

# The Dawn of Exploration for the English Bass Horn?

by Craig Kridel

New interest is emerging for instruments that have been a mere afterthought to the church serpent and ophicleide—namely, bass horns. The editors of second edition of *The Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments* included an integrated encyclopedia entry on bass horns rather than the previous array of three-to-six sentence, cryptic descriptions; the Kloster Michaelstein Conferences have featured upright serpents-bass horns; and the





recent publication of “The Bass Horn and Upright Serpent in Germany” by distinguished organologist Herbert Heyde has brought forth much new information and countless potential research topics for those interested in historical brass.<sup>1</sup> The low brass world is learning much about these distinctive and, albeit, short-lived instruments of the early 19th century. What proves most interesting, however, is that the more information that appears, the more questions arise. As a new generation of serpentists and ophicleidists has emerged in recent years, raising performance standards and increasing our understanding and appreciation of the unique roles of those instruments, perhaps the time has finally come for attention to bass horns and, specifically, the English bass horn. With the well documented interest of the English bass horn’s historic champion—Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1809-1847)—the instrument’s moment may have at last arrived and, I suspect, a new era of interest is now dawning.

There are bass horns... and there are English bass horns with both groups of instruments having some similarities and many more differences. The usage of the term “bass horn” represents a collective noun—a generic category of lip-vibrated areophones or, to be a tad more specific, a den of serpents and, even more precisely, upright serpents. Many instruments fall within this category—the English bass horn, serpent Forveille, early cimbasso, and ophi-monocleide—along with the more generic names—the continental bass horn and *basson russe*—that encompass the “miscellaneous” area of the upright serpent nest. Unfortunately, during the early 19th century, as well as today, there appears little consensus for terms such as serpent, English bass horn, *corno di basso*, and cimbasso, and these names refer to many types of bassoon-shaped upright serpents.

Some bass horns are constructed of wood, some of metal, and others a combination of the two. These were not necessarily misguided instruments waiting to become obsolete with the invention of the tuba. Experimentation reigned supreme during the early 19th century as designers sought to develop a wind bass instrument that would be sturdier, louder, easier to hold, and better in tune than existing types. Fingering patterns and the placement of the tone holes on the air column varied considerably. Yet, the English bass horn represents a more distinctive design with a precise pedigree, including a birth year, inventor, and country of origin.

The *basson russe* seems to receive more attention today among the family of bass horns—certainly in museum displays—with its stunning zoomorphic appearance; how-

ever, the English bass horn may have had more attention during its era of use, that being the early-to-mid 19th century. Now thought to have been invented in 1799 (thanks to the meticulous archival research of David Lasocki), Louis Alexandre Frichot designed this all metal upright serpent with its V-shape, flaring bell and swan-shaped bocal, and six chimney finger holes.<sup>2</sup> Frichot (1760-1825), a highly regarded, French serpentist who at the time was living in England as a refugee of the French Revolution, also included keys on the instrument, then common among military serpents. The English bass horn, similar to most upright serpents, has an open-hole air column (unlike the ophicleide, a closed-hole instrument where the pressing of keys opens rather than closes tone holes). Acoustical designs vary among all serpents with the English bass horn placing its finger holes closer together than other instruments and, typically, higher on the air column (i.e., above the “knee” or v-bend). Its all metal body suggests that it could endure more robust environmental conditions, such as being outside as a member of a military unit, and with its flaring bell substantially greater in diameter than military serpents, could produce more volume of sound. While the chimney finger holes could not be undercut or cross drilled on this all-metal instrument, as was common practice for wooden bass horns and serpents, this is not to say that all English bass horns were the same. Differences occur not just according to the linear placement of tone holes on the air column but also according to the orientation of the instrument. The chimney finger holes for most bass horns were positioned on the bocal column 180 degrees from the bell column. In contrast (in what is





*Photo 2: fingerhole position: early 19th century English bass horn from Germany, sans bocal; replica English bass horn from an early 19th century German maker, sans bocal*

a more lateral configuration), other English bass horns' finger holes were placed 90 degrees from the bell column. Further, the angle of the bocal differed among English bass horns: some instruments appeared with a more horizontal bocal and others were designed with a more angled bocal, seemingly suitable for marching, an insight conjectured by London-based, tubist-serpentist Jeff Miller after a review of period iconography.

What seems more distinctive about the English bass horn is not just its design but, rather, its familiarity among early 19th century composers and arrangers. Specified English bass horn parts exist within period harmoniemusik scores when, more often, bass line designations consisted of parts for bassoons with, at times, an additional (generic) serpent line (typically, a periodically-doubled second bassoon part) and, on occasion, a dramatically-more simplified bass line for trombone. I continue to search for harmoniemusik scores with designated parts for serpent Forveille (the only upright serpent with its own known treatise), ophimonocleide, basson russe, and serpent pavillon; they have yet to appear. Trevor Herbert reminds us that "this does not necessarily mean that these instruments were not used on bass lines if they were available."<sup>3</sup> However, does the fact that there are known designated English bass horn parts suggest that the instrument was more common, allowing composers and arrangers to assume that this specific type of horn would be available? Or were composers and arrangers decreeing an English bass horn—rather than an ophicleide or serpent—due to the facility of the instrument or an idiosyncratic tone color. Some English bass horn lines plod along as harmonic reinforcement for "the bass," and other English bass horn lines rip full speed alongside the second bassoon, far surpassing in dexterity any expectation for the trombones.

No English bass horn aficionado seemed more enthusiastic than Felix Mendelssohn who, upon seeing the instrument in 1824 while on holiday in Northern Germany (Doberan near Rostock), sketched the instrument in a letter to his sister, Fanny, describing the horn as looking like a big jug or watering-can. The facts of Mendelssohn's introduction to the English bass horn suggest that he heard an outstanding player. The resident harmonie wind ensemble at Doberan was supported by the Grand Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin and included the serpent virtuoso, Seipoldsdorf who, most likely, would have been playing the instrument that Mendelssohn described as having a deep, beautiful sound. Mendelssohn would score the English bass horn that same year in his Overture fur Harmonie-Musik (Notturmo in C major, Op. 24, 1824), viewed as "one of the little treasures of nineteenth-century original band music."<sup>4</sup> He would also write a part for the English bass horn—what would later become one of the more famous ophicleide parts—in his overture to *Ein Sommernachtstraum* (1826) where the instrument is aligned with a comedic character in the play, suggesting the horn's ability to obtain a more boisterous tonal quality (in contrast to Mendelssohn's earlier description). Mendelssohn's affection for the English bass horn did not end in 1826; he scored the instrument (rather than a serpent) in three marches for the Dusseldorf harmonie (1833-4) and in his *Trauer-Marsch* (1836). Of course, Mendelssohn was





Left: “conventional” bocal; English bass horn, R. Stewart, 1996 replica of c1820s German instrument by Geo. & Aug. Klemm; held by Michael Harley  
 Right: “marching” bocal; English bass horn, ca. 1810, of English origins; held by Michael Harley

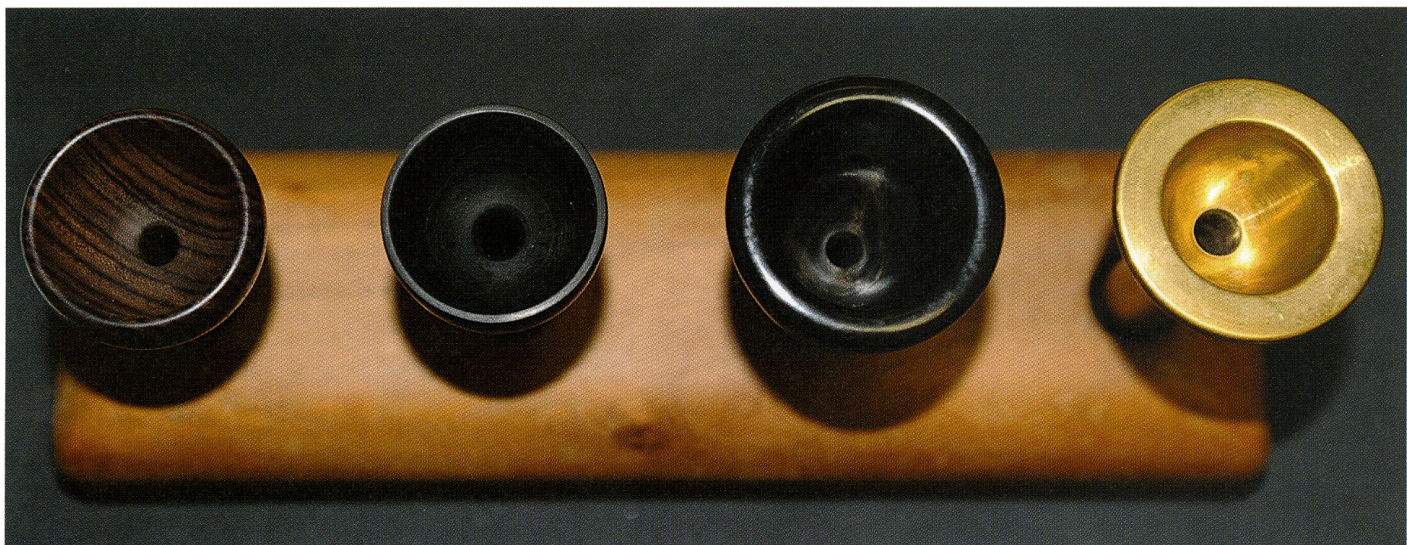
not the English bass horn’s only champion. The instrument was scored by name in other compositions, including Domenico Briscoli’s 1810 *The Conversation of Five Nations* grand overtures and Johann Simon Hermstedt’s harmonic arrangement of Mozart’s *String Quartet*, K. 428 (circa 1810).

While the English bass horn certainly captured Mendelssohn’s interest and imagination, his writing for the instrument in the *Notturmo* proves somewhat odd. What is curious is that a part written for the English bass horn—the operative word being “bass”—does not include its lowest eight notes. The entire bottom octave is not used. Since the original 1824 score no longer exists and the surviving 1826 expanded version designated a contrabassoon-bass horn part, contemporary editors may have created confusion in their efforts to reconstruct the original 1824 “Corno Inglese basso” line (since the bass horn does not read down an octave as does the contrabassoon). Yet, perhaps the instrument was not meant to double the bassoons one octave below. Mendelssohn, an organist and master of registration, could have been using the instrument to provide accenting

resonance and color as it weaves in and out of the two bassoon parts, blending and accentuating textures as it does wonderfully in its middle and upper register.

The English bass horn’s chromaticism is called upon by Mendelssohn. But here is another unique aspect of the score. There is a relatively long English bass horn phrase—fully exposed—where the instrument is playing whole notes: a D followed by a C# followed by a C (thank goodness) and then a B natural. This is, I dare say, impressive writing for any serpent! The D on all serpents pitched in C is so unstable that it led to instruments being constructed in the key of D. The C#, centered with the addition of an accidental key, still proves quite unreliable, allowing the instrumentalist to blow easily an interval of a fifth with a single C# fingering. And the B natural is so unclear, on any key-of-C serpent, that it led to the actual invention of another musical instrument—the ophimoncliede—whose primary purpose was to center that single note. Mendelssohn’s English bass horn line in the *Notturmo* may not be particularly idiomatic; however, he certainly does draw upon the instrument’s pitch flexibility. Kevin Gerald states “the Andante introduction begins ambiguously...





not until the bassoon and bass horn entrance in m. 2 is the harmony established as C major.”<sup>5</sup> The horn’s tonal flexibility permits the player easily to lift or lower roots and fifths and, of course, all bass horns have the flexibility to meet a harmoniemusik ensemble’s varied concert pitch. Geraldini maintains that “the most musically interesting section of the introduction begins with the entrance of the bass horn in m. 48. The mood and timbres turn dark.”<sup>6</sup> When played on an English bass horn, this mood can be achieved easily. Was this the sound of the horn that Mendelssohn wished? And were there other impressions? While Mendelssohn describes the beautiful sound of the instrument, it seems as if he held other expectations just a few years later when scoring *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*.

As recently described by Clifford Bevan in the pages of this journal, when Mendelssohn revised the score of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* after its premier in 1826, he added brass, and specifically the English bass horn, but aligned this instrument to a specific character—one of the buffoonish mechanicals—Bottom. In 1829, Mendelssohn was conducting the first British performance of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and, at the first rehearsal, no English bass horn player appeared. A replacement for the English bass hornist was secured who performed on string bass. Mendelssohn is said to have encouraged him not to play so nobly, requesting a more rustic sound in keeping with the theatrical character that the instrument was depicting.<sup>7</sup> Is this the “lovely, deep tone” that Mendelssohn had described in 1824?

Such a discrepancy causes one to wonder what English bass horn sound is authentic once we rid ourselves of 21st century sensibilities. Any characteristic sound of the bass horn is now difficult to ascertain since the provenance of mouthpieces is so questionable and since the design of the

cup and throat shape varies so dramatically. Be assured that placing a modern tuba or trombone or adapted modern serpent mouthpiece on an English bass horn does NOT produce the original sound of the instrument. [Please note: this discussion focuses on the bottom edge of the mouthpiece throat and its dramatic effect upon the instrument’s tone rather than discussing the thinness of the mouthpiece rim (a sharp rim) and how this feels on the players lips.] A designated English bass horn mouthpiece in the University of Edinburgh collection, a sharp-throated mouthpiece, similar to serpent mouthpiece designs of the 18th century, produces a soft and more breathy or “reedy” edge to the sound—one that blends beautifully with bassoons while remaining appropriately distinctive from the tone of trombones. Is this why the instrument was scored—to provide strength of sound for bassoons but also a texture different from other low brass?<sup>8</sup>

Yet, when one enters the world of authenticity, nothing can be assumed. I had always thought that the documented sharp-throated mouthpieces for bass horns (English bass horn and serpent Forveille) provided a much different sound and, thus, contrast to the trombone and/or ophicleide, instruments whose curved-throated mouthpieces create a more mellow tone. Scoring decisions would have been based not just upon availability of instruments but, also, upon a selected tone color or resonance. Research published by Hannes Vereecke and Stewart Carter, however, shattered my assumptions since, as I learned, early 19th century trombone mouthpieces were also sharp-throated, much like 17th century sackbuts, rather than similar to the curved-throated, mellow sound-producing 20th century type!<sup>9</sup> Were period trombones then blending with bassoons in ways that are somewhat incomprehensible with today’s instruments?



As our assumptions change, more research is required with these instruments stemming from a better understanding of authentic mouthpieces. Further, with the emerging interest in the English bass horn and other upright serpents, new opportunities arise for important work. Future scholars will be guided for years by the scholarship of Herbert Heyde, Clifford Bevan, and others. The time has come to put aside the generic overviews in masters

and doctoral theses—synoptic descriptions that serve to distort our understandings of the uses of bass horns due to the many generalizations and grand pronouncements. As research explorations continue, now is the time for meticulous, detailed accounts of instruments, players, composers, and arrangers in their local and regional communities and their different countries. 4x24 ■

#### Notes

1. Herbert Heyde, "The Bass Horn and Upright Serpent in Germany Part 1: The Continental Bass Horn," *Historic Brass Society Journal* 27, January 2014, pp. 21-39; parts 2 and 3 are forthcoming.
2. David Lasocki, "New Light on Eighteenth-Century English Woodwind Makers from Newspaper Advertisements," *Galpin Society Journal* 63, 2010, pp. 73-142.
3. Trevor Herbert and Helen Barlow, *Music & the British Military in the Long Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 97.
4. David F. Reed, "The Original Version of the Overture for Wind Band of Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy," *Journal of Band Research* 18:1, Fall 1982, p. 3.
5. Kevin Geraldi, "Flex Mendelssohn's Nocturno/Overture, Opus 24: A Study in Context, Composition and Performance," *Journal of Band Research* 44:2, Spring 2009, [www.journalofbandresearch.org](http://www.journalofbandresearch.org).
6. Geraldi, *ibid.*
7. Clifford Bevan, "Looking at the Past III," *International Tuba Euphonium Association Journal* 42:4, Summer 2015, p. 65.
8. Exploratory work is being done as we attempt to recreate what may be an "authentic" serpent and English bass horn sound. Scott Weiss and Craig Kridel, "Serpents and Bass Horns in Harmoniemusik: Practical Applications for Modern Performances," College Band Directors National Association's 2015 National Conference, Nashville, March 2015. J. c. Sherman has developed an euphonium mouthpiece that produces a serpent sound [[www.jcsherman.net](http://www.jcsherman.net)] and Sam Goble has copied English bass horn and serpent Forveille mouthpieces and designed an euphonium mouthpiece that produces an English bass horn sound [[www.samgoble.com](http://www.samgoble.com)].
9. Hannes Vereecke and Stewart Carter, "Mouthpieces for Brasswinds in the Writings of Victor-Charles Mahillon," *Historic Brass Society Journal* 26, January 2014, pp. 43-61.