

Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors

NOT QUITE THE SERPENT'S SWAN-SONG

By Clifford Bevan

Mention the name Wagner and the response is likely to include the word *Ring* if your companion is an opera fanatic, a reference to *Walther's Prize Song* if he is a euphonium player, and 'Wonderful man: the patron saint of overtime' if he plays in an opera house orchestra. Occasionally someone really intensely boring will remark 'Didn't he invent the tuba?,' a question to which the answer is, of course, no, and the same answer still holds if the question is put as 'Didn't he invent a sort of tuba?' Like much connected with Wagner, someone else had already done it, but he was wise enough to take up the idea, give it more exposure and (most importantly) add his name to it, as in 'Wagner Tuba.'

The response that nobody ever seems to make is 'Oh yes, he was a serpent enthusiast, wasn't he?'

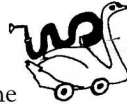
You may feel that this is because a person would need to be two cents short of a nickel to make this comment, but that is not, in fact, the case. Far from it, as confirmed when I found my eyes opening increasingly wide while compiling a list of lowest brass instrument names in nineteenth century scores.

Before going further, perhaps we should think of an important factor that underlines any informed person's thinking about Wagner. That is that even today he tends to be considered a progressive composer, a musician given to chromaticism, amazing chords and astonishing sounds - elements that paved the way for

Schoenberg, Debussy and Richard Strauss and from then on pretty well every twentieth-century composer. So why did he so often specify serpent?

It has to be admitted that he also specified ophicleide, and on rather more occasions, but it's never difficult to see the reason why in these cases: he hoped (in vain, as it happened) that both *Rienzi* (composed 1839-40) and *The Flying Dutchman* (1843) would be first performed at the Paris Opera where the low brass consisted of three tenor trombones and an ophicleide. *Nikolay* (1837) and *Rule Britannia* (1838) were both written for premieres in Riga, where he himself was music director from 1837-39. The ophicleide specified here would be the valved type: a rather deficient narrow-bore bass tuba.

Which brings us back to the serpent. He demanded one in *Norma, il predisse* (1838 - an aria also intended for performance in Paris), in *Das Liebesmahl der Apostel* (1843), in *Rule Britannia* and, extensively, *Rienzi*, first performed at Dresden in 1842. The three latter scores include both ophicleide (used as the lowest of the brass) and serpent, used with the double bassoon as the lowest of the woodwind in the way that Mendelssohn had employed it in his *Reformation Symphony* ten years earlier. Was the innovative Wagner really influenced by



the conservative Mendelssohn? It seems likely.

When the bass tuba was invented in Berlin in 1835 Wagner was a struggling young musician of twenty-two, working as conductor in the obscurity of Magdeburg. Taking up the conductorship at Riga gave him more opportunities but took him even farther from the mainstream artistic activities of the central German States. It was in Riga that he composed *Rienzi*, and obviously here that there was as yet no tuba for, as we have seen above, he used alternative instruments as the deepest of his brass.

Even Berlioz, based in the artistic centre of Paris, his ears and nose into everything musical, was to be surprised (agreeably, fortunately) when he came across the bass tuba in Germany during his conducting tour of 1843, so what hope for Wagner five years earlier, stuck away in the far north? In fact, it is highly likely that *Rienzi* never was performed with ophicleide and serpent in the pit, as when Berlioz arrived in Dresden he found a bass tuba, and the premiere of Wagner's opera had been given there only the previous year, the year in which Wagner became conductor at this important opera house.

It's make-your-mind-up time: what instrument(s) would you choose for an 'authentic' performance?

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