HISTORICAL INSTRUMENT SECTION

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Museums
by Arnold Myers

The biggest movement of heavy brass in the last year would seem to have been into the Fiske Museum, Claremont Colleges, California. The Fiske's energetic curator, Al Rice, is to be congratulated on his coup in acquiring the Coleman Collection of 152 brasswind instruments for the Museum. Among the Coleman instruments moved to the Fiske are the magnificent Lehnert "Centennial" model tuba, which was made to be played resting on the player's shoulders with the mouthpipe positioned directly onto the players mouth, and the rare English bass horn, a serpent derivative that has been known to tempt some English brass collectors to the sin of envy.

The Fiske is now well endowed with tuba-family instruments, having numerous helicons, over-the-shoulder instruments, examples of the rare quinticlave (tenor ophicleide) as well as the nest of serpents obligatory for any serious instrument museum.

It remains to be seen how the Fiske Museum will integrate these acquisitions into its displays, which raises a general question faced by museum curators and designers: how much to show. At the time of writing, this question is being grappled with by at least one museum setting up new displays. At one extreme, if the showcases are packed with instruments in an attempt to show as much as possible from the museum's holdings, the interpretation of the display for the general visitor suffers, and an effect of bewilderment is induced in the average museum visitor. On the other hand, if the museum shows only the rarest and most precious of its specimens, each magnificently housed and presented with a well-illustrated account of its history and significance, the visitor is left without any coherent story of the development of instruments and the enthusiast is cheated of seeing the many obscure instruments held by the museum, some of them probably unique.

This problem is particularly severe for the tuba family. Faced with a need to reclaim showcase space, a curator would need to remove 10 cornets from display to gain the space of one ophicleide or tuba. As a result, it has to be admitted that many museums who illustrate copiously the history of the flute or clarinet offer little in the way of tuba history. Of course each museum has to tailor the presentation of its material to its audience, and keep those who fund it sweet. I must say that my own preference as a museum visitor is to see lots and lots of instruments close together—so that one can experience the excitement of making discoveries, seeing similarities that possibly no one has noticed before.

Museums that have a problem with display space now have an alternative medium to show their treasures: the World-Wide Web. Their use of this is embryonic, but the potential is there for making available vast amounts of information—textual, pictorial and audible. Some museums, such as the Fiske and Edinburgh University, maintain complete lists of their holdings on their websites. Some, such as Stockholm and Edinburgh, have galleries of pictures of selected instruments. It is to be hoped that other tuba-rich museums will establish websites that go beyond advertisement to provision of real information.

The Musical Instrument Committee of the International Council of Museums (CIMCIM) has established a website with many useful pages. One is a page of links to members' museum websites, several of which have useful information where one can read, see and in some cases hear

Tuba in BB-flat (Henry Lehnert, Philadelphia, 1876-1880). "Centennial" model with three rotary valves (Fiske B302)