

What do you play in *A Midsummer Night's Dream Overture*?

By Cliff Bevan
 Introduction by Craig Kridel

The 20th century was such a simple time. Serpents were made of wood and Mendelssohn wrote *A Midsummer Night's Dream Overture* for ophicleide. With the fin de siècle approaching, however, times become more complicated, and such simple assumptions prove rather perplexing. Mendelssohn may have had other ideas, as Clifford Bevan informs us, and we find certain serpents to have glossy metal finishes. Oh, yes, and some serpents even have turns rather than curves! To accompany Bevan's essay I have included photographs of four serpents, an English bass horn (an upright serpent; copy of a ca. 1830 instrument by R. Stewart; owned by C. Kridel) and, from the Joe R. and Joella F. Utley Foundation instrument collection, a wonderfully rare French copper serpent d'eglise, an early 19th century (wood/leather) Baudouin serpent d'eglise, and a 19th century English metal military serpent. Welcome to the perplexing serpent world of the next millennium. ck

The first orchestral performance of Mendelssohn's overture *Ein Sommernachtstraum* (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*) took place at Stettin, Prussia (now Szczecin, Poland), directed by Karl Loewe on 20 February 1827, a few days after the composer's eighteenth birthday. In the first draft of the score (MS. M. Deneke Mendelssohn b.5 fol 7-12, Bodleian Library, Oxford), no low brass instrument is present. However, in the final version, dating from 1826 (MS. autogr. Mendelssohn vo. 32, Krak—w) an English bass horn appears as "Cornoingle. di basso," between "Fagotti" and "Corni in E." It is highly likely that the orchestration was supervised by Mendelssohn's friend, the composer Adolph Bernard Marx, who made a number of suggestions for improving the work. This did not prevent Marx from

reviewing the performance in *Berlin Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* (iv, Berlin, 1827, p. 95), where he observed that "...the clumsy English bass horn portrays perfectly the boorish Bottom."

The English bass horn was a type of upright serpent invented by the Frenchman Alexandre Frichot, who arrived in London in 1793 and arranged for George Astor to manufacture the instrument. It differed from other types of upright serpents in



English bass horn.

being made entirely from copper and being built in a V-shape. The bell flared widely, while pitch was changed through six finger holes and three or four keys. With a crook that occupied almost one-third of the total length and a relatively narrow bore, it had a clearer and stronger sound than many other types of serpent. It became widely popular, and examples were made

and played in many European countries. Furthermore, as the illustration shows, certain aspects of its construction made it a clear precursor of the keyed ophicleide.

Mendelssohn was on holiday with his father at Bad Doberan when he saw his first bass horn in the court wind band. He was so taken by its appearance that in a letter he wrote home to his sister on 21 July 1824 he included a sketch and also a description, likening it to a syringe or watering-can. There seems little doubt that his musical characterization of Bottom the weaver through the medium of this appropriately rustic ("watering can") and, as Marx says, "clumsy" instrument provided a perfect contrast to the leggiro fairy music and sennets and tuckets of Theseus's court.

On 24 June 1829, the first British performance of the overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* was conducted by Mendelssohn himself at the Argyll Rooms, London, in a concert for the benefit of the victims of floods in Silesia. (Another was given on 13 July.) The orchestra had been assembled by Sir George Smart, who was immensely proud of his friendship with Mendelssohn whom he had previously met in Berlin. However, as Mendelssohn relates in a letter he wrote home to his sisters, Fanny and Rebecka, on 25 June, at the 10 o'clock rehearsal on the day before the concert the bass horn was missing, and the irate composer took

Smart to task. Smart promised that "the man with the beer-bass [Bierbaß]" would be present, and the next morning "along came the fellow with the bass horn." Mendelssohn's account of the proceedings is graphic. "I accompanied him at the keyboard... Neate [Charles Neate, a director of the Philharmonic Society] walking around me, while Smart encour-