THE CIMBASSO AND TUBA IN THE OPERATIC WORKS OF GIUSEPPE VERDI: A PEDAGOGICAL AND AESTHETIC COMPARISON

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In recent years, the use of the *cimbasso* has gained popularity in Giuseppe Verdi opera performances throughout the world. In the past, the tuba or the bass trombone was used regularly instead of the *cimbasso* because less regard was given to what Verdi may have intended. Today, one expects more attention to historical precedent, which is evident in many contemporary Verdi opera performances. However, the tuba continues to be used commonly in performances of Verdi opera productions throughout the United States. The use of the tuba in the U.S. is due to a lack of awareness and a limited availability of the *cimbasso*. This paper demonstrates the pedagogical and aesthetic differences between the use of the tuba and the modern *cimbasso* when performing the works of Giuseppe Verdi operas.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES ......................................................................................................... iiiv

LIST OF MUSICAL EXAMPLES ..................................................................................... v

**Chapters**

1. INTRODUCTION ..................................................................................................... 1

2. HISTORY ................................................................................................................ 5
   
   Serpent ...................................................................................................................... 8
   
   Russian Bassoon, Bass-Horn, and Early *Cimbasso* ................................... 9
   
   Ophicleide .............................................................................................................. 11
   
   Bombardon ............................................................................................................. 13

3. PROFESSIONAL COMMENTARY ON THE SIGNIFICANCE AND PEDAGOGY OF THE *CIMBASSO* ........................................................... 17
   
   Pedagogical Comments ...................................................................................... 18
   
   Mouthpieces in Order of Preference ................................................................. 20

4. PEDAGOGICAL COMPARISON AND MUSICAL COMPARISON ............ 23
   
   “Nabucco” Overture ............................................................................................ 23
   
   “Macbeth” ............................................................................................................. 24
   
   “Aida” ................................................................................................................... 29
   
   “Falstaff” .............................................................................................................. 37

5. CONCLUSIONS ....................................................................................................... 43

**Appendices**

A. INSTRUMENT PICTURES .................................................................................... 45

B. INTERVIEWS ....................................................................................................... 48

C. MOUTHPIECE COMPARISON ........................................................................... 56

BIBLIOGRAPHY ........................................................................................................... 58
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure A.1: Modern *cimbasso* (1940). ................................................................. 46
Figure A.2: Russian bassoon (1833). ........................................................................ 46
Figure A.3: Serpent (*w/o* keys and *w/* keys). .......................................................... 46
Figure A.4: (English) Bass-horn. ........................................................................ 46
Figure A.5: Early *cimbasso* (c. 1820, Belgium). ................................................... 47
Figure A.6: Ophicleide ......................................................................................... 47
Figure A.7: Bb Saxhorn (Paris). ............................................................................. 47
Figure A.8: Flicorno (*bombardino*, Italy). ......................................................... 47
LIST OF MUSICAL EXAMPLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Composition</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Nabucco</td>
<td>Overture; Beginning, Rehearsal No. 7</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Macbeth</td>
<td>Act 1, Prelude; 6 before Square 1, 2 before Square 4</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Macbeth</td>
<td>Act I, Scene 2; Scene and Cavatina</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Aida</td>
<td>Act I, No. 3, Finale; 7 before Letter D, end</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Aida</td>
<td>Act II, No. 5, Finale; Letter K - Letter M</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Falstaff</td>
<td>Act I; 10 after Square 8, 3 before Square 9</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Falstaff</td>
<td>Act II, Part I; Pickup to Square 25 to end</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Falstaff</td>
<td>Act III, Part II; 2 before Square 63 to end</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In present day performance practice the tuba has superseded closely related historical instruments such as the ophicleide and the cimbasso in the orchestra. The ophicleide fell into disuse because the tuba proved to be a more satisfactory instrument for the purpose of providing the best low voice of the low brass orchestral quartet – consisting of two tenor trombones, one bass trombone, and one tuba. Berlioz discusses the difficulty in scoring for the ophicleide in his Treatise on Instrumentation, where he stated that there is “nothing more vulgar, I would even say more monstrous and less designed to blend with the rest of the orchestra than those more or less fast passages written as solos for the middle range of the ophicleide in some modern operas. It is rather like a bull escaped from its stable and is frolicking in a salon.”

The cimbasso, originally designated trombone basso Verdi, was Verdi’s solution to the search for a low brass instrument capable of playing fast passages and also creating the proper blend in the brass section of his operas. However, the cimbasso was seldom used during the 20th century for very different reasons than that of the ophicleide. Reasons such as the convoluted nomenclature of the instrument; which I will explain later in the paper; and specific nationalistic ties to Northern Italy made the availability of the instrument difficult.

Most critical editions of Giuseppe Verdi’s opera scores seldom specify tuba but usually designate cimbasso or trombone basso. Throughout most of the 20th century, however, tubists would see cimbasso indicated on their part and would usually play the

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part on tuba. Although this “instrument replacement” was common practice, Verdi’s orchestration provides strong evidence that these *cimbasso* parts were more of a contrabass trombone part than a tuba part.

In 1996 Renato Meucci published an article “The *Cimbasso* and Related Instruments in 19th Century Italy.” This article clarifies the term *cimbasso* and describes and documents how the terminology evolved into the modern *cimbasso*. This information collected by Meucci as well as other scholars such as Clifford Bevan suggests reasons for the ambiguous nature of the term. Clifford Bevan discusses Verdi’s fixation with minute differences in sound that obviously affected his instrumentation. It is noted that Verdi was extremely outspoken about his ideas of instrumental sound and blend in his opera orchestra. Evidence of Verdi’s strong opinions on instrumentation can be found in letters he wrote discussing his displeasure of incorporating a conical low brass instrument in his opera orchestra, such as tuba or bombardon. Verdi states in a letter to his publisher Ricordi, “I cherish a *trombone basso* Verdi, because it is the same family as the others…. but not that damned bombardon which does not blend with the others.”

Although we have strong research clarifying the differences between tuba and *cimbasso*, it is still common today to hear Verdi performances played on either instrument. However, because we have such strong evidence expressing Verdi’s idea of blend and timbre, it is difficult to justify playing these parts on the tuba. Tubists Roger Bobo and James Gourlay have realized this, and because of their own curiosities, they had a *cimbasso* fabricated for them for their own use and experimentation when playing

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works by Verdi in the orchestra. In his article “Cimbasso: A Comeback That's Here to Stay,” Bobo states, “[u]nfortunately, I was approaching the end of my orchestral career and had very few chances to play cimbasso after that, just a few times in the Maggio Musicale Orchestra in Florence. I could not help thinking, though, of the potential this instrument had… I look forward to watching how this instrument develops in the future and I’m a little envious of the younger players of today who will help guide that development.”

Consequently, an investigation into the differences in the pedagogical approaches to playing these two instruments, as well as a discussion of the contrasting aesthetic merit that occurs when playing each instrument in a Verdi operatic low brass section is warranted. This research also allows for a direct comparison, by providing the opportunity to hear the immediate differences when playing each instrument in an operatic orchestral low brass section.

It is becoming more common for some American orchestra conductors and/or music directors to request the use of the modern cimbasso when performing the operatic works of Verdi. This inclusion of the modern cimbasso is in part due to the recent uprising in historically informed performance practice throughout the world. Articles have been written on the cimbasso to clarify the instrument’s skewed history. However, the technical aspects of playing the cimbasso are vastly different from the pedagogical approach to playing the tuba. As well, the two instruments differ in articulation, tonal character, and the balance they provide as the bass brass instrument in the opera. These differences provide a divergent musical perspective and overall

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aesthetic experience for the audience. The goal of this project is to demonstrate the pedagogical and aesthetic differences between the use of the tuba and the modern *cimbasso* when performing the works of Giuseppe Verdi operas.
CHAPTER 2
HISTORY

The 19th century was a time of urbanization, industrialization, and political change throughout Europe. During the 17th and 18th centuries Milan went through periods of French, Spanish, and Austrian domination. As a result, Milan became a center for intellectual and cultural activity even amid its long history of political and social conflicts. This political unrest is true particularly during the end of the Napoleonic reign in 1814. Although the second Austrian rule of Milan in 1815 was at first keenly accepted, the Austrians ultimately “established a repressive regime in which freedom of speech and action was rigorously circumscribed.”⁴ These attempts to stifle the cultural and enlightened minds that gave Milan its identity for the past century created a rift in Milanese allegiance to the Austrians. Verdi made Milan his home a little more than ten years before the first Italian revolution against the Austrians (known as the Five Days of Milan). Both the political climate in which Verdi lived and Milan’s rich history affected Verdi’s compositions and compositional techniques, namely, his style of orchestration and his aversions to certain musical and instrumental traditions practiced in Central and Eastern Europe. In particular, Verdi’s strong aversion to large conical bass brass instruments, such as the bombardone and the tuba, were due to their “inability to blend with the orchestra”⁵ as well as the association and popularity of these instruments in Prussian, Austrian, and German bands and orchestras. Instead Verdi maintained his allegiance to Northern Italian traditions of using small bore bass instruments, whose

name evolved into the *cimbasso*. In an attempt to maintain the integrity of the composer’s intent, and a general historical accuracy, today’s opera orchestra is beginning to implement the use of this instrument (figure 1).⁶

Throughout the 20th century, the instrument and term *cimbasso* have had a very skewed and convoluted history. The word *cimbasso* existed long before the instrument we associate the word with today. The modern *cimbasso* is a valved contra-bass trombone, pitched typically in F or Bb. In 1881, when Verdi first heard this instrument in *Pelitti’s Instrument Shop*, he decided this was the ideal instrument to complete the brass section of his orchestra. As a result of Verdi’s decision, this instrument was soon referred to as *trombone basso Verdi* (or simply *trombone basso* or *trombone Verdi*).⁷ Verdi scored specifically for this instrument. This instrumentation specificity can be seen in his final two operas, *Otello* and *Falstaff*. After the conception of this instrument was finally realized, Verdi implemented the *trombone basso Verdi* for all of his previous productions. The dissemination of the instrument and the practice of changing the instrumentation of his earlier operas led to the obscured history of the *trombone basso Verdi* and how the name eventually evolved into the modern *cimbasso*. The ambiguous evolution of terminology left us with two separate definitions for the *cimbasso*.

The term *cimbasso* can be found in scores as early as 1816, specifically in Paganini’s *Violin Concerto No.1 in Eb*.⁸ The term *cimbasso* is derived from several source descriptions. Author and historian Anthony Baines describes the word as being

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⁶ Appendix A
⁸ Bevan, 407.
cultivated from ‘basso scimia’ meaning monkey brass.\(^9\) There is iconographic evidence portraying upright serpents constructed with the head of a dragon or baboon on the bell, possibly an Italian explanation of a Russian bassoon (figure 1.2).\(^10\) Another description, found in Francis Irving Travis’s dissertation on Verdi orchestration, states the term cimbasso being derived from cimba or cymba, which was a “name once applied to a special kind of small metal boat, and more freely, to something else similarly concave.”\(^11\) This definition could be an Italian explanation of a Bass-horn, which was made entirely of metal. However, Travis presents evidence suggesting another theory as to the origin of the term cimbasso. Travis’s research shows that the name of the bass brass instrument indicated in Verdi’s operas often varied in spelling (simbasso, gimbasso, or cimbasso) as well as the actual instrument used (serpent, ophicleide, or cimbasso). This situation occurs not only from opera to opera but also from act to act within a single opera. Irving suggests the reason for this occurrence is likely due to the numerous copyists that wrote out the parts for each act. This phenomenon supports the ideas expressed by the early music scholar Renato Meucci. Meucci believes that the term cimbasso is thought to be an abbreviation of the words corno in basso, which is commonly written c. basso or c. in basso; literally meaning - horn in bass register. He explains that due to Milan’s location and history of diverse national dominance, a number of instruments could have been commonly found in Northern Italy and that cimbasso was simply generic terminology. Meucci also believes that this mixed culture

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\(^10\) Appendix A

\(^11\) Francis Irving Travis, *Verdi’s Orchestration* (Zurich: Juris-Verlag, 1956), 50.
explains the lack of consistency in spelling (simbasso or gimbasso as stated earlier).\textsuperscript{12} With this evidence, and the rapid evolution of new instruments during the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, we can see that the Italian term cimbasso (in its early use) could refer to any bass instrument available at the time in Italian opera orchestras. The instruments used at the start of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century were most likely serpents, upright serpents (Russian bassoon, bass-horn, and Italy’s unique versions of either), and ophicleides.

Serpent

The serpent (figure 1.3)\textsuperscript{13} existed as far back as the 16\textsuperscript{th} century. It is the bass voice in the cornett family. Due to the serpent’s length, the instrument was made in an ‘s’ shape so the player could manipulate the finger holes bored throughout the body of the instrument. In 1743, the French author Abbe’ Lebeuf’s writes an account of how Canon Edmé Guillaume first introduced the instrument in 1590 in Auxerre, France. There are accounts of a few surviving serpents of Italian descent possibly dating back earlier than 1590 contradicting Lebeuf’s claims. However, it is evident that France was the country in which the instrument truly made an impact and established itself as a supporting instrument for the male voice in plainsong chant.\textsuperscript{14}

The serpent was associated with church bands throughout the 16\textsuperscript{th} and 17\textsuperscript{th} centuries. The instrument was made out of two hollowed out pieces of wood wrapped in leather. It was held vertically, extending down to the knees, and had six finger holes.

The instrument eventually disseminated into the military bands in most countries to


\textsuperscript{13} Appendix A

\textsuperscript{14} Adam Carse, Musical Wind Instruments (New York: Da Capo Press, 1965), 268.
serve as the bass voice during the 1700s. Instrument makers also began to experiment with different materials such as all metal serpents. Eventually keys were added to allow for more notes to be played as well as better stability in tone and intonation (figure 1.3).\textsuperscript{15}

Near the end of the 18\textsuperscript{th} century, when the serpent became a military instrument, some more attention was given to improving it and trying to bring it into line with other rapidly progressing wind instruments; it was then that the serpent was given a few keys, and was strengthened with more brasswork.\textsuperscript{16}

The playing position of the instrument seemed to pose a problem because of its awkward shape. The instrument was held horizontally, for ease of playing when marching. Eventually, the instrument was bent only once, much like a bassoon, making the instrument more comfortable to hold as well as making the finger holes more convenient for the player to reach.\textsuperscript{17} This “upright serpent” was found throughout Europe. This instrument varied in name and the materials used in its construction between countries. The “upright serpents” that show direct influence on Italy’s \textit{cimbasso} are the Russian bassoon, bass-horn, and \textit{ophicleide}.

\textbf{Russian Bassoon, Bass-Horn, and Early Cimbasso}

The Russian bassoon, bass-horn, and \textit{cimbasso} are all variations of the upright serpent. Ernst Ludwig Gerber, an 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} century German composer, wrote his \textit{Historisch-biographisches Lexikon der Tonkünstler} in 1792, where he discussed the instruments of the period and their history. In this book, he attributed J. J. Régibo as the first instrument-maker to design a serpent in bassoon-form in the year 1780, which was

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{15} Appendix A
\item \textsuperscript{16} Carse, 272.
\item \textsuperscript{17} Carse, 269.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
eventually named the Russian bassoon. Gerber also attributes the French musician Alexander Frichot as designing a metal serpent in a similar shape to Régibo’s design. Frichot, who was living in London at the time, had the English instrument maker J. Astor create his instrument. The instrument was called the bass-horn (figure 1.4), but because English musicians commonly used this instrument for some time, it was sometimes known as the English bass-horn. Both instruments had similar attributes, including tessitura and range. However the main difference between the Russian bassoon and the bass-horn were the materials used to create them. The Russian bassoon was made up of three sections, the bottom resembling the butt of a bassoon. The body was made mostly of wood and capped with a metal bell or more traditionally, one decorated or painted as a dragon’s head. The bass-horn was generally made entirely of copper. Both the Russian bassoon and the bass-horn had finger holes as well as keys. Although these two instruments were very similar in design, musicians in different countries found an affinity towards certain types of “upright serpents.” German, Belgium, and French musicians favored the Russian bassoon, while England used the bass-horn exclusively.

As described earlier, these upright serpents eventually found their way to Italy as well but as a cimbasso (which has been referred to as early cimbasso). The early cimbasso (figure 1.5) was similar to both the Russian bassoon and the bass-horn. It

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20 Appendix A
22 Appendix A
has the bell of a bass-horn and the wooden butt of a Russian bassoon as well as both finger holes and keys. The main difference between these instruments and the early cimbasso is simply the arrangement of the keys. After Paganini scored for the instrument in 1816, many Italian composers, such as Bellini, Rossini, and Donizetti favored the use of the instrument. Alessandro Vessella, an Italian composer and conductor, wrote many books on the instruments during the 19th century, describing the cimbasso as:

made of wood, sometimes copper, in bassoon shape with six finger-holes and two keys, a metal bell and an S, to which was applied a mouthpiece somewhat larger than that of the trombone.\(^{23}\)

This explanation of an early cimbasso shows the strong connection with the bass-horn and Russian bassoon of Austria, Germany, and England. Eventually instrument makers decided to explore entire instruments with keys leading to the creation of the keyed bugle, which had a very successful existence throughout Eastern Europe.\(^{24}\)

Ophicleide

The term ophicleide (figure 1.6)\(^{25}\) is derived from the Greek words ophis, meaning serpent, and kleis or kleid, literally meaning to close or that which serves to close.\(^{26}\) In 1821, The Parisian instrument maker Halary created this instrument. He made ophicleides in different pitches including soprano (clavitube), alto (quinticlave) and bass (ophicleide). Halary was influenced by the keyed bugle, which was very popular.


\(^{25}\) Appendix A

throughout Austria, as well as the English bass-horn. The ophicleide was immediately popular in military and brass bands as well as some opera orchestras. The use of the ophicleide was particularly prevalent in Italy, and Verdi accepted its use before his trombone basso was conceived or if the trombone basso was not available for certain productions. It should be noted that although the ophicleide was commonly used, one would still find the traditional word cimbasso in the score as the term referred to a generic bass instrument. Unfortunately, after the ophicleide’s rapid popularity, the invention of the valve ultimately led to its demise since the valve led to the creation of the bombardone and the tuba. These valved instruments replaced the ophicleide in many countries. However the ophicleide was able to survive in some areas and was used regularly throughout France, Italy and England until the end of the 19th century.27

The ophicleide was thought to be superior to the upright serpents in all variations because of the use of keys instead of finger holes. These keys made it possible to place the holes more evenly along the instrument helping resonance and intonation throughout the scale. Ophicleides were built with nine to twelve keys, however the instrument was typically found with 11.28

As the industrial revolution progressed, advancements in the art of instrument making grew as well. One of the major steps forward in the development of brass instruments was the invention of the valve. In about 1818 both H.D. Stölzel and Friedrich Blühmel patented the first valve. This breakthrough in technology led to the invention of new instruments. One of the most significant new instruments in certain countries was the creation of the valve trombone. During most of the 19th century

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valved trombones were commonly used throughout Italy. Throughout the centuries, slide trombones did not have the same quality as they have today. Because the slide trombone was considered to be too demanding, the valved trombone seemed to be a superior instrument.29

Bombardon

In France during the 18th century the instrument maker Adolph Sax, creator of the saxophone, had success creating instruments for various bands. Sax created entire families of instruments, in particular Sax created the conical family of Sax-horns (figure 1.7).30 These Sax-horns ranged from Soprano (Sax-trumpet) to Contre-basse (Bombardon). Eventually other countries began to create their own families of large conical instruments. With this explosion of creative energy came the dissemination of instruments still used today, such as the flugelhorn, as well as instruments that are no longer used, such as the bombardon (a type of large conical valved ophicleide which was superceded by the tuba). Italy also had a family of extremely conical instruments similar to the Sax-horns that were very popular in the bands. This instrument was called the flicorno (figure 1.8).31 Like the Sax-horns, flicorni was found in tenore (narrow bore bombardino – similar to a baritone), basso (larger bore bombardino – similar to a euphonium), Basso-Grave (bombardone-similar to a bass tuba), and Contrabasso (contrabasso bombardone – similar to a contrabass tuba).32 The range of these

29 Bevan, 409.
30 Appendix A
31 Appendix A
32 Bevan, 262.
instruments was greater than the ophicleide. However, Verdi strongly disliked these large conical instruments for his orchestra. Instead he preferred a smaller bore, more cylindrical shaped instrument to create a homogenous sound throughout the brass section. Evidence of his dislike appears in a letter Verdi wrote to Guilio Ricordi shortly before the performance of Aida at La Scala (1880). Verdi stated:

I wish to insist once again on a fourth trombone. That bombardone is not possible...I cherish a trombone-basso because it is of the same family as the others; but if it should be too tiring or too difficult to play, then get one of those ordinary ophicleides that reach low B. In fact anything you like, but not that damned bombardone, which does not blend with the others.33

It has been noted that Berlioz also did not care for the bombardon (bombardone) stating “[t]his is an instrument of very low range, without keys but with three cylinders (valves). Its timbre differs only little from the ophicleide.”34 However, the family of flicorni was widely accepted throughout Italy and the rest of Europe for use in bands. This acceptance of conical instruments is also evident when Verdi wrote for stage-band (banda). For example, the production of Don Carlo for La Scala in 1884 was performed using two bombadino and two bombardone.35 This example may illustrate why Verdi chose to write for ophicleide rather than write for cimbasso or his new trombone-basso when he composed his Requiem. It could be that Verdi’s sound concept and ideas of orchestration differed for a stage performance, accepting the use of larger more conical shaped bass instruments that would have been popular in bands during the period.

During the last half of the 19th century, discussions were held in a committee known as the Congresso dei Musicisti Italiani. This committee was looking to reform and

33 Bevan, 412.
standardize the orchestra because of the immense availability of new instruments that were invented and being used throughout the century. Much to Verdi’s dismay, in 1881 the committee recommended that the orchestra replace the third trombone with bass trombone as well as replacing the bombardone and serpentone with the contrabass tuba.\textsuperscript{36} Unhappy with the inclusion of tuba or bombardone in his opera orchestra, Verdi decided to work with the instrument maker G. Pelitti to find an instrument that he felt completed the brass section of the orchestra. Verdi heard a contrabass trombone in Pelitti’s workshop pitched in Bb, exactly one octave below the tenor, commenting:

\begin{quote}
the bass trombone in Bb and Eb...achieved a perfect homogeneity of timbre with the tenor trombones, thus completing the harmony without distorting the bass notes, as occurs with the present ophicleides and similar instruments, all fine for a band, but absolutely out of place in an orchestra.\textsuperscript{37}
\end{quote}

Pelitti named the instrument the \textit{trombone-basso Verdi}, although, Verdi chose to call this instrument simply the \textit{trombone basso} when he wrote for it in his final two operas. Later, Verdi returned to the Pelitti workshop with Ricordi and a member of the committee of the \textit{Congresso Musicale}. Ricordi recounts this visit in letters stating how much he liked the new instrument. He is quoted saying:

\begin{quote}
[I have heard the] new bass trombone in Bb, [pitched] an octave below the tenor trombone. This new instrument gave splendid results in range, sonority, power, sweetness and ease of playing, matching the other trombones perfectly. The final result would be the necessary adoption of two tenor trombones in Bb, one bass trombone, in F, and the new bass trombone in Bb, thus creating a perfectly homogeneous, effective quartet of trombones, without bringing the distinctive sound of the band to the orchestra, which adulterates the blend of the various instruments.\textsuperscript{38}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{36} Bevan, 413.
\textsuperscript{37} Bevan, 413.
\textsuperscript{38} Bevan, 413.
After this decision, the new *trombone basso* quickly displaced the tuba in Italian orchestras until the 1920s.

Today, the modern *cimbasso* is often used throughout American opera orchestras for the works of Verdi and his Italian contemporaries. However there are some scholars who believe operas prior to *Otello* and *Falstaff* should be played on the instrument it was originally intended for: the early *cimbasso*. Through the use of the specimens found in a few museum collections, the instrument maker Nicholas Perry was able to make a prototype of the early *cimbasso*. Clifford Bevan, historian and author on early and contemporary bass brass instruments, notes that this prototype instrument “worked remarkably well…The majority of the notes were strong and clear in tone, not least because the thickness of the wood of the bassoon-like butt enabled him to experiment with the size and position of the tone-holes…suiting the requirements of both the acoustic system and the player’s fingers.”\(^{39}\) Although this instrument appears to be successful, it is not the best choice when playing with a modern-day orchestra. Also, given Verdi’s emphasis on balance and homogeneity of sound, the early *cimbasso* does not compare to the modern *cimbasso* because of projection and bell direction. “Whether used alongside valved or slide trombones the sound [of the *trombone basso* (or modern *cimbasso*)] is projected in the same plane, thus making an additional contribution to the concept of four matching tone-qualities, and incidentally solving the problem of the tuba in the pit which can either be lost to the audience when facing through the proscenium arch into the dress circle.”\(^{40}\)

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\(^{39}\) Bevan, 423.

\(^{40}\) Bevan, 419.
CHAPTER 3
PROFESSIONAL COMMENTARY ON THE SIGNIFICANCE
AND PEDAGOGY OF THE CIMBASSO

Graeme Jenkins, the music director of the Dallas Opera, Donald Little, Principal Tuba and Cimbasso with the Dallas Opera, and Ed Jones Principal Tuba with the Fort Worth Symphony and Fort Worth Opera, all strong advocates of the instrument, discussed the issues of using tuba versus *cimbasso* in Verdi operas. They also discussed the reasons why the instrument might not be widely used in this country and offered possible solutions on the subject.

Although companies such as Alexander, Cerveny, G&P, and Haag are currently making quality *cimbassos*, the instrument is still not readily available in most American opera companies. Graeme Jenkins felt so strongly about the *cimbasso* that one of the first decisions he made when becoming Music Director of the Dallas Opera was to purchase an instrument and he uses it in the works of Puccini as well. As stated previously in this paper, Verdi was obsessed with minute details of timbre and blend and it is apparent that Jenkins is also aware of this important aspect in Verdi’s music. Jenkins states “The moment you hear a tuba play Verdi, you are now over the border. You are no longer in Italy, you are in Bavaria.” This statement expresses how the tuba goes against everything in which Verdi believed; timbre, homogeneous blend, and clarity in articulation.

There were common issues between each interviewee. Each was concerned with proper balance and blend, clarity of texture, and historical authenticity. What is most enlightening is that each felt awareness, or the lack thereof, was the foremost problem in Verdi opera performances in the United States. However, the discussion of
awareness seemed to take separate paths of significance with each interviewee. Jenkins discussed how the United States is lacking in historical awareness. From his experiences in Europe he believes that the U.S. is “ten and even fifteen years behind” that of the orchestras in Europe. The other type of awareness is that of the actual cimbasso itself. Jones and Little discussed how it is unfortunate that many musical directors and opera companies do not realize how much the use of this instrument in lieu of a tuba vastly transforms the sound of the brass section. Little stated that when he hears performances of Verdi operas using tuba “it just doesn’t sound right. It really sounds better and more complete with a cimbasso.” He feels the tuba is too conspicuous given the context of the music and the way Verdi wrote the part as well as the evidence we have clearly defining Verdi’s thoughts on the bass brass instrument of his orchestra. Jones supports these statements saying the cimbasso is “really just very much an extension of the trombone section. It’s really a valve contrabass trombone and it has all the qualities of a contrabass trombone but it’s accessible by the valve players.”

Pedogogical Comments

The cimbasso has the same length of tubing as an f tuba. However, the two instruments are drastically different. The tuba is primarily a conical instrument gradually increasing in size throughout the length of the tubing. The cimbasso is primarily cylindrical, maintaining the same bore size throughout most of the length of the tubing. However, although the cimbasso is of a smaller bore, it is not necessarily “easier” to play. Ed Jones describes the cimbasso as playing much “stuffier” than the tuba. This “stuffiness” or difficulty in playing the instrument is due to the valve section of the
instrument as well as the sharper bends on the *cimbasso* versus that of the tuba. Jones states that a lot more air and physical force is needed to produce a sound on the *cimbasso*. This concept is very different from the approach of playing the tuba – where tension and forced playing is avoided. Jones states, “you can’t really blow as openly or as relaxed as you would on a tuba and I assume that it is just because of the valves and just the layout of the instrument.”

Donald Little commented on similar difficulties when playing the *cimbasso* versus the tuba. The tuba is a more open free-blowing instrument, Little states “[t]he instrument [cimbasso] does not blow easily, it is sort of restricted to me.” Both Little and Jones discuss the difficulty in playing mid-range dynamics on the *cimbasso*. Little talks about dynamics on the *cimbasso* saying:

> Although not as responsive, there is a softer dynamic there, and then it has louder dynamics. What I find most difficult on that particular instrument is to play on what you feel would be a good characteristic sound in a medium or mid-range dynamic.

Jones comments on dynamics are very similar discussing the difficulty in producing sound in the *mp* to *mf* range of dynamics. Jones states, “It seems to me that [the cimbasso] works best when it’s played very loud and very soft. But the mid-range volume is not very responsive.”

My personal experiences of playing the *cimbasso* agree with the comments made by Ed Jones and Donald Little. I found the *cimbasso* to be far more resistant in terms of back pressure when playing, than the tuba. I realized that a significant aspect of pedagogical approach to the *cimbasso* is mouthpiece choice. Both Jones and Little brought up this particular point. The size and shape of the cup, the diameter of the rim, and the size of the throat, bore, and shank of the mouthpiece all will alter both the
sound and the way in which the instrument physically plays. The *cimbasso* favored certain registers depending on the size of the mouthpiece one used. The deeper the cup and the larger the diameter of the rim allowed the instrument’s low end to play more easily. However, when playing in the staff or above, it was very difficult to play, mostly due to the tremendous back pressure of the instrument. This problem also affected fast articulated passages. It became quite difficult to play with the dexterity needed to complete fast-articulated passages on a larger mouthpiece. A larger mouthpiece also seemed to alter the sound of the *cimbasso*, taking away the bright timbre that is desired to match with the trombones. When playing a smaller mouthpiece, similar to something one would use for bass trombone, playing in the staff and above was easier. However, anything below the staff was very difficult to play. Also, the timbre was affected by sounding too small, nasally, and pinched. I was able to narrow down three mouthpieces that worked well on the *cimbasso*.41

Mouthpieces in Order of Preference

- Thein MCL – The Thein Brass Company has been making fine handmade brass instruments since 1971. They specialize in making specialized brass instruments such as historic brass, including natural trumpet, natural horn, as well as specialty brass such as bass trumpet, piccolo and alto trombone, contrabass trombone, and cimbasso. Thein recommends the MCL mouthpiece for use on the contrabass trombone and the cimbasso. As far as size, this mouthpiece was in the middle of the three I chose for use on the *cimbasso*. It has a smaller rim diameter than the Monette but a deeper cup. The

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41 Appendix C
MCL has a larger rim diameter than the Doug Elliott but a shallower cup. I feel this mouthpiece works the best with the cimbasso. I had enough bottom to fill out the section and yet it was small enough to help with articulation as well as matching the brighter timbre of the trombones.

- Monette 94F – David Monette began making instruments in 1983. After that he also began making mouthpieces. The first tuba mouthpiece was created for Chester Schmitz of the Boston Symphony Orchestra after the entire trumpet section began playing on Monette equipment. The 94 F is the smallest tuba mouthpiece Monette makes. This mouthpiece has a shallow bowl-shaped cup. The 94 F is the shallowest cup mouthpiece out of the three; however it is the largest in rim diameter. This mouthpiece made playing below the staff extremely easy and gave quite a bit of bottom to the sound of the cimbasso. This was my second choice and also that of my section. However we all felt the Thein mouthpiece allowed for more upper overtones to come across allowing the instrument to blend a little easier than the 94 F. However, the 94 F is still a good mouthpiece and worked quite well with the cimbasso.

- Doug Elliott 118 rim – LB/TU N cup – N9 shank – Doug Elliott is a trombone player that began his mouthpiece company in 1981. Doug Elliott makes adjustable mouthpieces. The mouthpiece I chose to use is a combination of a 118 rim, which is a little larger than a Schilke 60 and yet still a bit smaller than the Thein MCL. The cup is a LB/TN N cup, which is a medium-deep cup. The cup of the Doug Elliott is the largest of the three instruments and has the smallest rim diameter of the three. The shank is an N 9, which is Doug Elliott’s large back-bore shank. It is about the same size back-bore as the Thein MCL. I found this mouthpiece to be the hardest to control with notes
immediately below the staff. I also found that it took a lot of the bottom out of the sound on the *cimbasso*. This mouthpiece was my third choice on the list; however I could see this mouthpiece working well with a trombone player beginning on the *cimbasso*.
CHAPTER 4

PEDAGOGICAL COMPARISON AND MUSICAL COMPARISON

“Nabucco” Overture

_Nabucco_ was first produced March 9, 1842 in Milan and it is in four acts. It is Verdi’s third opera and one of Verdi’s first successes in Milan, establishing his career as a serious and popular opera composer.\(^{42}\) This opera was written before the inception of the modern _cimbasso_. The overture of this work is commonly played in American concert orchestras. The excerpt chosen is the opening chorale from the overture (Ex. 1).

The opening chorale is written for three trombones and one cimbasso. Verdi wrote almost all in rhythmic unison except for a few occasions where trombone 1 plays a dotted half note over a half note played in the rest of the section (measure 14). As the excerpt continues Verdi uses the brass in what the author Francis Travis calls “block-style.” Verdi utilized “block-style” orchestration very often in his early works such as _Nabucco, Ernani, and Lombardi_.\(^{43}\) This excerpt was chosen because it exposes the dynamic abilities, intonation, and register of the _cimbasso_.

When playing on the tuba neither intonation nor ensemble was a problem. However, in recordings made of the section, the tuba was very exposed due to its large heavy sound in _piano_ and _pianissimo_ passages. When playing on the _cimbasso_ the section was able to match better in terms of articulation but more importantly in terms of timbre, especially during softer dynamics. During the faster passage, the _cimbasso_

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\(^{43}\) Francis Irving Travis, _Verdi’s Orchestration_ (Zurich: Juris-Verlag, 1956), 46-47.
made it much easier to play as a section, especially since Verdi orchestrated this in “block-style.”

Example 1: *Nabucco* Overture; Beginning, Rehearsal No. 7

“Macbeth”

*Macbeth* is also an early opera by Verdi and was written before the inception of the modern *cimbasso*. This opera was first produced in 1847 and revised by Verdi in 1865.44 *Macbeth* is the story of General Macbeth’s longing to be king. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth devise a morbid plan to make sure that Macbeth has the throne. Macbeth was extremely popular at the time of its premiere and was of the first operas Verdi wrote exploring gruesome themes such as witches, ghosts, or scenes with

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supernatural voices. Consequently, Verdi began improving his methods of relating the orchestral accompaniment to the dramatic process in his operas.45

The prelude to Act I sets the mood for the opera, where the opening scene is a group of witches meeting Macbeth and Banquo to discuss the prophecies that they have seen (Ex.2).

Example 2: *Macbeth*, Act 1, Prelude; 6 before Square 1, 2 before Square 4

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45 Francis Irving Travis, *Verdi’s Orchestration* (Zurich: Juris-Verlag, 1956), 56.
Verdi employed all instruments, using many octave and unison lines in order to create a hollow or eerie sound. What is interesting about this excerpt is how Verdi avoided the low Bb in the cimbasso during the unison sixteenth note runs in measures ten and eleven. This avoidance is because the ophicleide, which is what was used at the time, was not capable of playing lower than a B natural. Also, Verdi placed specific markings in the score such as “cupo” and “misterioso” to convey the proper macabre setting. At the request of Verdi, copyists later rescored this part for trombone basso which is the instrument Verdi had Pelitti fabricate for him in his instrument shop and what is currently known today as the cimbasso.

This excerpt conveys how convincing the cimbasso can be in portraying the menacing mood Verdi composed during this opening scene. Within the opening passage, the cimbasso matched articulation and timbre, while the tuba seemed to lack the luster and sharpness of sound that the cimbasso was able to create within the section. This homogeneity is crucial later in the excerpt when the cimbasso part is in octaves with the trombone section during sixteenth note runs. It is very clear when hearing the section with both the tuba and then the cimbasso that Verdi wrote this with a full section sound in mind and the cimbasso accomplishes that goal.

In the second excerpt (Ex. 3) Lady Macbeth learns of the witches her husband has encountered from a letter he has sent her. This excerpt is the end of that scene where she expresses her distress and her morbid plans to ensure Macbeth’s seat as King. We see Verdi’s “block accompaniment” again, however Verdi employs another method that is very common in his writing. He commonly doubles the technical bassoon line with the cimbasso and double bass.
Example 3: *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene 2; Scene and Cavatina
This excerpt is a wonderful example of how the cimbasso breaks away from the trombone section and is used in conjunction with the technical passages played by the bassoon. The narrower, bright, and articulate sound the cimbasso creates would blend with the bassoon better than the round, heavy, conical sound of the tuba. When playing this excerpt on tuba, it was difficult to project through the trombone section and would be even more difficult to project through the full orchestra. The cimbasso was the
optimal choice for both clarity of articulation, in order to match the bassoon and double bass, and projection of sound with the forward facing bell and brighter timbre.

“Aida”

*Aida* is one of Verdi’s later operas first produced in Cairo, Egypt during the winter of 1871. This opera is in four acts and seven scenes. Aida is an Ethiopian princess who is captured, brought to Egypt, and placed into slavery. Radames, a military commander, falls in love with Aida and is torn between his feelings for Aida and his loyalty to the King of Egypt.46 This opera was originally written for *cimbasso*, but after the inception of the *trombone basso*, or the modern *cimbasso*, Verdi insisted on its use in his previous operas particularly in *Aida*. In a letter to his publisher Ricordi prior to a performance in Milan of *Aida*, Verdi states, “I cherish a Trombone Basso because it is of the same family as the others; but if it should be too tiring and too difficult to play, try again one of the usual ophicleides that reach low B.”47

The first excerpt (Ex. 4) is the finale to Act I of *Aida*. Here Radames is chosen and promoted to commander-and-chief to lead the Egyptian army into war against Ethiopia. The listener can hear the brilliant way Verdi portrayed this military ceremony with the orchestra. This is a wonderful example of Verdi switching the *cimbasso* part between supporting the trombone section and supporting the bassoon and double basses. This excerpt begins with a technical sixteenth-note passage that starts with quick grace notes. This passage in particular is a strong argument for the use of a valved instrument such as the modern *cimbasso* playing this part, as opposed to a

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contra-bass trombone, which when operating a slide would be too cumbersome to play the parts that Verdi wrote. In recordings of section rehearsals, it was difficult to hear the tuba through the section during the articulated sixteenth-note passages. However, these technical passages were much harder to play on the cimbasso than on the tuba since the cimbasso has a slower response and requires more physical strength and a stronger output of air to create a sound.

Example 4: *Aida*, Act I, No. 3, Finale; 7 before Letter D, end
d'Egitto il sacro, il sacro
la mano tu di sten. di sovra, sovr'l'egi. zio
so. vra l'eg. zio, so. vra l'egi. zio
so. vra l'egi. zio, so. vra l'egi. zio
la mano tu di sten. di sovra, sovr'l'egi. zio
la mano tu di sten. di sovra, sovr'l'egi. zio
The bell direction plays an important role in the final few measures of this excerpt because the *cimbasso* completes the section sound giving the listener a full balanced blend.

The final excerpt chosen from *Aida* is during the finale to Act II (Ex. 5). This
scene is very thickly orchestrated so it is clear the brighter, narrower sound of a cimbasso is most appropriate.

Example 5: *Aida*, Act II, No. 5, Finale; Letter K - Letter M
(Entra Radamés, sotto un baldacchino portato da dodici Uffiziali)

Gloria! Gloria! Gloria!

Gloria! Gloria! Gloria!

Gloria! Gloria! Gloria!

Grazie, grazie, rendete, rendete, rendete nel
Grazie, grazie, rendete, rendete, rendete nel
Grazie, grazie, rendete, rendete, rendete nel

Primo animato
“Falstaff”

*Falstaff* was Verdi’s final opera and was first produced in May of 1893. It is a
comic opera in three acts. Although *Falstaff* is not as immensely popular as his previous operas, critics and musicians revere this work because of Verdi’s brilliant orchestration and refined melodic invention shown throughout the opera. \(^{48}\) This opera is based on Shakespeare’s *Merry Wives of Windsor*, telling the story of a fat, arrogant, and cowardly knight named Falstaff who attempts to lure two wealthy and married women in hopes of making money. \(^{49}\) This opera was written specifically for the “new” *trombone basso* in mind. Although Verdi’s orchestration is more developed and his writing has matured, he still uses the *trombone basso* as he did the *cimbasso* in earlier operas; supporting the bassoons and double basses, as well as completing the bottom of the trombone section. However, Verdi began using the *cimbasso* in a more soloistic nature as well as exploring the larger low range not possible with the ophicleide.

In later operas, Verdi began to elevate inner voices of the orchestra, such as viola and cello. \(^{50}\) This first excerpt (Ex. 6) shows this elevation by giving a melody to the *Trombone Basso (cimbasso)*, which is supporting the bassoon and horn line. This excerpt also shows the *cimbasso* supporting the bassoon and horns as they play the jovial theme of Falstaff as he discusses his plans to persuade the hearts of two unsuspecting wealthy women. This excerpt gives the listener a chance to hear the *cimbasso* play the solo line, followed by the bass trombone playing the solo line. The passing of the melody from the *cimbasso* to the third trombone allows one to hear a direct connection between the two instruments. When playing the excerpt on tuba it is


\(^{49}\) Toye, 421-436.

\(^{50}\) Francis Irving Travis, *Verdi’s Orchestration* (Zurich: Juris-Verlag, 1956), 38.
more difficult for the listener to find the correlation when the third trombone begins playing the melody.

Example 6: *Falstaff*, Act I; 10 after Square 8, 3 before Square 9

The second excerpt is the conclusion of Scene I Act II (Ex. 7). This short excerpt is an example of how Verdi orchestrated the trombone and *cimbasso* section in *Falstaff*; still using the bottom voice the same way he did in his previous operas – octave unison and rhythmic unison to create one sound. One can hear that when playing between tuba and *cimbasso*, that the *cimbasso* is the more logical choice. Although it is thickly orchestrated it is evident to most listeners that the *cimbasso* completes the trombone section in terms of timbre, articulation, and bell direction. It is this homogeneous union that makes this excerpt more aesthetically satisfying.

The final excerpt was chosen because it clearly shows the *cimbasso*’s articulation (Ex. 8). The beginning triplet runs are first shared within the section, then splitting allowing the *cimbasso* to play triplets by itself, only to finally play in rhythmic and octave unison with the bass trombone. This excerpt clearly expresses the articulation and timbre similarities between the trombone and the *cimbasso*. The listener
will hear that when the tuba is played with the section on this excerpt, it is too prominent and does not blend when the line breaks away from the trombone and then is played in conjunction with the third trombone.

Example 7: *Falstaff*, Act II, Part I; Pickup to Square 25 to end
Example 8: *Falstaff*, Act III, Part II; 2 before Square 63 to end
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

The modern *cimbasso* seems to be the solution for many problems encountered in the performance of Verdi opera. Although we have letters accounting Verdi’s request for the use of a cylindrical, narrow bore bass brass instrument to be used, the obvious inclusion of such an instrument is evident when simply hearing the *cimbasso* against the tuba within the trombone section. The matching of timbre and articulation throughout the trombone section is one obvious problem but another problem commonly overlooked is bell direction. Although the use of tuba is commonly accepted as the standard opera orchestral instrument to complete the low brass, it simply does not fit within the context of Verdi’s orchestration. The tuba’s articulation seems to be either lost in aggressive passages or balance becomes distorted in chordal and chorale-like passages. Recordings made of a low brass section playing with the tuba and then with the *cimbasso* confirmed these impressions. The bell direction and brighter tone quality of the *cimbasso* proved to be obviously more fitting than that of the tuba.

I played the tuba in the first few rehearsals with the section. We found ourselves working most of the rehearsal time on balance. Many of the excerpts had independent *cimbasso* parts and it was difficult to project while the section was playing at the same time, not particularly because of volume of sound, but specifically articulation. Note beginnings played by the tuba were not clearly audible with the trombone section. I found this to be true in the recordings I had made of rehearsals as well. After the first rehearsal with the *cimbasso* all our balance problems were solved. I found that we were able to play as a homogeneous section, much like a consort of sixteenth and
seventeenth century England. The difference between the uses of each instrument is drastic and yet it is still common to see most American orchestras using tuba. This project will bring about a greater awareness of the *cimbasso* and hopefully the United States will begin the shift toward the use of the instrument, upholding Verdi’s original intentions.
APPENDIX A

INSTRUMENT PICTURES
Figure A.0.1: Modern *cimbasso* (1940). Rampone & Cazzani, Italy

Figure A.0.2: Russian bassoon (1833). Swiss National Museum, Zürich Neg-109115

Figure A.0.3: Serpent (w/o keys and w/ keys). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston c. 1820 Baudouin, Paris, France

Figure A.0.4: (English) Bass-horn. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston c. 1800, England, Leslie Mason Collection
Figure A.0.5: Early *cimbasso* (c. 1820, Belgium).
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Leslie Lindsey Mason Collection

Figure A.0.6: Ophicleide (c. 1840, A. G. Guichard, Paris)
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Figure A.0.7: Bb Saxhorn (Paris).
Antoinne Courtios

Figure A.0.8: Flicorno (*bombardino*, Italy).
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APPENDIX B

INTERVIEWS
Interview with Donald Little: Principal Tuba/Cimbasso Dallas Opera

Alex Costantino: When did you first become of aware of the Cimbasso

Donald Little: I really didn’t know too much about the cimbasso at all. I think the first time I really became aware of a cimbasso other than a picture in the Clifford Bevan book, was when I was in Berlin in 88’ to 89’ and probably during the winter of 89’ or somewhere around March I went over to the Deutsche Opera with one of their two tuba players, Mark Evans, and he took me up and showed me where the guys warmed up and where instruments were stored and there was this cimbasso sitting out there on a stand. Mark just walked up to the instrument and blew on it and I think played some of Rigoletto. He said “Yeah we use this a lot for Verdi here.” And that was the first time I have physically seen one.

AC: Where your first experiences actually playing a cimbasso with the Dallas Opera?

DL: Yes

AC: And how many years ago was that?

DL: Approximately 15 years, I’m slightly fuzzy on the exact date. You know the cimbasso came about with the beginning of Graeme Jenkins conducting the Dallas Opera. So based on that I would say somewhere in 1996 is when I began playing the cimbasso. And it was either Graeme Jenkins or an Italian guest conductor right before Graeme Jenkins was hired that insisted on a cimbasso in our first rehearsal of a Verdi opera. Actually, I was not there, but it was Everett Gilmore the former tubist with the Dallas Symphony who was there. It was right about the time that Everett retired from the Dallas Symphony that he was subbing for me on the first couple rehearsals of this opera. I remember afterwards that Everett told me that the conductor had said he needed to play on a cimbasso and Everett told him that there wasn’t one in the entire southwest.

Sometime after that I found some instrument makers such as, Meinl Weston or Melton etc., who would make the instrument. I wrote a letter to the Dallas opera requesting they purchase the instrument for the opera house.

AC: Could you comment on the immediate physical playing differences between the tuba vs. cimbasso

DL: Well physically covers a lot of things- from posture and physically holding the instrument and playing the instrument.

As far as holding the instrument goes, it’s not really difficult because it has its own adjustable stand that accommodates for the players height. I feel most comfortable sitting out on the edge of the chair. Holding this instrument is different for a tuba player especially for me because I was then in my late 40’s so I basically have played nothing but traditional tubas for over 30 years. So that did take some adjustment, and then actually playing it took some getting used to as
well. It is a hybrid instrument, because it is basically a contrabass trombone with valves pitched in f. So it is the length of an f tuba, but the bore size of a bass trombone or maybe slightly larger than that. The instrument does not blow easily, it is sort of restricted to me and it has an okay soft dynamic; although not as responsive, there is a softer dynamic there, and then it has louder dynamics. What I find most difficult on that particular instrument is to play on what you feel would be a good characteristic sound in a medium or mid-range dynamic. Maybe somewhere between a $mp$ and $mf$. That is really where it is kind of hard to focus on a good sound. You can push the instrument and you will get more of an edgy sound similar to that of a trombone. And there are times where you need an edgy sound with the instrument. Which is not what a tuba characteristically sounds like. Overall it is a real challenge to try and get the sound right.

As far as intonation goes, the instrument can be a little particular. Some of the notes are very slotted and some of them are not. For example, the Db below the staff, works 2 and 3 like it would on an f tuba, but like most f tuba – the note is not heavily slotted and without too much effort you can easily bend the pitch. If you’re in reasonably good shape and you’re listening then it should not be too much of a problem, but it does take an effort.

AC: Could you comment on the immediate differences in sound between tuba and cimbasso? Articulation, timbre, differences you found when playing with the section.

DL: Well the articulation is different in that it is characteristic to an instrument with a smaller bore and more cylindrical shape. What I found is that I tend to need a shallower type of a tuba mouthpiece for it to work at all. And it’s much easier to match the articulations of the section with the cimbasso. I have used f tuba on Verdi for a long time and I knew by that point in my life that it wasn’t appropriate to bring my large tuba, although when I was younger I would use my large tuba for everything. Most of us did as younger players we would like to use the largest tuba we could. But later in my career I knew that f tuba was more appropriate, but even that being said – I was somewhat a reluctant participant in the cimbasso transformation for Verdi and Puccini, but since the Dallas Opera bought one and requested that I use it, I was willing to play it. And the cimbasso has always been more difficult to play for me than the f tuba, I could play Traviatta or Falstaff or Rigoletto – they all have their challenges on any instrument. But I would practice these parts at home on f tuba and then go down to the hall and play it on cimbasso and it was always more difficult because for a tuba player the cimbasso doesn’t respond as easily as the tuba does.

AC: Could you comment on awareness of the instrument and other possible reasons why you don’t see this instrument used more often

DL: Well Maestro Jenkins came to the Dallas Opera and said that cimbasso is the right sound for Verdi opera. Not all music directors in this country have such a deep understanding of historical significance towards performance practices.
We’re sure that the cimbasso is what Verdi wanted and even in your own research you were able to bear that out. And despite the fact that I have complained about the cimbasso being more work, I honestly feel like it sounds better and I have told you in other conversations that I have heard a lot of Metropolitan radio broadcasts on Saturday afternoon and there have been times where I am sure tuba played on the fourth part of Puccini or the fourth part of Verdi. And honestly, even though the tuba playing is very good, it just doesn’t sound right. It really sounds better and more complete with a cimbasso. The tuba, I have to admit, sticks out.

Interview with Ed Jones: Principal Tuba Fort Worth Symphony and Fort Worth Opera

Alex Costantino: How did you obtain a cimbasso for use in the Fort Worth Opera?

Ed Jones: I used the Meinl Weston cimbasso from the Dallas Opera about 2 years ago when Fort Worth performed Verdi Falstaff. The opera company rented the instrument from Dallas Opera.

AC: Was this at the discretion of the musical director at the time?

EJ: The conductor of that particular opera Yes it was.

AC: Okay. Did the conductor express any reasons why he preferred you to use the cimbasso?

EJ: No, I always check with the librarian months previous to a Verdi production to let the conductor know that we have a cimbasso available in the area and to see if he would like to use the cimbasso. This particular conductor confirmed that he did want to use the cimbasso for this production of Falstaff.

After that I told management that I had to have the instrument early. And I received the cimbasso about a month to 6 weeks in advance so I could play it and get used to it.

But I always go through that procedure of asking if they would like to have cimbasso if we are performing works of Verdi and sometimes Puccini. The history has been that our regular music director for the opera for whatever reason prefers not to use cimbasso. I still ask anyway, just in case he changes his mind, but he prefers not to use the cimbasso. I talked to him about it and he said that he just doesn’t particularly like the sound.

AC: Do you believe that your regular conductor is referring to disliking the sound of that particular cimbasso or the sound of a small bore contra bass instrument in general?
EJ: I don’t think it is that particular instrument because as far as I know we’ve never done an opera with that particular cimbasso with him conducting or with him ever present. This goes back to when I first started playing with Fort Worth and the first opera production I did with them was Norma (Bellini), which the part is for cimbasso and he said “no” he didn’t want to use cimbasso he wanted to use tuba. But I still check every time something like this comes up, just in case. But especially if it’s a guest conductor, I’ll go ahead and press the issue a bit.

AC: Could you comment on some of the immediate physical playing differences between tuba and cimbasso?

EJ: The cimbasso is a much much more resistant instrument. It’s stuffier. I think it’s more difficult to play. It’s stuffier more so than compared to a bass trombone. And I assume that it is just because of the valves and just the layout of the instrument. And so you can’t really blow as openly or as relaxed as you would on a tuba. You have to use a little bit more force just to get things out of it. That’s the biggest difference I found and the thing that I had to get used to the most is just that stuffiness and the way it blows.

AC: Could you comment on the differences in sound between the two instruments?

EJ: Well it’s obviously a much brighter sound cause it’s a forward facing bell so there is a lot more direct sound. It’s really just very much an extension of the trombone section. It’s really a valve contrabass trombone and it has all the qualities of a contrabass trombone but it’s accessible by the valve players.

I’m not sure how much research you have already done, but from what I have read, the standard Verdi trombone section is made up of valve trombones. I think the way the Italian operas are written in Verdi’s time I think the cimbasso works very well. I think it’s a great choice to use to get that unified sound which is what I think Verdi was looking for. Using tuba adds a bassier sound on the bottom, but the parts are not written really as a tuba part. The parts really I think are written as a low trombone part.

When I’ve had to play cimbasso parts on the tuba it never sounds quite right and I keep thinking how much easier it would be on cimbasso in terms of timbre and articulation. But again it isn’t ultimately my decision.

Going back to the pedagogical aspects. I found that things that are technical are really pretty difficult to do on cimbasso. It doesn’t respond as quickly as tuba and I know that sounds strange because it’s a smaller bore so maybe it ought to be more agile but I just don’t feel like it’s very agile. It takes so much energy just to make the note sound that the energy you would use for technique is kind of lost, it’s kind of dissipated. And so I had to spend a lot of extra time on passages on cimbasso that I wouldn’t have had to spend as much time if it were on f tuba.

What you also need to consider is mouthpiece choice. This instrument definitely does not work well with a regular tuba mouthpiece. Something much shallower
and close to that of a bass trombone mouthpiece but slightly bigger works much better. You might consider looking mouthpieces made by Douglas Yeo for contrabass trombone or even a small Eb tuba mouthpiece could possibly work.

The other thing is, it seems to me that it works best when it’s played very loud and very soft. But the mid range volume is not very responsive.

AC: Did other players in the section comment on the use of the instrument?

EJ: Yeah, it was interested because a couple of them were a little apprehensive about me using cimbasso. They didn’t want me to use it, but I think when I brought it in and started playing it in rehearsals I think their tune changed a little bit. I think they liked the sound and they like the blend of it. That was during rehearsals, and what happened was our pit is very small in Fort Worth, and so we rehearse in a pretty big rehearsal room and we have enough room for trombones and tuba or cimbasso to rehearse in one single line, like a traditional orchestra set up. But when we move over to the pit, we pull the tuba or cimbasso to sit behind the trombones. Now, that is not a problem if you’re playing tuba and the bell is pointed up, but I was sitting behind the trombones with the cimbasso blowing right into their ear. I think they weren’t as appreciative of the instrument with this particular set up! I don’t feel that this changed anything for the audience perspective of sound as much as it did sitting in the trombone section!

AC: Would you say that tuba changes the sound of the orchestra enough to where cimbasso should be adopted more often?

EJ: Yes I would say that. There is a drastic change in timbre and articulation between these two instruments. I know a piece that we have done quite a bit is the overture to Nabucco. That has the trombone and tuba or cimbasso chorale at the beginning of it and I’ve always played it on tuba because we’ve done it as an orchestral piece and there was really no reason to rent the cimbasso, but I would love to play it sometime with cimbasso to hear the difference. I think there would be a remarkable difference. I just think that Verdi calls for that more unified sound throughout the section – that narrow bore sound that goes all the way down the brass section.

Interview with Graeme Jenkins: Musical Director of the Dallas Opera

Graeme Jenkins: I took as my premise the bb new edition of Symphonie Fantastique and when you look at that and you see ophicleides and then when you listen to Norrington’s recording and you hear the use of ophicleides as opposed to tubas – that was for me the beginning of the dawn.

And so you come to Verdi – and what was the bass instrument available? Look at the orchestration of Rigoletto – was it really true that he only had 3 celli and 1 or 2 basses in La Fenice? And what was available at the time – They probably
used one of the bandas out of St Marco Piazza. And so for me it has been a crucial thing even in the start of *Boheme* – 4th trombone – but again what size bore should the whole family be at?

Now we play with these huge German instruments – and particularly when we’ve done Mozart I hadn’t wanted that. And I’m astonished at how little historical awareness there is in this country as opposed to what is going on in Europe. And the advent of the baroque bands in Amsterdam, Vienna, and London has transformed the way the major orchestras play in Europe – I think America is 10, 15 years and maybe even 20 years behind. And when you talk about articulations with the major bands it’s still I’m afraid what the Russian string mafia have taught in Julliard – which is what we’re working up against – and time has moved on.

Alex Costantino: You think awareness is the problem then?

**GJ:** It’s awareness it’s subtle differences. It’s *what is a pianissimo?* We’re all so used to everything being so damn loud. And when Verdi wrote 4 p’s he really meant it. And now we have these fantastic halls that can do this. We have to utilize this. And if you have a cimbasso underlying the brass particularly in Italian opera for me it really transforms the music. It’s not loudness – it’s clarity of texture – Blending with the attack of the bow of the double basses.

**AC:** You have mentioned the larger bore instruments now in use today. Would you say that tuba has aesthetic merit today in opera?

**GJ:** Of course it does when you do Wagner. And it’s there in Wagner when you change the quality of instrument – and what he wrote in the first version of *Flying Dutchman* and then by the time he got to revise it in Paris, maybe then you should be making changes to instrumentation. And the nightmare of doing Wagner in Germany is now those guys, as their holiday job, from playing at the Bayreuth pit where they play very very loudly because they’re in the back of a very deep pit. And they go back to other pits and they always play too loudly. It’s this sort of macho German thing. But I’m passionate about trying to get historical authenticity, not just within the brass but also in the area of the orchestra. And the more awareness people have of what is out there the better off we are.

The very first thing we bought when I came here was a cimbasso for the orchestra. And Don was great about playing it. I don’t know if he played one before but we’ve always used it ever since we bought it.

**AC:** Could you comment on some of the advantages of playing cimbasso vs tuba in the orchestra?

**GJ:** Clarity of texture. It’s not about loudness; it’s about sharpness of attack. The moment you hear a tuba play Verdi, you are now over the border, you are no longer in Italy, you are in Bavaria.
AC:  Do you have any comments on the banda parts?

GJ:  Banda parts are a complete question mark. It came down to what was available at that theater. And if it is scored for 2 flutes, bassoons, etc. you try and find that. And certainly in Verdi’s Scottish opera there are very specific parts because the banda comes on stage for instance but other then this instance it can’t be specific.
APPENDIX C

MOUTHPIECE COMPARISON
Monette 94F       Thein MCL       Doug Elliott 118 rim – LB/TU N cup – N9 shank

Monette       Thein       Doug Elliott
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books/Articles


**Scores**


