

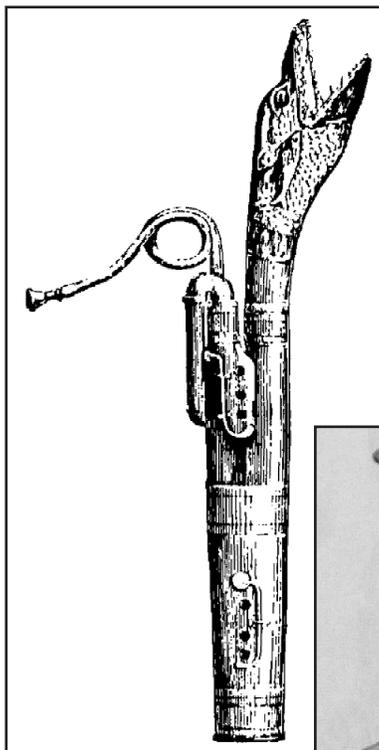
Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors
By Craig Kridel

Questions & Answers: Bass horns and Russian bassoons

What are bass horns and Russian bassoons (*basson russe*), and what's the difference? Where to begin! While there are many contemporary and historical accounts of Russian bassoons and bass horns, descriptions vary greatly not only in period treatises but also in contemporary reference books. Clearly, little consensus exists. Furthermore, as one begins to examine the serpent family, for which Russian bassoons (*basson russe*) and bass horns are considered members as upright serpents, equally perplexing questions arise, e.g., what's the difference between the serpent and bass cornetto, or why is an upright serpent called a Russian bassoon when the instrument is neither a bassoon nor specifically related to Russia?!

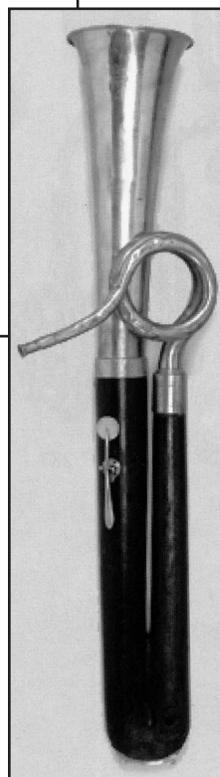
After one becomes somewhat familiar with the distinctions of the serpent and the oddities of the Russian bassoon's name, however, the original question reemerges: just what is the difference between Russian bassoons and bass horns? Since I own five different types of serpents, all in playing condition (*serpent d'église*, *basson russe*, *serpent a pavillon*, *serpent Forveille*, *cimbasso*, and English bass horn), I thought I could address the question. Mere possession, however, does not necessarily lend itself to knowledge! Fortunately, I also own a copy of Clifford Bevan's *The Tuba Family* and, as always, much is explained after perusing the early chapters of this text.

For all practical purposes, we can assign the term "bass horn" to a generic designation of "lip-energized," bass, tone-hole conical-bore, brasswind instruments that fulfilled primarily secular and military musical roles. Bevan refers to five main types of bass horns: Russian bassoon, French military upright serpent (*serpent Piffault* and *serpent a pavillon*), Italian



Left:
Basson
Russe

Below:
Serpent A
Pavillon



cimbasso, *serpent Forveille*, and English bass horn (Bevan, 2000, p. 83). As one strolls museum collections, however, various "lip-energized," bass, tone-hole conical-bore, brasswind instruments appear that do not always fall specifically into these categories. This is when the term *bass horn* adopts a "miscellaneous" disposition that describes any other finger-hole, bassoon-shaped, upright serpent. Interesting, *ITEA Journal* readers may note the absence of perhaps the most familiar upright serpent, the ophicleide (the Greek word for "serpent with keys"). Here, an initial distinction can be made, albeit not between Russian bassoons and

bass horns, but, instead, between bass horns and ophicleides. Bass horns maintain an open hole system where the fingers cover tone holes. This is to say that fingers are lowered to close the six basic tone-holes, and the accompanying three or four closed keys are used for accidentals and intonation adjustment. In contrast, the ophicleide, while an upright serpent in shape, relies exclusively upon keys to cover tone holes, hence a "keyed brass" designation. In addition, the ophicleide maintains a closed-hole system: as fingers are lowered onto keys, tone holes open. [Few are aware that serpent/ophicleide doublers play instruments with reversed fingering patterns.] But this merely distinguishes "ophies" from bass horns; what about Russian bassoons?

The *basson russe* is visually so spectacular that I encourage readers to visit the many websites that portray full-color photographs of this instrument, notably, <http://www.usd.edu/smm/Russianbsn.html>; <http://www.antikaparis.com/bissonnet/bisso6.htm>; <http://www.antikaparis.com/delcroix/delcroix1.htm>. I have included illustrations depicting the Russian bassoon, the serpent a pavillon, *cimbasso*, *serpent Forveille*, and English bass horn. I will not summarize the many important points discussed in *The Tuba Family* and *The Cambridge Companion to Brass Instruments*; readers may consult these references for further details. Bass horns vary greatly according to sound, weight, presences of thumbholes and keys; I make certain generalities, quite cautiously, that stem from the playing characteristics of my instruments.

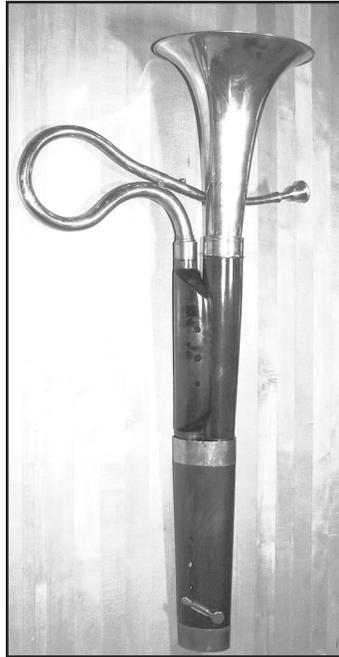
The Russian bassoon, a type of bass horn, was primarily a military instrument and most often sported a painted dragon's head for its bell (although other instruments with conventional wood or metal bells are also designated as a *basson russe* in contemporary museum exhibitions). The instrument consists of four sections with a

butt and wing joint similar to the reed bassoon and either a coiled or swan-shaped bocal. Fingers cover the six standard tone holes and, unlike other bass horns, the *basson russe* also maintains a right-hand thumb hole along with 3 to 4 accompanying keys. The very gradual expansion of the bore leads to an easier upper register than many other bass horns.² J. J. Regibo is designated as the inventor with the instrument celebrating a 1789 birthdate.

The French military upright serpent is most often depicted by the *serpent militaire*, first appearing in 1806 and later becoming known as the *serpent Piffault*, named after its inventor. For this column, however, I feature the serpent a pavillon with its more bass horn appearance. Described by Coeffet in 1839 as having a clear tone and notes of consistent quality, the serpent a pavillon consists of three sections with a coiled metal bocal and metal bell, six fingerholes with typically no thumbhole, and three keys. The middle portion, a U-shaped wooden stock of parallel tubing, is less substantial in weight and width than the *basson russe*. The third category of bass horns, the serpent Forveille, consists of three sections, a swan-shaped bocal, a “zagged middle” section of metal, and a J-shaped wooden bell-stock. Appearing in 1823 in Paris, the instrument also took its name from its inventor and seems to have been played more within a chamber music than military setting. Hermenge’s 1835 serpent Forveille treatise includes an impressive array of duets and caprices. With six fingerholes, no thumbhole, and 3-4 keys, the serpent Forveille may represent the best balance between a clear, upper third octave and a full, forceful bass register. The fourth type of bass horn, the cimbasso, originates in Italy circa 1815 and was seen at La Scala by 1816. Much as been written about the cimbasso. In fact, Bevan’s “The Great Cimbasso Mystery” appeared in the pages



Above: Serpent Forveille
Left: Cimbasso
Below: English Bass Horn



of this journal, and the instrument is described further in *The Tuba Family*. This bass horn consists of four sections with a butt and wing joint similar to the reed bassoon, either a coiled or swan-shaped bocal, and six fingerholes, no thumbhole, and 3-4 keys. The stock is much more substantial than the serpent a pavillon (providing for a very substantial lower register) and, in contrast to the *basson russe*, the cimbasso includes a widely-flared, metal bell. Bevan uses the term “early cimbasso” to distinguish this upright serpent from the “valved cimbasso,” the late 19th century valved, contrabass trombone. The English bass horn, the final category of Bevan’s taxonomy, was invented in the 1790s by a French ex-patriot, Frichot, who at the time was living in England. This upright serpent with its V-shape, flaring bell and swan-shaped bocal, six fingerholes, no thumbhole, and 3-4 keys, was made entirely of metal and appeared in military bands as well as within orchestral and

harmoniemusik, chamber music ensembles. Unlike all of its bass horn relatives, the English bass horn’s six fingerholes are placed on the descending tube (or corresponding wing joint section) of its V-configuration.

So much more could be said about these various types of bass horns. Their sound, playing characteristics, repertoire, and duration of musical lives all call for further research. Yet, to answer the

original question: the term bass horn refers to many different types of bass, brasswind instruments, one of which is the Russian bassoon. We must not view bass horns as primitive, however. Bass horns display remarkable forms of ingenuity and creativity. This spirit is captured in one of the most lovely sentences from *The Tuba Family*: “The origins of the English bass horn lie in a period of increasing revolutionary activity, when some were straightening the serpent and others were fighting for the Rights of Man” (Bevan, 2000, 86).

Each bass horn, with its varying proportions of brass-to-wood and different fingering patterns and placement, represent revolutionary acoustical experimentation. Further, the issue is not whether the early cimbasso or *basson russe* could display the agility of today’s valved, brass instruments. Much of the bass horn’s military role was to blend into a bass sound that combined bassoons and trombones and, for its orchestra role, to strengthen the sound of the reed bassoons. Too often today we discredit bass horns for their lack of dexterity when, in fact, acoustical blending may have been their most important feature. I was reminded of this recently while attending a performance of *La Traviata*. The cimbasso part, played by a bass trombone, would have been performed on this wood-bassoon type of bass horn. One could only wonder how the sound would have been transformed during those passages throughout the opera when the top three trombones were tacit and the

cimbasso was playing in unison or providing the lower octave for the bassoons. The bass horn fulfilled an important acoustical and aesthetic role that has subsequently been forgotten.

I have provided an answer (with a dash of proselytizing) to this column's question. But now I wish to add another point that may offer a further degree of clarity for today's low brass conversations. Throughout the past twenty years my discussions with curators, collectors, musicologists, and performers suggest that the term *basson russe* refers to dragon's head bass horns (similar to the buccin, the dragon's head trombone). This is mere convention and is not supported by historical documentation. In period documents, the term *basson russe* was used to describe many different dragon's head and flared-bell instruments. But my role now is not as historian but as linguist. Bevan's taxonomy is historically correct, yet, as is often the case, contemporary usage does not always prove to be historically accurate. I suggest that we standardize our descriptions, a musician's lexicon of common usage, and allow the term *basson russe* to refer exclusively to any dragon's head bass horn. In many respects, I am drawing upon an analogy that the buccin is to the trombone as the *basson russe* is to the bass horn, especially since the terms trombone and bass horn refer to general types of musical instrument. This *basson russe* designation

places me at odds with many others, even including Berlioz. Yet, as we celebrate the master's 200th birthday I should note his exasperation of having to inform an orchestral Russian bassoonist that the instrument he was playing was not a double-bassoon but the *basson russe*! Since Berlioz in his *Orchestration Treatise* felt the Russian bassoon "could be withdrawn from the family of wind instruments . . . without the least damage to art" (Macdonald, 2002, p. 244), I believe he would support any limits placed upon the term.

This leaves a group of miscellaneous, non-dragon headed Russian bassoons without a lexicon home. For those bass horns with conventional flared bells, formerly called *basson russe*, I suggest a sixth category to the taxonomy and one actually implied in *The Tuba Family*: the **serpent basson** – namely, a metal or wood instrument (distinct from the serpent a pavillon, serpent Forveille, cimbasso, and English bass horn) consisting of four sections with a butt and wing joint similar to the reed bassoon, either a coiled or swan-shaped bocal, and a conventional flared or bulbed bell. Thus, I conclude the column with a more refined and less accepted response: what's the difference between a bass horn and a Russian bassoon? A bass horn is a generic designation of any "lip-energized," bass, tone-hole conical-bore, brasswind instruments and a Russian bassoon is a specific type of

bass horn with a dragon's head bell.

Now, that was easy, wasn't it! Next question?

Notes

- ¹ The serpent's bore is much thinner than the cornetto's, and the serpent does not include a thumbhole (a 7th tone hole) as is the case with all cornetti. The etymological origins of the term *basson russe* remain a mystery. The Viennese musicologist Michael Nagy suggests that the term arises from an adaptation of *prusse* since the instrument was common to Prussian military bands.
- ² In fact, at the 1986 Amherst Early Music Festival, Ben Peck, director of the New York Cornet & Sacbut Ensemble, was blowing a *basson russe* well into its fourth octave before being told that the instrument was not typically played that high.

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