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Art and Craft

by Clifford Bevan

Surfers call it the “alchemy hour”: the magical moment when they enjoy ideal wave conditions. Brass players have an equivalent: when the lip is in, you’ve eaten and drunk enough but not too much, you’re relaxed but attentive and your breath control is just so. For tubists there’s the sense of fulfilment from knowing you’re the one supporting the entire ensemble and for euphonium players the delights of effortlessly soaring and dipping through those counter-melodies and solo passages. When you’re feeling good, you can effortlessly bring your artistry to bear upon the music you’re performing.

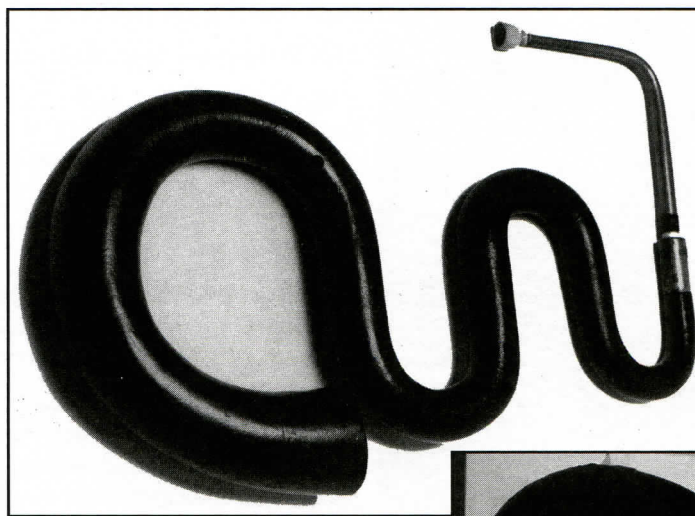
It’s easy to forget that the reasons you can do this began all those years ago when you blew your first few tentative notes, continued under the benevolent guidance of teachers who realized you had that something special and ultimately resulted from your own decision to practice scales and arpeggios when the other kids were playing ball in the street outside. In other words, you perfected the craft of playing, the techniques that enable you now to bring your art to audiences. And, of course, there is another important element: the instrument, one that you probably chose after investigating a number of models.

How different things were 200 years ago is shown by this extract from a letter written by the Deputy Adjutant-General of the Royal Artillery, England:

“I saw with the Duke of Kent’s Band the other day, what is called a Base Horn, for which James & William Power, 36 Tighe Street, Dublin have a patent. I have received the Master General’s directions to write to Colonel Manley to order one to be made for the Artillery Band.”

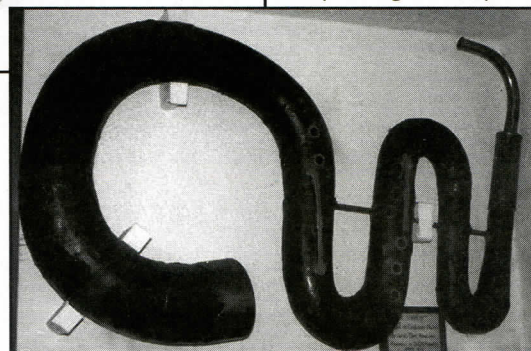
Note the words underlined. Buying a new instrument back then was not just a matter of going to the nearest music store, trying out several horns, and then collecting your favorite one. The instrument had to be made individually. (And, as it happens, two years later Master of the Band Mr. Eisenherdt ordered a second bass horn, a type of upright serpent, to be made by Messrs Power.)

The first representation of a normal, French-type church serpent (*serpent d’église*) in England appeared in 1779–81, in Zoffani’s painting of the Sharp family where it is held by James Sharp [see photograph]. It is likely that he bought the serpent in France during his Grand Tour. The serpent described in James Talbot’s Manuscript c. 1685–1701 (almost 100 years earlier) is also clearly of the French type—not surprisingly as it was provided for him by the leading player in London at the time,



Left: French serpent by Christopher Monk, Surrey, 1984. Photo by Sally Craig Harvey.

Below: English serpent by Cramer & Son, London now in St Andrew’s church, Owslebury, Hampshire. Photo by Sally Craig Harvey.



Francis Le Riche, who was himself French.

Christopher Monk described the French church serpent as consisting of the types

of curves that delight Frenchmen, while the later English military serpent was squatter in form and, with metal stays, much more rugged in construction, summed-up by Monk as being useful on the battlefield because if all else failed you could use it to hit your enemy! As a further indication of differences in approach between nationalities, the Parisian instrument-maker Piffault, active around 1806, made a military serpent (*serpent militaire*) that anticipated the shape of the saxophone.¹

Many English serpents were made by people not known to have built more than a single such instrument. There is an example in the hill-village of Owslebury, about five miles from my home. This is on display in a glass case in the 700-year-old church and is well documented with a note telling us that it was played by James Dyke about 1840 [see photograph]. It is of high quality, with the name of the supplier, Cramer & Son of 20 Pall Mall, London, beautifully engraved in brass. Pall Mall, situated close to Buckingham House (as it then was) and the Guards’ barracks, is in the heart of establishment London. Cramer was in business from about 1785 to 1828 but, significantly, no other serpent by him is known: although he described himself as a “martial musical instrument maker” his other surviving instruments are clarinets.

What was it like to be a maker, a craftsman, at that time...

which, of course, was exactly the same as being a craftsman at any previous time? Cramer's men turned out fine instruments for the best players, and it is true to say that certain retailers offered serpents from stock (for example, D'Almaine of London in 1839—sadly for him when the demand for serpents had passed its peak). But there are indications that village craftsmen were also able to produce serpents. Just occasionally their names are known: Mr. Dobb of Breage, Cornwall (1860) and George Lander of Mere, Wiltshire (1763–1843), whose copper serpent still exists.

My blacksmith son, Chris, who happens to live in Owslebury, came across an illuminating book by the wheelwright George Sturt, *The Wheelwright's Shop*, which indicates that many a village craftsman was capable of turning his hand to a wide range of work.² There is, for example, in Owslebury church a large oak chest made in 1602 from a single piece of oak to accommodate the parish registers. In view of what Sturt has to say, there is no doubt that the techniques used would have been very similar to those involved in making serpents, essentially the use of adze and axe in hollowing out the wood until, in the case of the church chest, the walls that remained were substantial, although in the case of a serpent they would be very thin and also very smooth.

Sturt himself worked in the area where Christopher Monk later lived, taking over the family business in 1885 at the beginning of a period of extreme change. Up to that time in rural England all activities were focused locally, time and money had no relevance, things took as long to do as they took, and the quality of materials and suitability of the product for purpose were paramount. It was not a recipe for riches: Sturt's employees lived only just above the poverty line, and he himself not much higher. But neither he nor they expected better.

Reading what the wheelwright has to say of his approach, a craftsman in wood, on being asked to make a serpent (and it's not impossible that this could be made by the village wheelwright for he was called upon to make many different wooden objects), would first of all look at his stock of timber, cut and kept carefully for many years while seasoning, to find suitable lengths for making the instrument. For this particular purpose he would generally choose hardwood from a fruit tree. The curves would present no problem: the wheelwright was accustomed to building his wagons with curves rather than straight sides, the curve serving the ends of usefulness and strength. (And they were always produced by planing and shaving, never by bending.) Using as a model an instrument from a neighbouring village, he would begin by copying the serpent using "eyework" rather than a measuring tape, he would make sure that it was the right size for the player in his village, the holes in the convenient places for the player's fingers, and that it would be fully appropriate for its function.

He would doubtless call on the services of the village blacksmith for the metalwork; the iron keys (all secured to the instrument's body with screws individually made), metal stays, and the brass bocal caused no problem for a man who had served a seven-year apprenticeship. The military serpent might really need to be hefty enough to use as a weapon of last resort. Serpents in England were played in the often boisterous environments of village bands (in and out of church) not amidst the fragrance of incense as in France. In early years, they would have been based on French serpents but modifications would soon have been made as English makers produced instruments for use in these very different surroundings. Gary Stewart, a 20th

century restoration specialist, concludes that "as serpents were changed and improved in England, they seem to have become generally shorter."³ It would appear that the English serpent evolved over time, probably from around 1700 until about 1800. The serpent depicted on Thomas Maynard's gravestone (a village player who died in 1807) is clearly of the English type.

It took Christopher Monk nine months to make his first serpent, carving it by hand in the way of the old craftsmen. He was only able to make later instruments affordable by investing in a high-tech machine normally used in the production of aircraft parts. So the 18th-century serpent would have been relatively expensive in terms of both time and materials, normally paid for by officers from the local gentry who maintained the militia and its band.

By 1815, the basis of the American System was already being stipulated by the American government in armaments procurement. The system was actually invented in England but not appreciated by the English who had to re-import it from across the ocean many years later. We all now benefit from its advantages: even the screw threads on the spindles of our water-keys are universally standardized. And it is this system which, allowing the division of labor into many specialized functions has, as Adam Smith foretold in *The Wealth of Nations*, enabled the standard of living to rise so spectacularly in industrialized nations.

I have no idea when the last serpent was made (before the late 20th century revival represented by Christopher Monk), but it was almost certainly well before George Sturt took over his wheelwright's business in 1885. The latest dated serpent I know was used in Blackburn and Clitheroe in east Lancashire and bears the maker's name Wood & Ivy, 50 New Compton Street, Soho, London with the date 1854 along with Frederick Rowe, 13 King Street, Manchester. Wood & Ivy are thought to have operated in London from 1837 to 1847 and Rowe had moved from King Street by 1850 so in the case of both alleged maker and presumed retailer the date 1854 is too late. It is said, however, that in Cornwall a Mr. Dobbs made a serpent in 1860. By this time church bands were in the process of being superseded by organs of various kinds in even the most isolated villages.

It is significant, however, that all English serpents were made before the American System was introduced into the country. They were crafted by the old, so-called British system, for the most part by a single individual from beginning to end and tailored to the requirements of a particular player.

When we need a new tuba or euphonium it is no longer necessary to have it made to our order like a "base horn" or serpent. We may stipulate some modifications, but normally it will have been made by a whole host of makers each with different skills and using standardized parts produced by reliably accurate machinery.

Endnotes

¹Illustrated in Bevan, C., *The Tuba Family*, Winchester, Piccolo Press, 2000, Fig. 2.6 (g), p. 81.

²Sturt, G., *The Wheelwright's Shop*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1923 and subsequent editions.

³Stewart, G. M., "The Restoration and Cataloging of Four Serpents in the Arne B. Larson Collection of Musical Instruments," Master of Music thesis, University of South Dakota, 1975, p. 49.