

By Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors

Vaughan Williams's *Tuba Concerto*: Composition and First Performance

by Clifford Bevan

Editor's Note: Throughout the years we have received a variety of questions pertaining to historical low brass instruments, and we continue to address these queries with our annual Questions and Answers section. For this issue, we move forward a few decades and attend to a question stemming from the on-line publication, The Tuba News website, which recently published an interesting essay by Roger Bobo entitled "The Vaughan Williams Concerto: It doesn't belong in the Tuba Ghetto" (September 9, 2007; www.tubanews.com). Among Mr. Bobo's normative and interpretive comments, he describes Philip Catelinet's "odd" selection for premiering the work and states, "I'm sure there is an interesting story about how he became the one to premier this concerto but I have never heard it." Well, as it turns out, a few *ITEA Journal* readers posed that same question to the Historical Instrument Section. I recalled reading about Catelinet's involvement with the concerto in Clifford Bevan's *The Tuba Family* (2nd edition) years ago. So I contacted our researcher-of-the-moment and, with characteristic wit and substantial historical knowledge, Bevan willingly accepted the request to *tell us more*.

~ Craig Kridel

When Philip Catelinet performed Vaughan Williams's Concerto for Bass Tuba and Orchestra on 13 June 1954, it was the first time in history that anyone anywhere had played a tuba concerto. This needs to be borne in mind when considering the significance of the event, the pioneering nature of the composer's work, and the demands made on the soloist. Other questions are inevitably raised: why was it Vaughan Williams who composed this first work of its kind and

why was it Catelinet who was the soloist?

The Tuba Concerto seems to have been the culmination of a number of influences and events, beginning with the character of the composer himself. Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958) was born into a privileged family and was sent to a leading public school, Charterhouse. While his close relatives included distinguished judges, he chose to study at the Royal College of Music in London, where he struck up a long-lasting friendship with Gustav Holst (whose background was far more modest: Holst came from a family of professional musicians). What they had in common was a lively interest in English folk song in contrast to the prevailing English musical establishment's taste for the works of the great German composers.

In his thirties, Vaughan Williams studied briefly in Paris with Ravel. Superficially his music shows no influences of the French composer. Vaughan Williams's characteristic orchestral tone tends towards the solid, almost organ-like density of sound found in the works of so many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century English composers. But a closer look at his scores does show one important influence of his teacher, a man who was renowned for the striking use he made of orchestral color. It was presumably because of Ravel that Vaughan Williams featured tenor saxophone in the sixth symphony, three saxophones and flugel horn in the ninth symphony, and a wind machine in *Sinfonia Antartica*. For Larry Adler he composed a *Harmonica Concerto* in 1951. Thirty years earlier, in his masterly orchestration of Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, Ravel had included solos for saxophone and, of course, tuba (in "Bydlo"), specifically the small French C tuba of the time. Can anyone find a solo

for tuba in an orchestral work composed before Ravel's?

This is not the place to use Schenkerian Analysis to pursue a detailed comparison of two different works. However, there may be more than coincidence in the structure of the opening phrases of "Bydlo" and the slow movement of the Tuba Concerto. Note what occurs at the peak of each phrase—Ravel's in Example 1 and Vaughan Williams's in Example 2.

Example 1



Example 2



While working on the unfamiliar task of devising a soaring melody for solo tuba, did Vaughan Williams subconsciously tread the path previously traveled by his mentor?

John Fletcher has suggested that Vaughan Williams had been interested in the idea of a concerto for tuba long before he was approached by the London Symphony Orchestra with a request that he compose a work to mark the orchestra's jubilee in 1954. The LSO was the first of the great independent London orchestras and has consistently occupied the high ground. John Fletcher himself was eventually to become the orchestra's distinguished tubist. In 1954, the tuba player was Philip Catelinet. Like almost all professional English orchestral tubists up to the 1960s, he had previously been a euphonium player. Many of his contemporaries had been army bandmen, but