

## Pure or Practical?

by Clifford Bevan

### Pure or Practical? Which are you?

A few years ago the British Trombone Society considered augmenting its membership (and funds) by allowing tuba-players to join. When the suggestion was put to the vote, the members gave a huge thumbs-down to the idea that their organization for those blowing straight and “slidey” things should accept those blowing curly things with valves. What was strange about this decision, it was pointed out by some of the more enlightened, was that quite often slidey things and curly things are blown by one and the same person (though rarely simultaneously).

On this occasion the purists had won—membership included those who are addicted to the trombone and solely the trombone; those who tolerate tubas (and other instruments) only because they are a necessary accompaniment to their trombone parts; and those who find it impossible to understand why anyone would want to play a tuba (or a piano, a cello, or piccolo) when they could instead play trombone. But don’t misunderstand me. This condition isn’t restricted to trombonists. Players of other instruments can suffer from it, too—even players of the tuba. You may know some.

The contrasting outlook is that of Mrs., Ms., Miss, or Mr. Practical. This is the one who will take over the euphonium part if the player is absent, or put down the trombone and blow tuba if that’s the only way to provide the band with the missing bass notes. This attitude can become part of the job for low brass professionals. Since no one can make a living as a cimballo player, the opera house tubist has to be prepared to finger what is in effect a contrabass trombone. Think of those parts in musicals when the bass trombonist needs to double on tuba, or where the tubist or trombonist oils the valves of her euphonium when it’s time

for Holst’s *The Planets* or Strauss’s *Ein Heldenleben*. These are simply facts of professional life. And for the session player, the list of facts can be quite a bit longer.

Is this practical attitude a modern development or are there historic precedents?

In fact, historically it was the norm. Find in your music dictionary any great name from the past and look at the list of this distinguished practitioner’s activities. There is Mozart the composer, keyboard player, and violinist; Handel the composer, organist, and impresario; and less eminent musicians such as Stephen Storace, the 18th-century composer, musical director, double bass player, and designer of firework displays for Marylebone Gardens in London. If the tuba had been invented, perhaps he would have chosen that instrument instead of string bass.

You don’t have to be reminded that players of bass instruments tend to be obscure, except perhaps to other players of bass instruments. We therefore know relatively little about them. When I was writing *The Tuba Family* some years ago, I was interested to find references to a serpent-player named Le Riche who provided information to James Talbot for his research on musical instruments (conducted between 1685–1701).<sup>1</sup> Other than knowing that Le Riche was “one of the most renowned of contemporary players” of the serpent, there seemed to be no more information on this particular ancestor of ours.<sup>2</sup> More details of Le Riche have come to light and provide interesting evidence of the working life of a professional player in the 17th and 18th centuries. Francis Le Riche, or François La Riche, was probably born in 1662 at Tournai, then in the south Netherlands. By 1685, he had come to England and was given a warrant and sworn in as “Base[s]” (bassoon or bass violin) in his majesty’s private

musick at an annual salary of £30, the equivalent today of about £2,050 or \$4,000. Later that year, he and composer Henry Purcell received their certificate of appointment, indicating that Le Riche moved in high musical circles.

By November 1687, he was one of the stewards at the St. Cecilia’s Day Festival along with Jeremiah Clarke, composer of the tune we now know as “Trumpet Voluntary,” and a benefit concert was held for the two of them at Hickford’s Room. Later that year a benefit solely for Le Riche was held at York Buildings, which included performances of some of his own compositions. In 1689, William and Mary ascended their thrones, and Le Riche shortly found himself out of a job. How he earned a living is uncertain; however, in June 1691 a notice to pay “La Rush . . . and one more hautboys” was issued for “attending his Majesty unto Holland.” The musicians on this tour consisted of seven trumpeters, a kettle-drummer, “20 Musicians and five Hooboyes,” one of whom was Le Riche.

Sadly he was not one of the four-and-twenty musicians appointed the following year, but his versatility fitted him for a freelance career. It is likely that he was the serpent player when John Eccles’s semi-opera *Rinaldo and Armida* was performed at Lincoln’s Inn Fields Theatre in London. (The serpent part is reprinted in *The Tuba Family*.)<sup>3</sup> He is one of the only two serpentists we know of in London at the time, and there is at least one other reference to his involvement with that particular theatre. James Brydges, later to become the formidably rich Duke of Chandos, noted that he heard Le Riche play in a consort in March 1697. The following year he played at Cannons, the duke’s vast house, where George Frideric Handel was to become director of music in 1717.

Le Riche was also an oboist, a

*Kammermusicus*, in Dresden, where he performed in 1700, although in September of that year he appeared in an interval entertainment at Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre advertised as "by the famous Mons. Li Rich, lately arrived from the Court of Poland: being the only and last time of performing the said entertainment, or any other, by reason of his sudden return to the said kingdom." Also in 1700, he took part in the wedding celebrations in Berlin of the Crown Prince of Hesse-Cassel and the Princess of Brandenburg, and two years later he played there in opera performances. In 1716, the eminent German composer Georg Phillip Telemann dedicated his *Kleine Kammermusic* to four oboists, one of whom was "François Le Riche (Dresden)" who had probably played in the first performance at Frankfurt that year. In addition, Le Riche acted as an agent for the King of Poland (also the Elector of Saxony) in the purchase of foreign goods. In 1702, for instance, he provided the king with fifteen English horses, earning him a considerable annual income of 3,200 thalers in comparison to 250–600 thalers for other musicians and

1,200 thalers for the first violinists.

By 1727, Le Riche had retired as a musician but clearly was extremely active in the field of international commerce. Johann Joachim Quantz, a member of the King's Orchestra in Dresden and flute teacher to the Crown Prince Frederick of Prussia, wrote before journeying to England: "La Riche, the former chamber oboist in Dresden and a friend of mine for many years, had sent me an open letter addressed to his correspondent, a merchant in London, on the basis of which I could draw as much money as I needed." The distinguished woodwind instrument maker Peter Bressan lived in Tournai during the last two years of his life, and one witness to his will in 1731 was "jean Chmielensky domestique au Sieur LeRiche." Le Riche is last acknowledged in Dresden court records for 1733.

What impressions did you have of the pace of life in the olden days? Had your predecessor musicians the advantages of a slow and leisurely lifestyle, with job security and plenty of time off for fishing and playing quoits? An account of Le Riche's activities provides a fairly graphic

answer to this question. He must have had time to practise for a good eight hours a day, except when he was commuting between London, Berlin, Frankfurt and Dresden; playing serpent or oboe; providing material for a major musicological work; composing; and acting as agent for the King of Poland. You don't get much more practical than that.

#### Notes

1. Clifford Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, 2nd edition. Winchester: Piccolo Press, 2000.
2. As a matter of interest, James Talbot's description of the serpent is so precise that we know not only all the dimensions but also the materials of which it was constructed. His day job was Regius Professor of Hebrew at Cambridge University. Le Riche also provided Talbot with a double curtal [a type of early double bassoon] and tablature [fingering-chart] for the oboe.
3. Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, pp. 108–109.

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