

# HISTORICAL INSTRUMENT SECTION

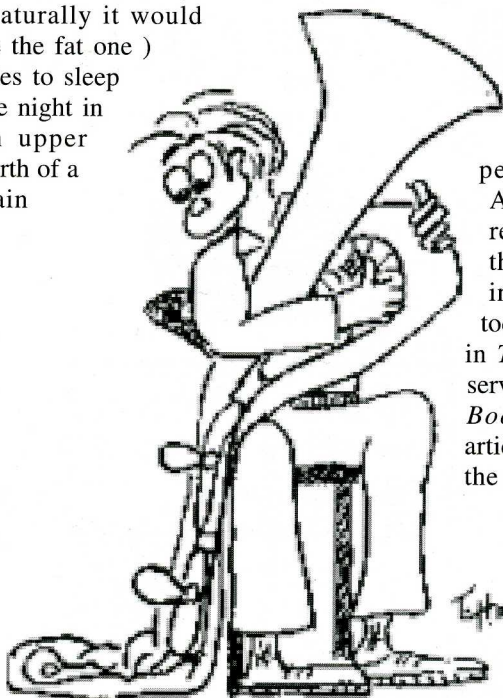
Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors

## The Historian's Perspective by Ronald Davis

This could qualify as the most sensitive and controversial conflict within our profession, a subject that raises the fieriest passions within each of us. The debate has raged for over 160 years. There are compelling justifications to support both sides of this issue, yet no resolution seems possible.

Is the tuba funny?

What prompted this question was my going through some archive acquisitions and coming across the manuscript of an article written by Roger Bobo, "Tuba Humor" (*TUBA Journal* Volume 7, No. 2, Fall 1979). Some of his observations: "...Humor and tuba are not a new combination: the humorous paintings of a clown with a tuba; the Laurel and Hardy film where Hardy (naturally it would be the fat one) tries to sleep the night in an upper berth of a train



with a sousaphone; the Um Pa Pa tubist of a German beer garden band and many many other such images that the mind can conjure."

He then described participating in the recent *Tubajubalee* in Cincinnati, Ohio:

"This was a concert of tuba humor at its best and without even a hint of the all-too-frequent movements to organize and improve the tubas' and tubists' lot. It was arranged for the pleasure, fun and entertainment of the audience and the performers and it was completely successful."

Most interesting! Here is Roger Bobo, the serious recitalist, admonishing us to "lighten up." Almost two decades after its publication, his comments elicited enough of a visceral reaction to raise my curiosity and motivate me to examine how the organization has dealt with this most delicate subject.

**We are serious artists who have chosen this instrument.** One of the founding principles of the Tubists Universal Brotherhood Association is, "... to enhance the image and role of our instruments and performers," (*TUBA* Constitution, Article III Section B) or as Roger restates, "... to organize and improve the tubas' and tubists' lot." From its inception in the Spring of 1973 until today the majority of articles published in *TUBA Journal* have been devoted to serving this goal. Open *The Tuba Source Book* and examine the entries in the article bibliography; in all areas most of the articles documented come from our organization's publication.

Several *Journal* entries have shown how seriously we can take what most outsiders would consider humorous subjects. Take for example the Ohio State tradition of dotting the "I"

(Volume 7, No. 3). What for the football fan is a curious little diversion to pass the time while their team rests is serious business for the individuals involved. In 1977, I met a female tuba major who decided to make Bowling Green State University her choice of college simply because she missed the opportunity to be the first girl to dot the "I" by one year (thanks to Jan Duga). Other topics in this category: *Tubby the Tuba* (Volume 9, No. 4), *The Flight of the Tuba Bee* (Volume 9, No. 2), "The Tuba" at Harvard University (Volume 16, No. 1). We have a rather undecided area in two of our most celebrated institutions, *Octubafest* and *TUBACHRISTMAS*. Are they serious or not? Harvey Phillips has always been an innovator, creating catchy names with instant appeal for the general public. According to the published programs, in their earliest manifestations, *Octubafests* at Indiana University were opportunities for serious recital performances. Other institutions came along later and emphasized the more comedic possibilities. *TUBACHRISTMAS* continues to be very popular, and the *TubaSantas* continue to draw large crowds wherever they perform. Performing as a *TubaSanta* however is a most unusual experience and may not be to everyone's liking. If so, then beware of Christmas gigs where the required dress is "hard black shoes and socks."

**Admit it, tubas are funny.** Many of us are so focused on the image we are trying to create that we ignore or deny the tuba's more droll possibilities. At the 1992 International Tuba/Euphonium Conference I was having lunch with several of my students, and the topic of conversation

◀ The First Cartoon, "The Deflating Tuba" by Tom Hancock

