

# DON'T DERIDE THE OPHICLEIDE

The way my maternal grandfather died was like this:

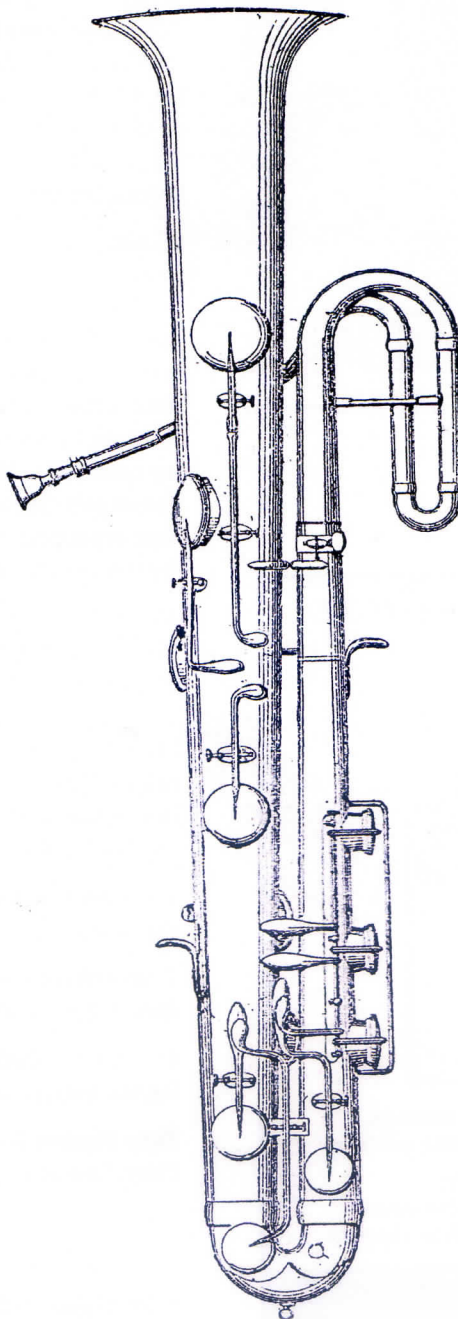
Bill was a steam-powered, agricultural engine driver, retired by the time I knew him. I couldn't understand a word he said in his strong rural southern accent, and he couldn't understand a word I was saying in my northern industrial city accent. But we got on immensely well during the annual fortnight's holiday that the family spent with him and my grandma.

One day my Aunt Win visited them in their village. "Here you are, Dad," she says to Grandpa, giving him half-a-crown. "Go down the pub and buy yourself a drink so I can have a nice chat with Ma." So Grandpa trots off down the path to the high street, through the door of the pub, and buys himself a pint. He drinks it...and drops down dead.

The thing is—he drained his glass first. Grandpa Bill was a good man, and that was the way he deserved to leave this wicked world.

Despite certain difficulties in verbal communication, I had gathered one thing from Grandpa: he didn't hold too much with book-larnin'. Mind you, don't get me wrong. A bit of book-larnin' never did anybody much harm, but we all know the dangers of having too much of a good thing. And what I'm particularly concerned about is the danger of accepting as total truth everything we see in print.

In recent years I have read statements by brass researchers about the ophicleide that caused me concern. The instrument has been described as unwieldy, unable to produce louder volumes, and not possessing clear articulation or the traditional brass sound we know today. It seems to me that these comments may have been made



*Ophicleïde, from Lavignac's La Musique et les Musiciens, Paris, 1895*

by people who have never actually heard an ophicleide, something I find extremely odd coming from a country where most if not all symphony tubists are expected to be able to perform Mendelssohn's *Ein Sommernachtstraum* on the instrument. If these brass authors-critics were writing about paintings, would they form their opinions without having stood in front of the works of art? Should you yourself play ophicleide, or if you have heard a live or recorded ophicleide performance, you will understand why I am questioning the validity of these statements. But what is the source of this apparent distaste for the instrument?

If we look back to those who made comments about the ophicleide during the first years of its existence, we will, of course, find a variety of opinions. The first major composer to use the instrument was Berlioz, who included ophicleide in 24 scores, in some cases specifying more than one. Berlioz was a composer with a particular interest in musical instruments, their construction, and capabilities. He was also the author of the first (and still one of the best) books on instrumentation. Of the ophicleide he wrote an objective assessment:

excellent for sustaining the lowest part of massed harmonies. In the higher range it is agile, but less so in the lower, and staccato passages are scarcely practicable for fast tempos...the sound of the low notes is rough, but in certain cases, under a mass of brass instruments, it works miracles. The highest notes are of a ferocious character which has not yet been utilized appropriately. The medium range, especially if the player is not skilled, recalls too closely the tone of the serpent and cornett; I believe that it should rarely be used without the cover of other instruments.

## Allegretto

The image shows a musical score for the aria "O Ruddier Than the Cherry" by George Frideric Handel. The score is written in bass clef, 2/4 time, and B-flat major. It consists of four staves of music. The first staff starts with a piano (*p*) dynamic. The second staff is marked with the number 9. The third staff is marked with the number 17 and features a complex, rapid sixteenth-note passage. The fourth staff is marked with the number 23 and ends with a mezzo-forte (*mf*) dynamic. The score concludes with a double bar line.

G. F. Handel: "O Ruddier Than the Cherry" (Acis & Galatea, 1718). These are the final 27 bars of a direct transcription of an aria sung by the giant Polyphemus in the opera.

Here speaks a composer and conductor, a totally practical musician, who has met with "not skilled" players (haven't we all) and whose ability to critically analyze tone-colours was crucial to his chosen composing style.

He had the artistic luxury of creating orchestral works, but how about the fiercely practical world of the military band? Here, too, there is no doubt that the ophicleide fulfilled a long-felt want. It was a French invention, and by 1836 in Paris alone there were 60 ophicleide players, most of them attached to military organizations. The instrument also quickly found its way into the United States (probably manufactured there by 1835), Britain (1830), Spain (1828), and other European countries.

So why have such contemporary critical comments appeared in print, recorded for all time and for all readers? Especially when the critiques seem misguided??

### An Inability to Produce Louder Volumes

An analysis of Berlioz's compositions does show that he marks the ophicleide parts at the dynamic level of piano on only 110 occasions but forte on as many as 427. Then we have the enthusiastic comments of British author and journalist G. A. Sala: "Mr Balfe has added an enormous ophicleide to the band which absolutely blows one out of the house [Drury Lane Theatre]."

Is there a sense of exaggeration here? (He was, after all, writing about a contrabass ophicleide.) But bear in mind that the ophicleide is actually an instrument that can still hold its own. It is regularly found playing its part alongside a modern trombone section in performances of works by Mendelssohn, Berlioz, and others. The blend and balance are good and there are no problems with the strength of its tone. An ophicleide naturally appears on the Grimethorpe Colliery

Band recording, *The History of Brass Band Music: The Early Years* (DOY CD162).

Belgian musicologist François Fétis issued these cautionary comments when considering the instrumental support of voices: "As for the use of the ophicleide to play the tenor parts, this is barbarous; for the big tone of the instrument is not suitable for this intermediate part; the volume of the tube must be proportionate to the character of the voice." (He might have been writing about the euphonium.)

### Unclear Articulation is Inherent in its Technique

One of the most popular pieces in the solo ophicleide player's repertoire in the mid-19th century (and still today) is Handel's "O, Ruddier Than the Cherry." With its wide leaps and long runs of sixteenth notes, this piece calls for dexterity and, particularly clarity, for success. And audiences applauded it then, just as they do now.

### Still Does Not Possess the Traditional Brass Sound We Know Today

Here we can call on more recent events. When pioneering English ophicleidist Alan Lumsden introduced the instrument as a solo voice to amazed music-lovers listening to the 1969 recording, *Music All Powerful: Music to Entertain Queen Victoria*, they may have noted his tone-quality. He was invited to play ophicleide to a committee debating whether to use the ophicleide in a forthcoming production of a Berlioz opera at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. After his demonstration, they decided that the instrument sounded like a euphonium and asked one of the resident trombonists to play the part on his eupho. The assertion that the ophicleide does not produce "the traditional brass sound we know today" seems to have been authoritatively demolished here. Berlioz (who knew the ophicleide at first hand) considered that "In the higher range it is agile,"

while admitting that it was "less so in the lower." (Nothing unusual there.) But what of the disapproving comments of the horn-player and composer Henri Kling: "It has gradually and justly been put aside, as its croaking, unmusical and false tones are, to say the least, quite disagreeable...as a solo instrument it would be quite disgusting." (Think of the many audiences in the 19th century who paid good money to be disgusted.)

Cecil Forsyth wrote: "shockingly defective in intonation." (In this same book on orchestration Forsyth included the serpent under the heading "obsolete wood wind instruments"). Both of these comments were made in the early years of the 20th century, at a time when the number

of ophicleidists in the world was at its lowest. It is quite certain that Kling and Forsyth had never actually heard the instrument.

Today we can make up our own minds. Thanks to YouTube, which brings the world into our homes, there are opportunities to hear the true sounds of the ophicleide. But here is a warning: there are some unfortunate performances to be found, just as there are some tuba solos that would have been better left until the player had mastered his instrument. But as a starting-point, the recommendation is to simply type in "Fantaisie Johann Hummel (ophicleide basse solo)." Here Patrick Wibart performs what all ITEA members will identify as a typical 19-century air-varié. If you're taken by this

(as you will be), the next step is up to you.

A surprising number of ophicleides are still in existence, and many are being played by tubists, euphoniumists, and trombonists. If there is any possibility of borrowing one, take it. As befits an instrument designed to operate in both bass and tenor ranges, the typical mouthpiece is smaller than that for a tuba, larger than that for a euphonium. Don't worry that the instrument has keys rather than valves. I'd never played a keyed instrument before I tried ophicleide for the first time. You'll find that the keywork is arranged in such a way that your fingers automatically fall into their right positions. Once you apply the mouthpiece and blow, you will feel the magic! Believe me, it

is the most wonderful experience, although the danger is that it is so beguiling it can easily become addictive.

Here is an instrument that is comfortable to finger, easy-blowing, and if your ears are already trained to help you play in tune, then there are really very few intonation problems.

But there must be a downside?

Yes. You're going to have to work very, very hard to persuade the instrument's owner to let you keep it for a bit longer...and then a bit longer still...and then even longer...

(But every downside has its upside: you won't have to wait too long for another to come up for sale in its place. They're being discovered all the time.)