

New wine for old bottles

by Craig Kridel



Peter Schickele (left) in full song with singers and serpentists at the 2005 performance of *O Serpent* (photo credit: Richard Termine)

Through the years many hopeful composers have contacted me inquiring about the possibilities of writing for historical brass instruments. The question is not as particularly strange as it may seem. The American resurgence of interest in the serpent, beginning at the 1986 Amherst Early Music Festival, featured the world premiere composition, *The Amherst Suite for Eight Serpents*, which was aired on ABC radio and broadcast throughout the United States. I had not given too much thought to these queries until this past summer at the 2009 Early Brass Festival, held at Connecticut College, where I heard a brilliant presentation, "New Wine for an Old Bottle: Contemporary Music for the Natural Horn," by Dr. Jeffrey Snedeker, one of the country's leading natural horn players, current President of the International Horn Society, and Professor of Horn at Central Washington University. Snedeker mentioned

that much "early music" scholarship represents discoveries of historical and interpretive aspects of the music and instruments; yet, he states, "an interesting by-product of the historically-informed performance movement has been a number of new compositions written for certain of these historical instruments, perhaps most noticeably the surprising number of contemporary compositions for the natural horn." His tabulations note over 60 modern pieces for natural horn, premièred and published for the instrument in various solo, chamber, and orchestral settings.

No other historical brass instrument has received greater attention, but interestingly many noteworthy works have been composed in recent years for historical low brass. While I do not suggest the serpent or ophicleide as the first venture for the neophyte composer, I thought *ITEA Journal* readers would be interested in a brief overview of some of

these new works as I encourage composers to explore further the growing capabilities of today's instrumentalists and underscore lessons from those who have ventured into this unusual musical terrain.

Certainly, the leading serpentist of modern music is Michel Godard, the renowned European jazz tubist and serpent player extraordinaire. A recognized composer as well as player, Michel has written *Serpens Secundo*, a work for solo serpent as well as received various commissions from Radio France and the French Ministry of Cultural Affairs. His many available recordings offer aspiring historical brass composers a wonderful primer to post-modern serpent techniques and repertoire. Insights for players and composers arise from these works, including how an instrumentalist's unique capabilities can guide compositions in new and innovative directions. Godard's recordings and improvisatory works are much too numerous to list; I encourage



Above: Douglas Yeo, with Simon Proctor and John Williams, after performing the Procter *Serpent Concerto* at Symphony Hall with the Boston Pops Orchestra, 1997.



Simon Proctor

readers to visit his websites at <http://michel-godard.fr/> and <http://www.michelgodard.fanspace.com/custom4.html>.

The best-known “modern” composer for the serpent may be none other than P.D.Q. Bach and his compositional “rediscoveries,” one being *O Serpent* for three singers and serpentists and representing the distinctive choral tradition of the serpent. This piece’s world premiere was originally announced in an *USA Today* article and portions were aired on National Public Radio’s Morning Edition. A recording of *O Serpent*, sans serpent, has recently been released on P.D.Q. Bach and Peter Schickele: *The Jekyll and Hyde Tour* and the last fully-staged performance occurred at the 2005 P.D.Q. Bach holiday New York City concerts, *A 40-year Retrogressive: An overview of classical music’s underbelly*, with a photograph appearing in the *New York Times* (confirming the general public’s interest in either the unusual shape of the serpent or the concert dress of Peter Schickele). Other well-known composers-musicians have turned their attention to the serpent. Boston Symphony Orchestra trombonist Norman Bolter composed *Temptation* for serpent and string orchestra. Drake Mabry, American-French composer, has written *Quatra Tanka* for serpent & soprano, and most recently, Thérèse Brenet, faculty at the Paris Conservatory and recipient of the First Grand Prix de Rome in musical

composition, composed *De Bronze et de Lumière* for solo serpent which was premiered this past summer at the Early Brass Festival and Amherst Early Music Festival.

Among those currently writing for historical low brass are musicologists as well as composers. Clifford Bevan, author of *The Tuba Family*, has written numerous works including two compositions with allusions to 19th century choral idioms set within modern contexts. *Les Mots de Berlioz* for choir, buccin, serpent, and ophicleide (with words by Hector Berlioz from a letter written in 1825 after the performance of *Messe solennelle* in Paris) and *Mendelssohn’s Seasons* for choir, natural horn, trombone, English bass horn, and ophicleide (with words by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow) bring forth historical and idiomatic dimensions of modern and ancient sounds. While Bevan is quite familiar with historical low brass, being an orchestral tubist and

well-known serpent and ophicleide player, he nonetheless is a careful and extremely well informed composer when working with related instruments. For example, in *Mendelssohn’s Seasons*, his requests of the natural horn intentionally draw upon notes outside of the harmonic series for different textures and dynamic qualities; here he was informed by the enharmonic scale from Gallay’s *Methode complete pour le cor* (c 1845). Bevan’s compositions serve as a reminder not to expect historical low brass to replicate the sounds and abilities of their modern counterparts. A careful listening of his works displays the characteristic and unique sounds of ensemble play but also reminds the aspiring composer to “know thy horns.”

Perhaps the most prolific composer for “unusual” low brass is Simon Proctor of England. Proctor has a long history with the serpent, composing the *Amherst Suite* and what is thought to be the first serpent concerto, written for Alan Lumsden in

1989 and featured on National Public Radio. This work was later performed in 1997 by Douglas Yeo on Boston Pops Orchestra concerts under the direction of John Williams. A portion of Proctor's ophicleide concerto has been recorded by Nick Byrne on the 2006 award-winning CD, *Back from Oblivion*, and he has also written a concerto for keyed bugle and many other works for serpent (as well as compositions for the glass armonica and for multiple recorders for the single player). During a 2008 interview, Proctor discussed his approach to composing for historical instruments. When describing his interest in the serpent and ophicleide, he admits to being naturally drawn by their distinctive sound but, as a non-player, went about educating himself to their various types of sounds and textures for each note. He knew that on first appearance the serpent seemed comical; however, he sought to place in juxtaposition the humorous and serious elements of the instrument, finding that in the upper register the serpent could surprise and beguile the listener with its singing tonal quality and warm, controlled sound. Proctor, who describes himself as a composer working within traditional symphonic conventions (i.e., he enjoys a sense of melody), conceives his concerti in relation to specific performers. In fact, he feels that his conversations with players have allowed him to bring new dimensions to the instrument as part of an

unexplainable creative process.

In no way could this brief introduction identify all of the new works that have been written for historical low brass, but I have attempted to feature a few of those published and premiered compositions that represent different genres of the instruments. Whether attracted by the visual appearance of the serpent, or intrigued by the sounds of the ophicleide, or merely amused with the thought of writing for the unusual, these composers have brought forth new understandings of the functions and capabilities of these instruments. While much attention has been devoted to the serpent, other historical bass horns—the serpent Forveille, early cimbasso, ophimoncleide, English bass horn—all bring different characteristics and unique musical roles that are now being explored by instrumentalists. The informed and inspired composer, with curiosity and a sense of adventure, will have many interesting opportunities to create new works for old horns in the years to come.

Notes (*not all of the featured works have been recorded*):

Michel Godard's *Serpens Secundo* (DMP 0438) is published by Drake Mabry Publishing [www.drakemabrypublishing.com].

O *Serpent* by P.D.Q. Bach appears on *P.D.Q. Bach and Peter Schickele: The Jekyll and Hyde Tour* (Telarc CD-80666).

Norman Bolter's *Temptation* for serpent & string orchestra is published by Air-EV Productions [www.air-ev.com].

Drake Mabry's *Quatra Tanka* for soprano and serpent is published by Drake Mabry Publishing [www.drakemabrypublishing.com] and appears on *Le Monde du Serpent* [www.yeodoug.com].

The Serpent Concerto (Su510) and the *Lyrical Concerto* for tuba and other instruments (Su528) by Simon Proctor is published by Southern Music Company [www.southernmusic.com] and appears on *Le Monde du Serpent* [www.yeodoug.com].

The Ophicleide Concerto by Simon Proctor appears on *Back from Oblivion*, Melba Recordings of Australia (MR 301111) [www.melbarecordings.com.au].

Clifford Bevan's *Les Mots de Berlioz* (Full Score, PP0066; Vocal Score PP0067) is published by Piccolo Press [www.piccolopress.info] and appears on *Le Monde du Serpent* [www.yeodoug.com].

Mendelssohn's Seasons by Clifford Bevan (Full Score with natural horn, trombone, English bass horn, ophicleide, PP0065; Full Score with horn, horn, trombone, tuba, PP0065m; Vocal Score PP0064) is published by Piccolo Press [www.piccolopress.info].