

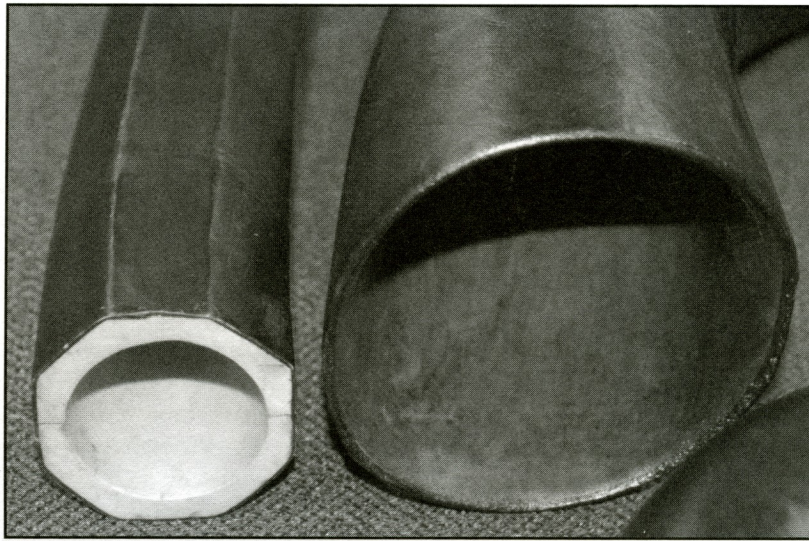
Craig Kridel and Clifford Bevan, Editors

## Resurrecting the Bass Cornetto

by Craig Kridel

Among the more famous neither-nor instrument statements is the legendary sentence, “the English horn is neither English nor a horn.” The informed low brass instrumentalist, however, can continue the patter with another assertion—“the Russian bassoon is neither Russian nor a bassoon”—perhaps generating a smile or smirk...or even worse. And for the truly knowledgeable, for those intrepid instrument “frothers” who wish to crawl onto the limb of absurdity, the tour de force is uttering a variation to that low brass conundrum: “the serpent is neither a bass cornetto nor does it have a thumbhole.” Conversations stop; furtive glances occur and, with this triumphant declaration, questions arise since many encyclopedia accounts of instruments blithely state that the serpent is indeed a bass cornetto, and many leading American early musicians, if they do stoop to consider such historical low brass analogies, are surprised to learn that the two instruments are not one and the same. I am pleased to say, however, that after 300 years we are now beginning to address “the great bass cornetto mystery,” and many interesting, I dare say, even exciting activities are underway. Thanks to the efforts of Volny Hostiou (France) as a player, Roland Wilson (Germany) as a maker, and Wolfgang Köhler (Germany) as a scholar, the bass cornetto is on the verge of experiencing its own renaissance.

For ITEA *Journal* readers who may have missed those precious moments of Renaissance organology during their music history classes, the cornetto, much like the serpent, is one of the more oddly classified “brass” instruments—actually made of wood, covered with leather, and sporting a host of fingerholes acoustically misplaced as is the case with the serpent. Oh, yes, and neither instrument’s body is made of brass. A lip-vibrated, conical wind instrument with a cup-shaped mouthpiece, the cornetto is also called “cornett” or “cornet,” not to be confused with the modern brass instrument with valves and a cup-shaped mouthpiece. During the



The bass cornetto with an octagonal-walled bell and the serpent bell with much thinner, circular construction

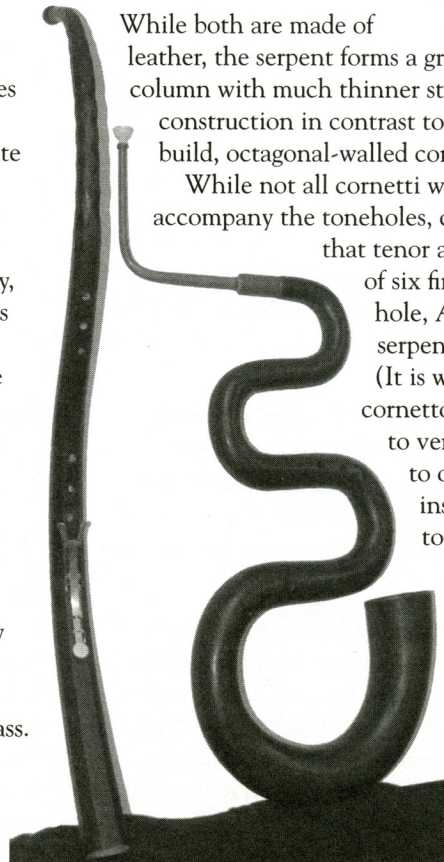
cornetto’s glory years, from the mid-16th to mid-17th century, the treble size was the première instrument, and its performers’ virtuosity compared if not surpassed the leading violinists of the time. Its tone best represented the human voice with the 17th century music theorist-acoustician Marin Mersenne using the metaphor that its sound was “a ray of sunshine piercing the shadows.”<sup>1</sup>

The cornetto, however, displays a contrast in design, construction, and function to the serpent.

While both are made of wood and covered with leather, the serpent forms a greater-expanding, conical air-column with much thinner structural walls and circular-tube construction in contrast to the more cylindrical, thicker-build, octagonal-walled cornetto.

While not all cornetti were built with a thumbhole to accompany the toneholes, conventions seem to suggest that tenor and bass cornetti consisted

of six fingerholes, a seventh keyed-hole, AND a thumbhole, unlike the serpent with only six fingerholes. (It is worth noting that the bass cornetto’s thumbhole does not serve to vent, to change registers, similar to other wind instruments but, instead, provides another outlet to the air column for tuning purposes.) Also, while bass cornetti and serpents have been erroneously described as the same, the bass is a fifth or sixth higher in pitch than the serpent. The serpent’s fundamental note being Great C or D with six



Bass cornetto and serpent

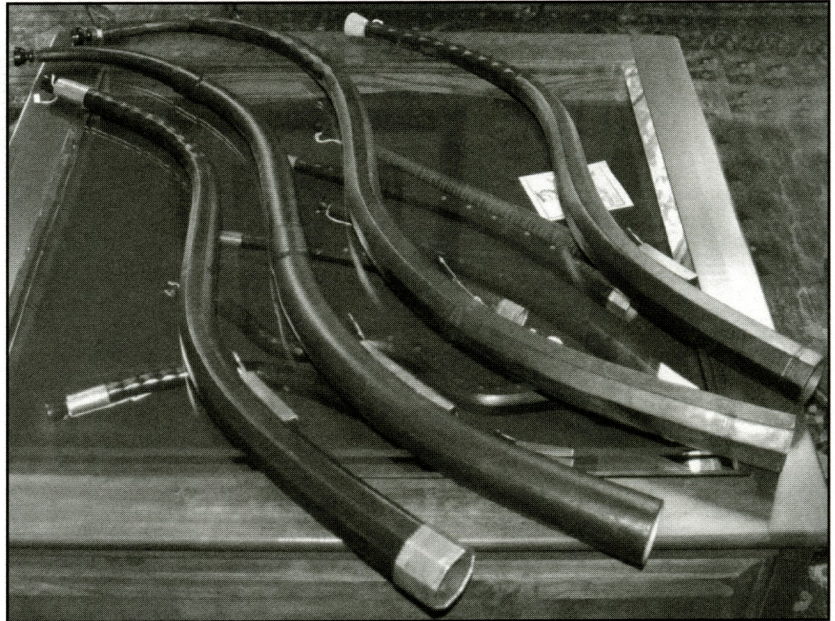
fingers covered and the bass cornetto pitched at Great A or G with six fingers covered and a tone lower by closing the fontanelle key-7th tonehole. The most noticeable difference, of course, is their appearance with the low cornetti maintaining a more elongated shape, similar to the treble-size instrument, in contrast to the undulating, curved form of the serpent that allows players to reach the toneholes.

Serpents were used in church choirs and ensembles and later in military bands and orchestras, supporting bassoons and trombones. In contrast, while the bass cornetto is thought to have been used in church, it also...well, actually, we are not quite certain what it did.

With all the substantial research on Renaissance historical brass, the bass cornetto has always been one of those acknowledged-yet-forgotten low brass instruments. Mersenne offers a detailed description of the bass (sans thumbhole) and even includes, in his 1636 treatise, *Harmonie Universelle*, a fantasia for five cornetti (with 2 treble, alto, tenor, and bass parts). Yet, he describes the serpent as “the true bass” of the cornetto-family and asserts that one without the other was to have a body without a soul. While cornetti appear in museums, it is thought that no bass instrument survives. Organologists have argued over the proper classification of the horns in Brussels and Paris collections that are or are not bass cornetti. In one sense, the bass cornetto seems more of an apparition that fulfills our image of the Renaissance predilection for consorts (although many believe that cornettino, treble, tenor, and bass cornetti were not played together as a family of instruments).

During the past few years, Wolfgang Köhler has been exploring the realms of the bass cornetto, finding several archival references that clearly confirm its use. His presentation at the 2009 Michaelstein Cornett Symposium in Germany, along with a bass cornetto roundtable organized by Sabine Klaus at the conference, are offering new directions for the field of musicology, and we certainly look forward to the publication of Köhler’s paper, “The bass cornett – misapprehension or intention?,” in the forthcoming Michaelstein conference proceedings. Volny Hostiou, part of a new generation of serpent virtuosi, now appears on the CD, *Requiem pour Claude de Lorraine* by Pierre Cléreau, playing a bass cornetto.<sup>2</sup> Performing on an instrument constructed by Serge Delmas and designed from a low cornetto housed at the Musical Instrument Museum in Brussels, the recording provides listeners with the sole opportunity to hear what is thought to be a bass cornetto. And during the past two years, Roland Wilson, conductor, cornettist, and instrument maker, has built three bass cornetti, two of which were designed and scaled from an Italian tenor instrument and the third instrument constructed from Mersenne’s description (these being in addition to the first bass that he built in the mid-1990s). Stemming from a close examination of these instruments and Hostiou’s performances, our understanding of the bass cornetto’s playing characteristics are beginning to take form.

Fortunately, Hostiou and Wilson are allowing the character of the instrument to unfold, inviting a horn that had not been

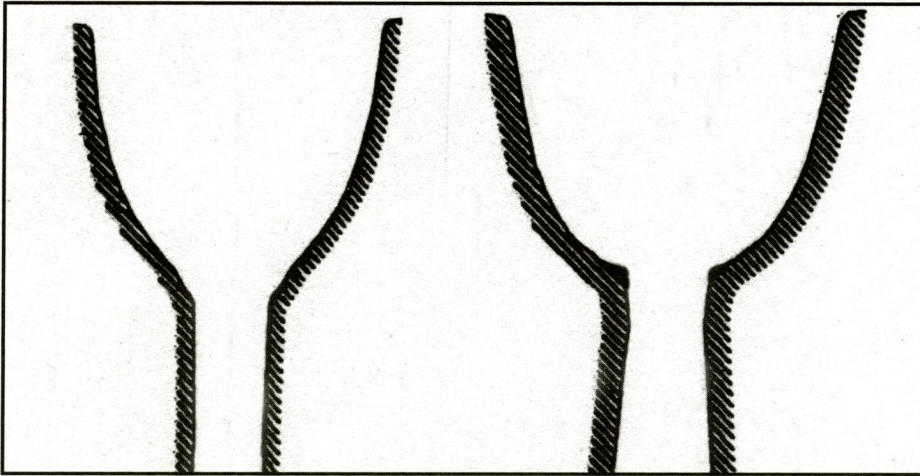


**A colony of cornetti: on top from left to right: lysarden by John McCann, Mersenne bass cornetto by Roland Wilson, bass cornetto by Wilson, Bruderlin-replica tenor by McCann; Joe R. and Joella F. Utley Collection of Brass Instruments of the National Music Museum**

heard in centuries to guide and inform our understanding of its musical qualities rather than judging its abilities, or lack of capabilities, from pre-defined expectations (as has often occurred with the serpent). Both conclude that this size cornetto does not truly fulfill a bass role in the standard sense. Hostiou describes the cornetto as a baryton-tenor horn and Wilson, a performer on the tenor cornetto (also called a lysarden), compares the tenor cornett, similar to a counter-tenor vocal texture, to the low tenor vocal quality for the bass.<sup>3</sup>

Such descriptions are dramatically different from the texture of a serpent, “the true bass” instrument comprised of acoustically-fundamental notes, which serves to engulf sound and blend—actually, to gather—the tonal qualities of nearby voices and instruments. As a serpentist, Hostiou describes centering notes on the bass cornetto more easily (as I have found as well being the owner of one of Wilson’s recently-built instruments). While the serpent’s harmonic series of notes locks into place quite easily in terms of pitch and clarity, the intonation and tone of the bass cornetto’s notes are more evenly centered in their placement throughout the instruments 1.5 to 2 octave range.

Resurrections are difficult, however, and this one includes a very wonderfully-complex twist. Today’s players will be defining the sound of this instrument by what mouthpieces are chosen. The tone and texture of this instrument are not determined “a priori”; the selection of the mouthpiece will define its sound. And while much mouthpiece chatter revolves around rim sizes and the feel for the player, little talk is directed to the mouthpiece’s defining feature for sound—namely, the sharpness of the mouthpiece throat. While most low brass players assume that the bottom of the mouthpiece has always been the curved, conical shape commonplace today, this was far from the case from the mid-16th through mid-19th centuries. This point was specifically discussed at the 2009 Historical Brass Festival



Round-throated and sharp-throated mouthpiece drawings

presentation, "In Medias Res: Considering the Sounds of the Bass Cornetto," where Douglas Yeo and I examined the two drastically different throats on serpent mouthpieces—the sharp-edged throat of the 17th century and the curved-edged throat of the early 19th century, typical in today's modern brass mouthpieces. The former design permitted the serpent to blend with bassoons, and the later mouthpiece, producing a dramatically contrasting sound, indicated why serpents could be called brasswinds with their warmer, pure, mellow sound. Noting that some early 19th century trombone mouthpieces had sharp-edged throats, a staggering fact if one begins to think of the implications for the sound of the trombone during that period, we suggested analogies for deciding upon the "proper" mouthpiece for the newly resurrected bass cornetto. Using a sharp-throated mouthpiece inserted a hiss within the tone; a round-throated mouthpiece offered a more mellow texture for the bass.

In essence, twenty-first century bass cornettists will not only be choosing mouthpieces based upon personal preferences of rim width and size but, in the upcoming years, will be negotiating the actual sound of the instrument.

While the situation is complex indeed, musical relativism will not rule the day. This is not "anything goes," where the bass cornetto may end up with a double reed instead of a cupped mouthpiece. Our explorers, guided by the historical record, will come to some commonality of understanding, and this will be a delight to observe for the low brass and early music communities in the future. Rarely do we have such an opportunity to witness the resurrection—the definition and determination—of an instrument that is known to have existed but has not been heard in centuries. We look forward to the future work of our guides, Volny Hostiou, Roland Wilson, and Wolfgang Köhler. I suspect, however, the low brass prankster may already have a new conundrum: the bass cornetto is neither a bass nor a serpent. What more will the future bring?

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Period descriptions abound for this stunning instrument, and one should be prepared for an ethereal, transcendental experience when given the opportunity to hear today's leading performers (Bruce Dickey, Kiri Tollaksen, Jean Tubery, Jeremy

West, and others) in concert. One's conception of brass music will never be quite the same.

<sup>2</sup> We are grateful, as always, for the assistance of Serpent Website administrator, Paul Schmidt, who not only maintains the most comprehensive discography of serpent, ophicleide, and bass cornetto recordings but, also, in this instance has translated the liner notes for Ensemble Entheos' recording *Requiem pour Claude de Lorraine* by Pierre Cléreau [Entheos CD005].

See [www.serpentwebsite.com/disco.htm](http://www.serpentwebsite.com/disco.htm) and [www.serpentwebsite.com/Requiem\\_Lorraine\\_CD\\_book.pdf](http://www.serpentwebsite.com/Requiem_Lorraine_CD_book.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> In a slightly different line of reasoning, Dr. Sabine Klaus of the National Music Museum (US) is questioning, through linguistic interpretation of historical vernacular, whether the tenor size cornett is actually the instrument documented in the historical records. Klaus introduced this thesis during the 2009 Michaelstein Roundtable discussion, and we look forward to her continuing treatment.

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