Clifford Bevan

LOOKING AT THE PAST III:
"Travelling into the Past"
Conclusion

The ophicleide was still in use in some orchestras as late as the end of the nineteenth century, little more than a hundred years ago (probably the reason why there are enough extant instruments to satisfy demand). Yet, by post-World War II it had become unknown except as an exhibit in museums. In the UK it was occasionally revived by members of the Galpin Society whose enthusiasm for early instruments rarely stretched to high standards of performance. When played, it was normally in a short burst as part of a demonstration either of historical instruments or low brass. Some years ago serpentist and ophicleidist Phil Humphries discovered an ancient BBC recording made by a distinguished Galpinite visiting a collection in London who took it upon himself to demonstrate why discerning audiences had often disapproved of the ophicleide (although he didn't actually state this as his intention). It is likely that it was not until trombonist Alan Lumsden took up the instrument in the mid-1960s that it was heard being played seriously.

The original London Serpent Trio: Andrew van der Beek, Christopher Monk, and Alan Lumsden

Others were becoming interested in historical instruments around this time, including Christopher Monk. A history graduate and sometime trumpet student, after service in the Merchant Navy during WWII (the reference from his captain, describing him as "a good plain cook in all weathers," was framed on his toilet wall) he found himself based near Haslemere, Surrey, home of the Dolmetsch family of early music pioneers. Ever curious (his distinctive method of writing his own forename will be found at the foot of this article), Monk constructed his first cornettino in 1955 and three years later made the first broadcast on the cornett. In 1968 he and a colleague devised a method of making cornetts inexpensively from resin.

It took Monk nine months to carve his first serpent from the plank using traditional methods. Anxious to make historical instruments as widely available as possible (and delighting in paradox), he installed in his barn a machine normally used in precision metalworking which enabled him to mass-produce serpents, his first modelled on one of the best extant French instruments, by Baudouin. With Alan Lumsden and Andrew van der Beek he was a member of the London Serpent Trio when it gave its first performance in 1976.

The London Serpent Trio was a totally new concept. How many trios composed for serpent were there? Answer: none. So arrangements of the widest possible repertoire along with new compositions were performed as well as pieces stolen from other early instruments. The whole (successful) idea was to intrigue audiences, often amuse them, always play to the highest standards and also introduce them to music not of our time. And thus we have a revived old instrument and a totally new concept, culminating in the First International Serpent Festival, arranged by Craig Kridel at the University of South Carolina in 1989, and the 1990 Serpent Celebration in London with its 59 performers.

Authentic Performance, Historically-informed Performance or Something Else?

However, it's as well to be aware of the potential dangers of performing at modern standards on historical instruments. Alan Lumsden was one of the pioneers of the so-called authentic performance movement back in the early 1960s, as a member of the legendary Early Music Consort of London and the David Munrow Recorder Consort, an associate of Christopher Monk, an original member of the London Serpent Trio and possibly the first to record on ophicleide.[1] When the Royal Opera planned a production of Berlioz's *Benvenuto Cellini* at Covent Garden, they thought it might be appropriate to include an ophicleide in the orchestra as the composer specified. Readers will recollect that the score includes a famous extended solo, "Cavatine de Pasquerello." Alan was invited to audition and did so with such success that it was considered that the ophicleide sounded like a euphonium and the company consequently economised by having one of their resident trombonists play the part on that instrument, saving the cost of hiring an extra player.

The question is, "What is the difference between the sound of an ophicleide and the sound of a euphonium," and the answer is, of course, that slight tendency for the beginning of notes on the keyed instrument (as on all keyed brass) to be momentarily bent in pitch. But if you play it too well . . . and we do know of one incident that occurred many years ago, during the currency of what we would now call an "historical instrument," when the player initially played 'too well' for the composer.

Mendelssohn saw his first bass horn in the court wind band while on a family holiday in the Baltic city of Bad Doberan and was so taken with its appearance that in a letter to his sister Fanny written on 21 July 1824 he included a sketch and a description in which he likened it to a syringe or watering-can. Following the first performance of his *Midsummer Night's Dream Overture* at Stettin, Prussia (now Szczecin, Poland) on 20 February 1826, in which the orchestra did not include any bass brass instrument, revisions to the score were suggested by his friend Adolph Bernard Marx and it seems likely that it was he who suggested the inclusion of "the clumsy English bass horn [portraying] the boorish Bottom" in contrast to the fairy music elsewhere. Mendelssohn had previously included *Basshorn* in his *Ouvertüre für Harmonie-Musik* which he composed at the age of fifteen for the Bad Doberan band (the instrument quite possibly played by one Seipeldsdorf) and again in his *Trauer-Marsch*, also for wind band, although he left it out of the orchestral version.

Fast-forward to the first English performance of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. This was conducted by Mendelssohn himself on 24 June 1829 at the Argyll Rooms, London, the orchestra having been assembled by Sir George Smart, at the time the prime fixer, mover and shaker in the London music world. Smart was proud of having played timpani in a performance of a Haydn symphony directed by the composer when the player failed to arrive, although he was apparently not conspicuously successful as Haydn himself (the most practical of musicians and Kapellmeister-extraordinary) walked into the orchestra and gave him a timps lesson. (One wonders about the standard of this performance.)

At the first rehearsal of *MSND*, no bass horn player was in evidence. This time Smart didn't volunteer to play the missing part, but he did assure Mendelssohn that the player of what Mendelssohn in a subsequent letter to his sister termed *Bierbaß* (a German folk bass string instrument) would appear. When he arrived, a military musician (probably Jepp of the Coldstream Guards), Mendelssohn had to encourage him not to play *schön* [noble] as instructed by Smart but roughly. Following the rehearsal, Mendelssohn wrote that the player then went off home, taking his part with him. "The scene was divine," he concluded. Was this the first case of the player of a bass brass instrument not playing roughly enough? The question then arises, had Mendelssohn assumed that the bass horn was always played roughly since he had only heard it (and scored for it) previously in wind bands and not in the orchestra?

And another question arises: did Jepp anticipate developments of almost two centuries later?

The Paradox of the Anti-historically-informed-performance Tendency

Unwittingly, the standards of London Serpent Trio—and eventually also other—performers created a musicological problem. Monk and his colleagues were able to take the interpretation and performance of early music seriously, as they had successfully demonstrated elsewhere before even taking up their serpents. But at the same time, quoting Monk's own delight in paradox, since Wagner had composed for serpent could it really be considered "an early music instrument"? [2] Since nobody had ever composed for a trio of serpents before the 1970s could a serpent trio give anything like an "authentic performance"? The members lost no sleep debating these points and others similar; they just delighted in pointing them out.

But it is generally accepted that during the past half-century, and probably for another fifty years before that, performance standards have improved overall, and we might thus be justified in concluding they have improved immeasurably, if gradually, over the past two centuries. Which leaves us with a puzzle: if Handel and Berlioz never heard their works performed at the standards of today, are we exactly paying them homage by playing them as "well" as we do? Sixty years ago, there was no question: ditch those out-of-tune serpents and ophicleides, those

tinkly harpsichords and toneless sackbuts, and let's play music of earlier periods on tubas, on concert grands and large-bore trombones. Yet now we seem to have moved on another stage... or is it simply in another direction, which may appear at some future date to be equally wrong?

In the quest for historically-informed performance, the target may now have been reached and overshot. Modern technology and research have enabled instrument- makers to far surpass the standards of perfection reached by their predecessors.

When the quest began, those aiming to create historical instruments used as their models the best of those still in existence. The pioneering Christopher Monk, for example, initially made a replica of an excellent serpent by a nineteenth-century French maker and thereby produced an instrument admired by all who play it. But recently there have been developments in acoustical investigation and instrument-making technology which have resulted in the creation of serpents that seem to respond to present-day players as perfectly as any "modern" instrument. To the eye there are some noticeable differences from traditional serpents, but they are slight and, as in the case of any musical instrument, what is important is the sound: its character, and the intonation of individual notes. Thus we should expect performances with a greater degree of perfection than any previously reached. But do these instruments do a disservice to the music being performed, the composers who created it and the audiences listening to it? Are these instruments possibly as anarchic in their way as the "squarepents" and other absurdities that have occasionally appeared? Have we travelled too far from the concept of "historically-informed performance"?

What Then of Today?

Our journey has finally brought us to Venice, Pearl of the Adriatic, known to low-brass players through its remarkable and influential musical sons, Andrea and Giovanni Gabrieli. Some readers may have been lucky enough to experience those feelings of awe and elation shared by all who choose to climb to the galleries in St Mark's, the very spots where players of trombone and cornett stood to perform centuries ago.

In a review of a recent book about this fascinating city beneath the headline "Venice: whose city is it anyway?" [3] Roger Lewis noted that it was visited by 21.6 million tourists in 2012, mainly owing to the fact that nothing left over from the past "should be disturbed or changed." English historian John Julius Norwich, setting up the Venice in Peril Fund after the floods of 1966, stated: "Venice belongs to us all. It is part of our own history." (Although the reviewer points out that Norwich didn't save Norwich (England) from developers, or Leeds, or Bath.) He then asks whether anyone bothered to ask what Venetians think. This was historically a place with little sanitation, with rickets, tuberculosis and high infant mortality, and in the cholera epidemic of 1837 of over 43,000 Venetians who caught the disease over 23,000 died. But "the lesson for Venice has been straightforward: 'Anything that besmirched the past or made it harder to discern should not be permitted'."

So here we have a place where, largely owing to the efforts of foreigners, the residents exist in an historically-informed environment (one particularly beneficial to gondoliers and ice cream sellers, it must be admitted). The edifice that concerns us is, of course, musical rather than architectural but the conclusions are largely the same: different listeners will hear different things, just as residents and visitors see this city differently, and their reactions accordingly differ. No wonder there have always been strong feelings about the sounds of serpents, ophicleides, bass horns and the like. Beauty is in the ear of the beholder.

This is a place, following Parts I and II of this essay and having almost reached the end of Part III, for a conclusion. Why do you wish to play instruments that are so much more difficult to tame than modern brass? Do you like the technical challenges of trying to achieve the standards you've already reached on the instrument you've grown to know and love? Are you aiming to recreate for your audiences music as it was conceived by the composers of long ago? In either case you're going to have to accept compromise.

I've been asking about you and you are entitled to ask about me. Why do I play early low brass? The serpent because it is a challenge (though when it's playing well I love the sound and the very flexibility of the intonation). But it does have an animal name after all, and it's as well to stay on guard, with even the best-trained. But the ophicleide . . . oh how beguiling an instrument is that! To me, it combines the best characteristics of both euphonium and tuba. I don't need an external audience; I can just sit playing happily to myself. And I'm just as happy improvising as trying to be historically-informed.

Amongst London orchestral trombonists of my teacher's generation there was a riddle: "What's the difference between a trombone and a sackbut?" Answer: "One guinea." A guinea, or one pound and one shilling in "old money," was the extra fee paid for "doubling": stating fees in guineas (still used in the horse-racing world) was a ploy in wide use in many professions for successfully combining perceived extra worth with actual extra income.

Not that any of today's low brass players would ever think like that . . .

Notes

1. *Music All Powerful: Music to Entertain Queen Victoria*. Argo ZRG596 (LP). Recorded 3 September 1968.
2. Christopher Monk was aware of an elderly serpentist (from Rousinovec in South Moravia) who was still playing for the morning mass as late as the 1950s. With Christopher's involvement with the serpent beginning in the 1950s, the existence of this Czech serpentist suggests that there is, in fact, an unbroken tradition of serpent playing.
3. In *The Times Saturday Review*, London, 23 August 2014. (Review of R. J. B. Bosworth, *Italian Venice: A History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014.)

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