

The Case of the Mysterious F: A Detective Story

by Clifford Bevan

THE MOST RECENT DISCUSSION IN THE HISTORICAL

Instruments Column of the English F tuba was in 2008. The context was an investigation into Vaughan Williams's Tuba Concerto which was composed for, and in 1954 premiered on, one of these instruments played by Philip Catelinet, at the time tubist with the London Symphony Orchestra. The English F is still heard, but now in performances where the sounds of a particular period are being recreated: it has become an historical instrument (although as conveniently small, it has also recently been seen in the orchestra pit).

This was the British orchestral player's instrument of choice from about 1890 to around 1960, a time when orchestras of different countries produced very individual sounds and the orchestral tuba varied in size from the French Small C Tuba (pitched a tone higher than the euphonium) to the BBb tuba favoured in the United States. Despite the tendency of British composers to succumb to Teutonic exemplars, in the woodwind and brass sections French influence was strong. Tenor trombones were narrow-bore "pea-shooters," for example. The F tuba was in effect a compromise between the French C and the EEb commonly found in British brass and military bands (that instrument also French, adopted under the influence of Parisian instrument-maker Adolphe Sax).

In size, the F tuba was relatively small—one distinguished American tubist who should have known better alleged that in a photograph Philip Catelinet was actually holding a euphonium. (Better-informed, Arnold Jacobs chose an English F to make his 1978 recording of the Vaughan Williams Concerto.) In fact, during the period of their manufacture English Fs tended to increase in



size. This is certainly true of the type known as "Barlow Tubas," initially commissioned at the end of the nineteenth century by the first Hallé Orchestra lowest brass player, Harry Barlow, to consistently use tuba rather than ophicleide. (The instrument is now in the Edinburgh University Collection of Historic Musical Instruments.) This was made by the Manchester firm of Higham and had five valves; subsequently, the London firm of Besson undertook production, and it is thought that only fourteen Barlow tubas were made. Of the last three instruments, John Fletcher wrote: "They are arguably the finest tubas in any pitch to be made in this country."

When the British tubist/serpentist/ophicleidist Andy Kershaw recently acquired a previously-unknown F tuba, its small dimensions indicated that it could be a very early instrument, possibly made in the 1870s or 1880s and perhaps the earliest yet found. Previously the earliest known (although not still extant) was the instrument commissioned in 1887 from William Hillyard by the German



conductor Hans Richter for tubist J. H. Guilmartin to play in his London concert series. One of the last F tubas in regular use was played by Stuart Roebuck of Manchester's Hallé Orchestra from 1962 to 1984. This had the most generous dimensions of any, with a bell diameter of 431.8 mm (there was also a recording bell with a 355.6 mm diameter) and second valve-slide diameter of 17 mm. In comparison, Andy Kershaw's instrument has diameters of the bell at 320 mm and the second valve-slide at 18 mm. The overall height is only 680 mm and the mouthpiece receiver is 14 mm diameter. You may find it interesting to compare the dimensions of your own favourite tuba.

The two accompanying photographs give an idea of the general appearance of the instrument. The maker is given as "Besson & Co, 198 Euston Road, Class A," dating the instrument to later than 1895. (The style of the maker's name is an important indicator of the date of the instrument since at different times this was shown as "F. Besson" or simply "Besson.") The number on the main valve cluster is 12560. (Most other British makers put the serial number on the bell.) The rather unusual positioning of the main-slide and valve-slides is found on other early Besson tubas. In common with the majority of brass instruments made in Britain before the turn of the century, the main-slide has been lengthened to lower the pitch from A=453 Hz to A=440 Hz. Other aspects are less usual. For example, the very long mouthpipe enters the instrument via the fifth valve. In general, makers of tuba family instruments try to design them in such a way that the distance from mouthpiece to valve cluster is as short as possible, allowing the greatest possible length to the important conical section, a major contributor

to the instruments' distinctive sound. However, in this case it has to be admitted that the timbre in all registers, from highest to the deepest pedals, is full and round.

British low brass players tend to favour instruments built on D. J. Blaikley's compensating system, devised in 1874, some twenty years before Barlow decided on his system of five valves to accomplish the same aim. Blaikley was, however, Boosey's works manager and other manufacturers had to find different methods of improving intonation. So was this instrument the first English F as indicated by its small bell and overall size? Was it a previously unknown early Barlow Tuba, in fact, bringing the total made to around fifteen?

The mystery intensifies as more problems come to light. Note, for instance, the diameter of the second valve-slide. In view of the small size of the bell and of the instrument as a whole, this should surely also be small. Yet, it is actually larger than that of the last Barlow instrument, that played by Stuart Roebuck into the 1960s. On the basis of the photographs, the Manchester instrument-repairer Derek Farnell (who incidentally served his apprenticeship with Mayers & Harrison, successors to Higham) confirms the early date of the instrument on the evidence of the rounded knuckles, typical of Besson instruments of the time, but wonders about the fourth and fifth valves which almost look as though they might have been added to a three- or four-valve instrument. Professor Arnold Myers, curator emeritus of the Edinburgh University Collection, states that the number of medals given on the bell (50) puts it at 1895 or later, and the instrument's number of 12560 dates it to 1933, just before Bessons left their Euston Road address. One thing seems certain: this instrument is not a Barlow Tuba. It is, however, without doubt a five-valved F tuba built on English lines. The instrument could consist of a circa 1871 body, rebuilt with 1933 valves and a long lead-pipe necessitated by its entering the instrument at the fifth valve (perhaps added later), rather than the first, as is normal. The diameter of the mouthpiece receiver indicates that this was done at a relatively late stage in the development of this type of instrument although the wide diameter at the second valve slide remains a mystery. The bell itself can be dated to sometime between 1895 and 1933.

How many players have owned this instrument is not known, and another mystery is how many hands played a part in making what is certainly a unique tuba. Ultimately, of course, we're dealing not with an artefact but with a musical instrument constructed to carry out a particular function. How does it sound; how does it blow? Certainly, in the hands of its present owner, very well indeed. ■