the case, but not always the case. This was not so much a musicological problem as a moral one and, asked by the ophicleidist for my advice, it was to tell the first trombone to do something that it would not be appropriate to print in a journal such as this. The advice was taken and with the conductor onside we know who was the inevitable winner. There is an argument that it is not always appropriate to include ophicleide in an orchestra with modern brass, but the decision needs to be made on a case-by-case basis and in this instance the conductor had obviously thought it through. The trombonist's reaction was inexcusable, caused serious upset, and it is a sad thought that there are people in the music profession with such an undeveloped awareness of what may constitute a valid musical interpretation.

**To be continued:** "Travelling into the Past," the third in a series of three essays.

## Notes

1. Attributions and more complete quotations will be found in Bevan: *The Tuba Family*, 2nd ed, Winchester, 2000. Here also will be found some approving comments on the instruments!
2. Translation: Lawson, V. from Bevan, pp. 513-524.
3. Quoted in Bevan, 208-9.
4. Horwood, W. *Adolphe Sax 1814-1894*, Egon, Baldock, 1983, p. 35.
5. Edward Thomas: "Adlestrop". The poem is included in numerous anthologies. Thomas was to die in France in 1917.
6. See B. Rainbow, *The Land Without Music*, London, Novello, 1967, especially pp. 118, 119.

