

THE SERPENT AND OPHICLEIDE AS INSTRUMENTS OF ROMANTIC COLOR IN
SELECTED WORKS BY MENDELSSOHN, BERLIOZ AND WAGNER

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Traditional scholarship has stated that the serpent and ophicleide (as well as their successor, the tuba) were developed and added to the standard orchestra to add a bass voice to the brass, allowing a tonal compass to match a similar downward expansion in the strings and woodwinds. A closer reading of the earliest scores calling for these instruments reveals a more coloristic purpose, related to timbre as much as to compass. Indeed, the fact that composers rarely wrote for serpent and ophicleide makes two points: it proves them to be inadequate choices as a brass bass, and when they were called for, they had an expressive, often descriptive purpose..

Despite his conservative musical education supervised by Carl Friedrich Zelter, the seventeen-year-old Mendelssohn, under the influence of A. B. Marx, used the Corno inglese di basso, an upright version of the serpent, in his Overture to A Midsummer Night's Dream to give a more rustic flavor to Bottom's ass-braying. Even when the English bass horn functioned as a bass voice, it was playing in contexts that were descriptive, where it often demonstrated its musical inadequacy. Berlioz's descriptive writing for the serpent and ophicleide are well known. A remarkable feature which *Symphonie fantastique* shares with works by the other composers is the confidence Berlioz showed in the ophicleide's functional independence by occasionally giving it an arpeggiated figure while the rest of the orchestra sustains the chord. Wagner's writing

for the serpent and ophicleide in *Rienzi* follows the less imaginative conventions of French grand opera. In *Der fliegende Holländer* the ophicleide, while not used as descriptively as Mendelssohn and Berlioz, nevertheless contributes significantly to Wagner's emerging focus on the inner lives of his characters and expressive commentary on the stage action.

Tubists should consider the expressive implications and the unique timbre of these instruments when performing works originally written for the forerunners of the tuba.

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CHAPTER 1

EARLY ROMANTIC PERIOD INNOVATION

Introduction

Traditional scholarship¹ has stated that the serpent and ophicleide (as well as their successor, the tuba) were developed and added to the standard orchestra to add a true bass voice to the brass,² allowing a tonal compass for that family to match a similar downward expansion in the strings and woodwinds. While this understanding undeniably has merit, a closer reading of the earliest scores calling for these instruments reveals a more coloristic purpose, related to timbre as much as to compass. Indeed, the fact that composers rarely wrote for serpent and ophicleide makes two points: it proves them to be inadequate choices as a brass bass, and when they were called for, they had a greater purpose than merely providing a bass voice.

Tubists have long been faced with the challenging parts assigned to them in the earliest orchestral literature for their instrument. It is obvious that these parts were not written for, nor are they well-adapted to, the modern tuba. The player is presented with the performance practice issues of appropriately performing works intended for different, and virtually obsolete, instruments.

Beyond—and informing—the issues of performance practice, this investigation contributes to an understanding of how and why composers, notably Mendelssohn, Berlioz and Wagner, expanded the orchestra in the nineteenth century. Just as the

¹ Adam Carse, *The Orchestra from Beethoven to Berlioz* (New York: Broude Brothers, 1949), 42; see also Clifford Bevan, *The Tuba Family* (Winchester, England: Piccolo Press, 2000), 480.

² "It was not so much the particular tone-qualities of any of these instruments that was wanted; it was rather quantity of sound in the bass register that they needed, so they availed themselves of whichever instrument was to be found in their particular locality." *Ibid.*

tuba, which became commonly available in the 1840s, provided a new color in the Romantic composer's palette of orchestral sound, the ophicleide served a definite purpose when it was introduced into the orchestra by Spontini in 1819.³ The serpent, commonly used in France since the 1600s for liturgical purposes, was rejected as a bass voice in orchestral settings but was used in wind bands and in some oratorios. In the nineteenth century, composers newly aware of the expanding expressive possibilities of instrumental choices wrote for the serpent (and its progeny) and ophicleide in ways which exploited their unique characteristics.

Even further beyond a description of the ophicleide's function lies the issue of the composer's *expectation*. Instead of trying to divine the composer's *intentions*, making moral judgments about the rightness of present-day choices, this investigation hopes to understand what the composer *expected* to hear when he chose to write for the ophicleide. A perception of expectation leads the historian to better understand the process by which composers made choices in expanding the orchestra, and provides the performer with additional information to consider when shaping his role as a member of the modern orchestra.

Understanding each composer's biography lays the foundation for a study of his writing for the serpent and ophicleide. Certain life experiences led these men to consider the possibilities of expanding the orchestra; as a result, they choose certain very specific sounds—sounds that had meaning and alluded to experiences related to their expectations. After establishing such biographical underpinnings, it is then

³ However, it appeared only in the stage band within the opera. *Ibid.*, 42.

possible to approach the music with greater discernment, clarifying the role of serpent and ophicleide beyond their expected bass function.

New Sensibilities

The dawn of the nineteenth century brought changes to the world of music—changes influenced by the Romantic movement in literature, philosophy and art. While Beethoven and Schubert began to be influenced by Romantic ideas, they applied them in classical ways. Younger composers, however, born at the turn of the century, had no pre-conceived notions (sometimes in spite of their training), and felt themselves free to chart new courses, rather than adapt old procedures to new ways of thinking.

Composers of the early 19th century were influenced by an intellectual movement that valued the new, the boundless, the unfettered. The individual and his subjective expression were paramount, in opposition to the formal and harmonious symmetry and discipline of Classical thought, thus making it difficult to identify universal traits that could define a historical period. Indeed, the idea of contrasts permeates the Romantic period. The very act of identifying style characteristics and common strands of thought, for instance, contradicts a primary trait of the time—that individuality is to be honored above all.

While a listing of the characteristics of Romantic period music is certainly simplistic, and variations abound throughout the musicological literature, it is still possible to enumerate commonly accepted attributes that can be supported when considering the Romantic repertory. From a standard music literature textbook, Roger

Kamien's listing is typical and easily may be substantiated: he identifies individuality of style; expressive aims and subjects; nationalism and exoticism; program music; expressive tone color; colorful harmony; expanded range of dynamics, pitch, and tempo; and the duality of both miniature and monumental form.⁴

Experimentation with Tone Color

Among the several common characteristics of music in the Romantic period, a fascination with instrumental tone color seems to be universally accepted. Lang notes that while the classical period emphasized contour and design, the romantic era emphasized color. "The romanticists were colorists not only in painting but also in music, in poetry, and even in their *Weltanschauung*."⁵ For Grout, "the most remarkable Romantic achievements lay in the development of harmonic technique and instrumental color." Acknowledging Berlioz's *Treatise on Instrumentation and Orchestration*, he observes that "[n]ew sonorities were discovered in piano music; new instruments were added to the orchestra, and older instruments were redesigned to be more sonorous and more flexible; above all, new combinations of instruments in the ensemble were invented to produce new color effects."⁶ Palisca follows a different pattern, choosing to explore the characteristics of each composer, rather than ascertaining how a composer fits a pre-established norm. He does find, though, that Berlioz's orchestration "initiated a new era: he enriched orchestral music with new resources of harmony, color,

⁴ Roger Kamien, *Music: an appreciation*, eighth edition (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2004), 275-280.

⁵ Paul Henry Lang, *Music in Western Civilization* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1941), 749.

⁶ Donald Jay Grout, *A History of Western Music* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1960), 500.

expression, and form. . .”⁷ Longyear provides more specifics by identifying “principal vehicles for Romantic color” as being the clarinet, bass clarinet, French and English horns, and harp. Additionally, he recognizes an expansion of each instrumental family in the orchestra “to extend their colors over a wide range.”⁸

The serpent, ophicleide and tuba are notably absent from Longyear’s instrumental list. While it is safe to assume that he and others consider their presence in the orchestra to constitute an extension of the brass family’s colors over a wider range, I submit that the serpent and ophicleide, in use before the tuba was invented, were chosen by the few composers who used them not merely to extend the brass section’s range downward. They were chosen for their unique sounds and for their expressive purposes—sounds and purposes that their successor and modern counterpart, the tuba, cannot accurately replicate. The serpent and ophicleide were, indeed, “instruments of Romantic color.”

⁷ Donald Jay Grout and Paul Palisca, *A History of Western Music*, sixth edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001), 551.

⁸ Rey M. Longyear, *Nineteenth-Century Romanticism in Music*, third edition (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1988), 303.

CHAPTER 2

THE SERPENT AND OPICLEIDE: HISTORY, CHARACTERISTICS AND USE

Instrumental History

Until the early 1840s, a composer's only choices of brass instrument to supply a bass voice in the orchestra were the opicleide, a member of the keyed bugle family, or the variously shaped serpents, the putative bass voice, according to Mersenne, of the medieval/renaissance *cornetto* family.¹ While the serpent is not a member of that family (being pitched a fourth or fifth lower and having a larger, more conical bore, thinner walls, and possessing no thumb hole),² it is derived from the tenor cornett, which had proven to be unsatisfactory.³ In fact, it was not uncommon in like-instrument consorts for the bass to be "supplied by an instrument of a different character because of difficulty in constructing an effective instrument of the group in a sufficiently low pitch."⁴

In spite of the fact that mention of the serpent's invention has been found in a single source (with no independent corroboration but no reliable alternative), most writers accept Abbé Leboeuf's 1743 *Mémoire Concernant l'Histoire Ecclésiastique et Civile d'Auxerre*⁵ as reliable. In 1590, according to Leboeuf, Canon Edmé Guillaume, responding to an ecclesiastical need for a better instrument than the tenor cornett to

¹ Marin Mersenne, *Harmonie universelle* (1635), quoted in Clifford Bevan, *The Tuba Family* (Winchester, England: Piccolo Press, 2000), 63.

² Bruce Dickey, "The Cornett," *The Cambridge Companion to Brass Instruments*, edited by Trevor Herbert and John Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 56.

³ A cornett consort used trombones on the lower parts, in spite of the availability of tenor and bass instruments. *Ibid.*, 54.

⁴ E. A. K. Ridley, quoted in Clifford Bevan, "The Low Brass," *The Cambridge Companion to Brass Instruments*, edited by Trevor Herbert and John Wallace (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 143.

⁵ Cited in Bevan, *The Tuba Family.*, 65.

accompany the singing of plainchant, enlarged the bore and made it more conical in order to produce a more reliable low register that would be compatible with the male voice. The serpent is made of wood, with its two halves carved and hollowed out, then glued together and bound in leather, its eponymous shape necessary because of the length needed to play in the range of the male voice.⁶ Very quickly it became the primary instrument to accompany voices in French churches. Westrup observed that the serpent player was “a sort of one-man band and as such almost as important as the organist or the maître de chapelle.” While violins and occasionally the oboe and cornett were used on special occasions, “except at the great feasts the serpent held the field.”⁷ The pitch instability of the serpent, frustrating in modern circumstances, was actually an advantage since it’s “lack of attachment to the equal-tempered scale” (Bevan’s phrase) made it ideal for accompanying voices. Dr. Burney observed that it

. . . is less likely to overpower or destroy by a bad temperament, that perfect one, of which the voice only is capable. . . The serpent keeps the voices up their pitch, and so is a kind of crutch for them to lean on.⁸

By the mid-seventeenth century, writers outside of France were taking notice of the instrument: Mersenne and Trichet describe it, Kircher considers it a French instrument, while Praetorius seems not to know it.⁹ According to Marcuse, “The serpent was playing bass parts in instrumental ensembles outside the church by the mid-seventeenth century, and a century later it was employed in the orchestra of the

⁶ *Ibid.*, 66, gives these dimensions: 2150 mm long (84 inches); bore size begins about 12 mm (.5 inch), and grows to about 100 mm (3.93 inches) at the bell, which has no flare; the walls are a “mere 6-7 mm thick” (about ¼ inch); 6 finger holes.

⁷ J. A. Westrup, “Sidelights on the Serpent,” *The Musical Times*, July 1, 1927, 635.

⁸ Bevan, *The Tuba Family.*, quoting Charles Burney, *The Present State of Music in France and Italy*, 2 vols. (London, 1771) [11-12], 92.

⁹ Sibyl Marcuse, *A Survey of Musical Instruments* (New York: Harper Row, 1975), 779.

Comédie Italienne, when a violinist named Simonet played one in fifteen performances of the *Chinois* (in 1756)."¹⁰ Its most common use outside the church, however, was in civic wind bands and military bands, where it provided a more reliable bass range, having the advantage "over all of its contemporary competitors in compass, power, flexibility of intonation, and dynamic range."¹¹

When military bands adopted the serpent late in the eighteenth century, keys were added to the six finger holes, construction was strengthened, and it was given a bassoon-like shape.¹² First mention of this design comes in 1789, from J. J. Regibo, a musician in Lille, France. This newly shaped instrument, honoring both its lineage and its design, was called *serpent basson*, and then came to be known as *basson russe*. With no known Russian connection, Bevan speculates that the latter designation may have been a corruption of *basson prusse*, recognizing its adoption by the Prussian military bands.¹³ The bells of these upright serpents often were carved in the shape of a serpent's or dragon's head, thus retaining some connection with its original form. Based on form, Bevan identifies five main types of upright serpent, any of which might be called bass horn,¹⁴ an often generic designation (see Table 1).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 780.

¹¹ Philip R Palmer, "In Defense of the Serpent," *Historic Brass Society Journal*, Volume 2, 1990, 136.

¹² Bevan, "The Low Brass," 143.

¹³ Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, 81.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

Table 1. Types of Upright Serpent

Type	Description
1. Russian bassoon	Wooden body, normally with a dragon's head bell
2. (French) military serpent	Wood, saxophone—later sometimes tuba—form
3. (Italian) cimbasso	Long crook, wooden body, metal bell
4. (French) Serpent Forveille	Section terminating in bell wooden, remainder metal
5. English bass horn	Metal, V-shape

Bevan, in fact, advocates for considering the English bass horn as an instrument “in its own right,” since it is made of metal (usually copper, with some brass) and has a “relatively long crook, beginning with a straight section which expands rapidly into the wing joint,” and a rapidly flaring bell.¹⁵ He cites contemporary serpent authority Christopher Monk to support his claim that the English bass horn is “a type of serpent only in the broadest sense since its fingering, its blowing characteristics and its timbre were all significantly different from those of the traditional church or military serpent.”¹⁶ Such changes would certainly alter its tonal characteristics, and this is the instrument Mendelssohn encountered as a teenager on vacation in 1824 (see discussion in Chapter 3). In his 1835 patent for the bass tuba, Wieprecht compares his new invention several times to the English bass horn.¹⁷

The ophicleide owes its invention to the keyed bugle and a Russian aristocrat's

¹⁵ Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, 85-86.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

fascination. After the addition of keys to the military bugle in 1810 by the Dublin instrument maker Haliday, this new chromatic instrument captured a place in British military bands. During the allied occupation of Paris in 1815 following Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo, it is said that Grand Duke Constantine heard the British virtuoso John Distin perform on the keyed bugle and commissioned Parisian instrument maker Halary (Jean Hilaire Asté) to copy the instrument. Halary complied, but also extended the idea to an entire family of keyed brass, calling the lower instruments opficleides, literally in Greek, serpent with keys (alternatively, *serpent à clef*). With a range similar to the serpent, but with a timbre that was "recognizably modern,"¹⁸ the original opficleide had nine keys. It was submitted in 1817 to the Institut de France, the Académie Royale des Beaux Arts and the Athénée des Arts and patented in 1821.

Bevan describes the instrument as

. . . normally made of brass, sometimes silver-plated. They were conical in profile, bassoon-shape in form and all the side-holes were covered by keys. . . The exclusive use of metal in both instruments and similarity of key-heads and seatings leads to suspicions that Halary may have been influenced in his invention by both the English bass horn and the keyed bugle, producing an improved English bass horn in which the conformation was changed to a U. . . The eventual number of keys varied between nine and twelve, eleven becoming normal.¹⁹

The opficleide is something more than an improvement on the leather-clad wooden serpent. Dudgeon observes that "although technically a bass instrument, its agility in the upper register and flexible, vocal tone gave composers the option of using it as a

¹⁸ Bevan, "The Low Brass," 145.

¹⁹ Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, 142.

tenor or baritone voice."²⁰ Indeed, in civic and military bands, particularly in Great Britain, but also in the United States, a tradition of ophicleide virtuosos developed that continued until the end of the eighteenth century.²¹

Instrumental Use and Compositional History

From its originating church of Auxerre in 1590, the serpent had made its way to Notre Dame des Doms in Avignon by 1602, where there is a record of Michael Tornatoris being appointed serpentist and bassoonist.²² Records exist showing that the serpent was used in the wind bands of Louis XIV (r. 1643-1715),²³ though Palmer speculates that they were "in all probability used mainly if not entirely for religious services and ceremonies connected with the court."²⁴ By the end of the seventeenth century the serpent has appeared in Spain, Italy and the Low Countries, and has found a home across the channel in Great Britain. That Handel had not encountered it before arriving in London some have taken to indicate that the serpent was not known in Germany at the time. Indeed, there was an entirely different culture of church music in the German states, obviating even the need for such an instrument. Handel, in fact, was not very impressed by the instrument, reportedly remarking, upon hearing its name, "Aye, but not the serpent that seduced Eve."²⁵ While Palmer notes that Handel included it in his scores for the *Water Music* (1717) and *The Royal Fireworks Music*

²⁰ Ralph T. Dudgeon, "Keyed Brass," *The Cambridge Companion to Brass Instruments*, edited by Trevor Herbert and John Wallace (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 140.

²¹ See Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, 168-177.

²² Palmer, 137.

²³ David Whitwell, *The Baroque Wind Band and Wind Ensemble* (Northridge, CA: WINDS, 1983), 36.

²⁴ Palmer, 137.

²⁵ Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, 105.

(1749),²⁶ Bevan, using sources that would have been available to Palmer, definitively states that “the word ‘Serpente’ has been very strongly deleted” from the list of instruments in the manuscript of *The Royal Fireworks Music*, and “matches Handel’s other corrections.”²⁷ There is evidence that John Eccles (1668-1735), a contemporary of Handel’s in London and a composer for the theatre, wrote for the serpent, in addition to a specific part in his opening ‘Symphony’ to *Macbeth* (n.d.).²⁸

While there are isolated references to the serpent’s use for purposes other than liturgical, such as the Eccles citation and Marcuse’s reference to its use in the orchestra of the Comédie Italienne in Paris in 1756, it was not until the end of the eighteenth century that it was regularly used in civic and military bands. In 1783 the Duke of York imported a military band from Hanover that included a serpent, replacing a group that did not.²⁹ This episode indicates that the serpent was already in use in German military bands by 1783, and that it was not common in British ensembles. However, there are extant marches from 1777 that indicate that—at least in some bands—the serpent was available. The French Revolutionary period provides ample documentation of the use of the serpent in France. A serpent class was instituted shortly after the École de Musique de la Garde Nationale Parisienne (forerunner of the Conservatoire Nationale) was established in 1790, and such classes were present until 1836. In fact, when the Conservatoire superseded the École and the Institute in 1795, there were six serpent teachers for twenty-four students, but only one trombone teacher for four students

²⁶ Palmer, 140.

²⁷ Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, 106.

²⁸ Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, 107.

²⁹ Palmer, 141, relates the reasons for the importation of an entire military band from Germany, quoting *Treatise on the Military Band*, by H. E. Adkins (London: Boosey & Co., 1958).

(seventy-two bassoon students warranted eighteen teachers).³⁰

In his article "Text-Books on Orchestration Before Berlioz," Carse's first mention of the serpent is of a fingering chart in Gehot's *A Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Music*, published around 1784, a work directed more to players than to composers.³¹ The first book for composers, and which included the serpent, was Louis Joseph Francœur's *Diapason general des instruments à vent*, published in Paris in 1772. "The first German attempt to do the same sort of thing appears to have been the *Vollständige theoretisch-praktische Musikschule für all beym Orchester gebräuchlichen wichtigen Instrumente* (1810-11)," and "includes no less than seven pages on the serpent."³²

In Vienna and its circle of influence, the serpent and its progeny was relatively unknown, its role given to the more common contra-bassoon (also known as double bassoon). Carse notes that the choice of a brass bass instrument was often governed by local availability—serpent was common in its birth-nation of France, but virtually unknown in Vienna, where the contra-bassoon was the instrument of choice.³³ When scores calling for double bassoon were performed in Paris and Berlin (and probably London), for instance, the parts were generally performed on serpent or its progeny (or ophicleide in Paris, when it became available). Considering that there was "no trace" of the double bassoon in Berlin, Dresden and Munich before the middle of the nineteenth century, Carse concludes that

³⁰ Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, 99-100.

³¹ Adam Carse, "Text-Books on Orchestration Before Berlioz," *Music and Letters*, Vol. 22, No. 1 (January 1941), 27.

³² *Ibid.*, 29.

³³ Adam Carse, *The Orchestra from Beethoven to Berlioz* (New York: Broude Brothers, 1949), 34.

It is more than probable that Haydn's and Beethoven's double bassoon parts were either omitted in many German performances or else were played on a serpent or a bass horn. There is also the uneasy suspicion that the references to the double bassoon in Germany during the first half of the nineteenth century cannot always be trusted to refer to the real reed instrument; if a player on the bass-horn was able to suppose that his instrument was a double bassoon [as Carse recounted earlier], it is quite likely that others were capable of making the same mistake.³⁴

Almost immediately upon its invention in 1817, the opficleide was adopted by military bands, finding its way into the opera house in that guise in 1819 (two years before it was patented), as part of a stage band playing a march in Spontini's *Olympie* along with four horns, eight trumpets and three trombones.³⁵ In spite of the obvious improvements over the family of serpent instruments (see below), the opficleide has been seen as a transitional instrument, since it had been in use less than twenty years by the time Wieprecht created the first modern bass tuba in 1835. In that transitional time, however, it quickly began to supplant the serpent in orchestras and military bands in France and Great Britain, and even take over its liturgical responsibilities. In Germany and Austria the opficleide was less well known and correspondingly less used. Bevan relates that "in 1827 the composer Maurice Hauptmann, then a member of the orchestra in Kassel, was totally unaware of the nature of the opficleide specified by Rossini in his *Siege of Corinth*: the part was played on trombone."³⁶ Berlioz, in 1843, found no opficleide in Berlin, Brunswick, Hanover, or Mannheim.³⁷ Leipzig, where

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁵ "Spontini's band is on the French cavalry pattern of the time, with natural trumpets and horns, and a diatonic bass for trombone plus the new instrument discreetly on trial with the simplest possible part. . ." Quoted in Anthony Baines, *Brass Instruments, Their History and Development*, with additions to and corrections of the 1976, 1978 and 1980 editions by the author (Dover Publications, 1993), 199.

³⁶ Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, 154.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

Mendelssohn was music director, had one, "or rather the abject brass object masquerading under that name, bore no resemblance to the French variety, having practically no tone." Berlioz replaced it with a fourth trombone.³⁸ Darmstadt, however, was "exceptional in possessing a first-rate ophicleide."³⁹ Wagner knew of the ophicleide in Königsberg and Riga in 1837-1839, scoring for it in works written and performed in those cities.

Although he repeats commonplace misconceptions (that Mendelssohn wrote for it in *Ein Sommernachtstraum*, and that Mendelssohn was the only German composer to write for it, thus excluding Wagner), Dudgeon has rightly observed that "History has proven the bass ophicleide to have been the most long-lived keyed brass instrument."⁴⁰ In smaller musical centers in France and Great Britain, and in the civic bands that had adopted the instrument in Great Britain, the ophicleide persisted longer than it perhaps should have, if only because of the initial investment in the instruments, and the natural reluctance to replace what seemed functional and comfortable. In its heyday, Rossini, Donizetti, Berlioz, Meyerbeer, Mendelssohn and Wagner called for the instrument.

Tonal Characteristics of the Instruments

Throughout the serpent's and ophicleide's histories, there have been almost as many opinions of the instruments' sounds as there have been observers. Some who actually heard the instruments may have been prejudiced by the quality of the playing.

³⁸ Hector Berlioz, *The Memoirs of Hector Berlioz*, translated and edited by David Cairns (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1969), 296.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 348.

⁴⁰ Dudgeon, 140-141.

Some may have been so put off by the visual aspect of the serpent and its name that their evaluations suffered. Researchers in the middle of the twentieth century were only able to put their faith in the written descriptions of others. With a resurgence of interest in these instruments in the late twentieth century, we are able once again to rely on first-hand experience.

Regarding the tenor cornett, which the serpent fortunately replaced, Praetorius, who knew nothing of the latter, described its sound as “most unlovely and bullocky”⁴¹ Writing a century later and in contrast to other positive observations of the serpent in liturgy, Burney gives a similar opinion of the successor serpent after a particularly unpleasant experience in Antwerp: “The serpent is not only overblown and detestably out of tune, but exactly resembling in tone that of a great hungry, or rather angry Essex calf.”⁴²

The opinions of many scholars regarding the sound of these instruments are still based on tonal evaluations by researchers of the early to mid twentieth century.

Reginald Morley Pegge’s opinion, writing in 1961, is typical and describes the serpent’s tone thus:

As far as can be judged nowadays, the tone is rich and rather ‘woody’ in the lower register, weak and rather windy in the upper reaches. By its very nature the serpent is so flexible that good intonation depends entirely on the musicianship of the performer, and it is assuredly poor musicianship that was responsible for the bad reputation it got in certain quarters.⁴³

⁴¹ Quoted in Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, 63.

⁴² Quoted in David Whitwell, *The Wind Band and Wind Ensemble of the Classic Period (1750-1800)* vol. 4 of *The History and Literature of the Wind Band and Wind Ensemble* (Northridge, CA: WINDS, 1982), 136. Burney’s opinion of the bassoon players in Antwerp is equally low. However, he mentions a later “splendid procession” in the same town, “consisting of a prodigious number of priests . . . accompanied by French horns and Serpents (sic).”

⁴³ Reginald Morley Pegge, “The Horn and the Later Brass,” *Musical Instruments Through the Ages*, ed. Anthony Baines, second edition (New York: Walker and Co., 1976.), 274.

A more recent account, from Grove Music Online, for which Morley Pegge is listed as a contributor, says only that "As the finger-holes are opened towards the mouthpiece the tone quality becomes progressively poorer, though skilful breath control can mitigate inequalities in resonance."⁴⁴

When Westrup remarks that the serpent "is attractive neither to the eye nor to the ear," he is relying not only on contemporaneous accounts but also his own experience, discounting comments that the instrument's tone was "rich" as "due to professional pride."⁴⁵ He does acknowledge the difficulty in playing such an instrument. However, the serpent does seem to have been well suited to its role as an instrument to accompany male voices singing Gregorian plainchant. Mersenne, closer to the action in 1635 and pleased with its power, grace and harmonious nature, remarked on its ability "to accompany as many as twenty of the most powerful singers and yet play the softest chamber music with the most delicate grace notes."⁴⁶ However, like other early auditors, Mersenne observed that "It seems that the irregular distance of the holes of the serpent makes its diapason more difficult than that of the other instruments. . ."⁴⁷ The flexibility of its intonation, as noted earlier, turns out to be a remarkable strength for accompanying singers, permitting the purer intervals that choristers are wont to sing. Bevan aptly describes the intonation challenges a serpentist faces:

⁴⁴ Reginald Morley-Pegge, Philip Bate, Stephen Weston, "Serpent, §1: Description," *Grove Music Online* (Accessed 03 June 2006), <<http://www.grovemusic.com/shared/views/article.html?section=music.25473.1>> (Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁴⁵ Westrup, 635.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Palmer, 135-136, from Marin Mersenne, *Harmonie Universelle: The Books on Instruments*, translated by Roger Chapman (The Hague: Maartinus Nijhoff, 1957), 345.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, 65.

Some notes can be lipped up or down a fourth or more, and for this reason the player needs a very keen sense of intonation. It is difficult to imagine an abundance of musicians able or willing to make each note so carefully at the embouchure, and this doubtless accounts for the many unfavorable opinions expressed on the serpent.⁴⁸

In addition to pitch challenges, strength of tone varies from note to note,⁴⁹ a not uncommon result of tone holes spaced along the length of a sounding pipe.

The fact, however, that the serpent was in use for more than two centuries should lead to the conclusion that its more avowedly obnoxious qualities may have been exceptional, rather than common. If it were universally as bad as many have said, a greater effort would certainly have been made to improve it or replace it. Ironically, it may have been the improvements that caused its demise. When keys were finally added toward the end of the eighteenth century to improve intonation by changing the geometry of the tone holes, players may have expected the new additions to take care of the instrument's deficiencies and became thus less mindful of the product of their playing.

Some negative opinions may indeed have been the result of chauvinistic reasoning. To counter this perspective, Bevan reminds us that certain serpent players,⁵⁰ "highly regarded in their own time, were remarkable musicians," and

there is no question that the serpent is the most difficult of all cup-mouthpiece instruments to play to an acceptable standard. In the circumstances it is amazing that by the end of the nineteenth century it had maintained a continuous presence for some 300 years, particularly bearing in mind the

⁴⁸ Bevan, *the Tuba Family*, 74.

⁴⁹ See Hector Berlioz and Richard Strauss, *Treatise on Instrumentation*, translated by Theodore Front (Dover reprint, 1991), 348.

⁵⁰ In particular he mentions Frichot, inventor of the English bass horn, André, Jepp, Young, and Ponder, all active between the end of the eighteenth century to the middle of the nineteenth century. Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, 116-118.

constant attacks made upon it (especially by those who had probably not heard it).⁵¹

Alan Moore, a modern-day serpentist, points out that his instrument

need not resemble that of [Burney's] 'great hungry or rather angry Essex calf.' Serpentists must dismiss from their minds any thoughts that serpent sound should resemble that of tuba or trombone. Serpents have rather mellow sounds, somewhat airy, and not unlike those of bassoons. When played at soft to moderate levels of loudness, the sound is not at all displeasing to the ear and become a harsh squawk only when its level of loudness is pushed beyond its musical capabilities.⁵²

Not only did the addition of keys weaken the serpentist's necessarily total reliance on his own pitch-producing capabilities, that addition opened the door for the ophicleide, the instrument that very quickly replaced it.

The ophicleide, while welcomed as an improvement over the serpent, was not without its own intonation idiosyncrasies.⁵³ Musicians of the time, however, were not unused to dealing with the technological limitations of their instruments. Like the serpent, it was not hard to overblow, producing what Gevaert called "its coarse, bellowing tones, so rough as to be sometimes almost grotesque,"⁵⁴ while Prout described it as "very powerful but somewhat savage and intrusive."⁵⁵ Daubeny, writing at about the same time as Gevaert and Prout and recognizing a perceptual problem, noted that "its timber varied greatly over each register, owing to the great distance

⁵¹ Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, 118.

⁵² Alan G. Moore, "Playing the Serpent," *Early Music* Vol. 3, No. 1 (1975), 22.

⁵³ See ⁵³ Reginald Morley-Pegge, Philip Bate, Stephen Weston and Arnold Myers, "Ophicleide, §1: Description," *Grove Music Online* (Accessed 03 June 2006), <<http://www.grovemusic.com/shared/views/article.html?section=music.40954.1> (Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁵⁴ Francois Auguste Gevaert, *A New Treatise on Instrumentation* (Paris: Henry Lemoine & Co., 1910), 264.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Baines, 203.

separating the extreme tone holes,"⁵⁶ while Baines provides a more modern perspective before quoting Prout's observation by saying that "the bright, free sound can today be most refreshing."⁵⁷

Theodore Sturgeon, a writer of speculative fiction, perhaps gives the most comprehensive description of the sound of the ophicleide:

The psychiatrist . . . drove off [into the mountains] . . . he began to pray that nothing would go wrong with the car, and sure enough, ten minutes later he thought something had. Any car that made a noise like the one he began to hear was strictly a shotrod, and he pulled over to the side to worry about it. He turned off the motor and the noise went right on. . . It was sort of like music, but like no music currently heard on this or any other planet. It was a solo voice, brass, with muscles. The upper notes, of which there seemed to be about two octaves, were wild and unmusical, the middle was rough, but the low tones were like the speech of these mountains themselves, big up to the sky, hot, and more natural than anything out to be, basic as a bear's fang. . . And he was playing, or anyway practicing, the ophicleide, and on his shoulders was a little moss of spruce needles, a small shower of which descended from the tree every time he hit on or under the low B-flat. Only a mouse trapped inside a tuba during band practice can know precisely what it's like to stand that close to an operating ophicleide.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ulric Daubeny, *Orchestral wind Instruments, ancient and modern* (London: Wm. Reeves, 1920), 111.

⁵⁷ Baines, 203.

⁵⁸ Theodore Sturgeon, "And Now the News. . .," excerpt from short story found on The Serpent Website, <http://www.serpentwebsite.com/quote.htm>, Copyright Paul Schmidt, 1997, revised April 2006. The above is preceded by the following introduction: "Before he left he stood in wonder before a monstrous piece of musical plumbing called an ophicleide which stood, dust and majestic, in a corner. (While it might be easier on the reader to make this a French Horn or a Sousaphone—which would answer narrative purposes quite as well—we're done telling lies here. MacLyle's real name is concealed, his home town cloaked, and his occupation disguised, and dammit it really was a twelve-keyed, 1824-era, 50-inch, obsolete brass ophicleide.)" . . . Months later. . ."

CHAPTER 3

MENDELSSOHN AND *EIN SOMMERNACHTSTRAUM* OVERTURE

A Youth Intrigued By Novelty

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847), considered a musical prodigy second only to Mozart by such figures as Schumann and Wagner, had all the advantages that a prodigy needs but seldom has. A family wealthy enough from a banking fortune to indulge a child's every whim did more than that—they provided seemingly every resource necessary to cultivate the young Felix's prodigious intellect. From early parental instruction in mathematics, French, German, literature and art, to a private elementary school for two years, to tutors supervising study in geography, mathematics, history, French and Greek, young Felix and his older sister Fanny were not lacking in intellectual stimulation.¹ "Outside his musical interests, he is also inclined toward drawing, which he could only practice from lack of time in a limited way during his attendance at school."² The children received their first lessons on the piano from their mother Lea, five-minute lessons that "gradually increased [in] time until he and his sister Fanny went through a regular course of instruction."³

From the age of ten, Felix's musical development was entrusted to Carl Friedrich Zelter, a mason by birth and training who nevertheless followed his muse to become an uninspired composer but an excellent musical craftsman, educator, and conductor of

¹ See Peter Mercer-Taylor, "Mendelssohn and the institution(s) of German art music," *The Cambridge Companion to Mendelssohn*, edited by Peter Mercer-Taylor (Cambridge, 2004), 13.

² Extract from a letter of Lea Mendelssohn on July 20, 1818; quoted in Larry Todd, *Mendelssohn, A Life in Music* (Oxford, 2003), 34.

³ Quoting Jules Benedict (*Sketches of the life and Works of the Late Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, London, 1850*), in Todd, 33.

the Berlin Singakademie (begun by his teacher C. F. C. Fasch) from Fasch's death in 1800, until his own death in 1832. Under Zelter's tutelage, the young Felix's musical genius blossomed under a rigorous and systematic training more in common with the eighteenth century than the blossoming nineteenth,⁴ following closely the established methodologies of Kirnberger and Marpurg, and using Bach, Haydn and Mozart as models. Zelter also "sheltered his charge from newer, implicitly more questionable, avenues of musical expression."⁵ Mendelssohn's output, both as student and composer was prodigious: in 1823 alone (the same year his Opus 1, the C minor Piano Quartet was published by Schlesinger) the fourteen-year-old youth produced "a spate of string symphonies, two concerti, another piano quartet, string quartet, violin sonata, Kyrie, Lieder, piano and organ works, and completed his fourth opera"⁶ which was produced complete with orchestra at the family's residence in Berlin. Reflecting Zelter's influence, these compositions, "pendulum-like, [. . .] swing between cerebral Bachian counterpoint and graceful Viennese classicism."⁷

Zelter's conservatism was not the only influence on the young Mendelssohn, however. He and his parents attended the Berlin premiere of Carl Maria von Weber's *Der Freischutz*, conducted by the composer. Weber's romantic opera contrasted greatly

⁴ Plantinga sees the breakdown of the old patronage system, which promoted the systematic teaching/practice of music in families (e.g. the Gabriellis, Scarlattis, Bach, Mozarts, Beethovens, etc.) as one contribution to the "extraordinary diversity" of the Romantic period. Wagner and Berlioz were much more characteristic of the kind of musical education gained by most Romantic composers. See Leon Plantinga, *Romantic Music: a history of musical style in nineteenth-century Europe* (Norton, 1984), 12-13.

⁵ "Thus, contemporary musical styles—the 'heroic' style of Beethoven, the onslaught of romanticism (Carl Maria von Weber's 'romantic opera' *Der Freischutz* would premiere in Berlin in 1821)—were not a significant factor in the very earliest stage of Felix's training." Todd, 49.

⁶ Todd, 109.

⁷ Todd, 110.

with court Kapellmeister Spontini's "neoclassical *Olympia*, commissioned by the Prussian monarch"—a work more compatible with the tastes of the court, which "responded by patronizing three performances."⁸ Felix could not have been unaware of the controversy and conflict surrounding these works and styles. Something of Weber's colorful romanticism must have sunk into the boy's psyche, for later that year, when he improvised for Goethe on his first visit to Weimar with Zelter, the great poet responded by exclaiming "What hobgoblins and dragons have you been dreaming about, to drive you along in that helter-skelter fashion!"⁹

Of all of the musicians who frequented the Mendelssohn household, one stood out as particularly influential for the teen-aged Felix. Adolph Bernhard Marx (1795-1866), fourteen years Felix's senior, editor of the *Berliner allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, became one of the most influential music theorists of the nineteenth century, and advocated throughout his life for musical study for all, not limited to the professional musician. Already in 1826, when he "became an habitu  of the Haus Mendelssohn,"¹⁰ Marx was espousing his ideas on 'characteristic' music, holding "that

⁸ This new German version provided "stately processions (Statira, Alexander the Great's widow, entered on an elephant, accompanied by a clamorous band crammed onto the stage), a bacchanal, and an apotheosis with the macabre specter of Alexander." Todd, 9-80. [A reminder: *Olympia* was the first work to use the ophicleide, in Paris, 1819]. Thus, Mendelssohn was exposed to whatever instrument was used in Berlin as part of that "clamorous band" onstage.

⁹ Todd, 87.

¹⁰ A. B. Marx, *Musical Form in the Age of Beethoven*, edited and translated by Scott Burnham (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4-5. Burnham's summary of Felix's and Marx's relationship is worth quoting in full: "Marx's writings and ideas found ample resonance in Berlin's intellectual community. During his years as editor of the music journal Marx became an habitu  of the Haus Mendelssohn, through which he cultivated the acquaintance of many of the city's most distinguished intellectuals and artists. His skill as a conversationalist kept the teenaged Felix entranced, and the two were great friends for a number of years — until they shared critiques of each other's oratorios, at which point the younger composer could no longer disguise his opinion of Marx's compositional mediocrity. Perhaps the greatest monument of their shortlived but intense friendship was the famous rediscovery and performance of the Bach St. Matthew Passion

composers tried 'to reveal, not only the internal emotions and mental conditions of their characters but also the accompanying external circumstances, actions, and events.'"¹¹ Marx believed that all music since Mozart "had at its core an extra-musical idea, a *Grundidee* (or *Grundgedanke*) which—though not completely expressible in words—is quite specific, and which serves as the program of the work."¹² Eduard Devrient, another of Felix's close friends (only 8 years senior) who "struggled with Marx unsuccessfully for influence over Mendelssohn", remembers that "Marx had an influence over Felix which no one ever again had."¹³ During this time when their relationship was strongest Mendelssohn composed three programmatic works: the 'Reformation' Symphony, *Meersstille und glückliche Fahrt*, and the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

An Overture to a Fantasy World

The summer of 1826 saw a convergence of influences that stimulated Mendelssohn to produce one of the most magical works of the Romantic era. Zelter's thorough, uncompromising if pedantic tutelage gave the teenager not only the skills to compose in virtually any medium, but also the confidence to experiment. His study of Beethoven's late works, exposure to the German Romantic operas of Weber and French

in 1829. Mendelssohn resurrected the work and conducted the performance, while Marx's professional enthusiasm for the work was instrumental in convincing Adolph Schlesinger to publish it."

¹¹ Sanna Pederson, "Marx, (Friedrich Heinrich) Adolf Bernhard [Samuel Moses], *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 15 August 2006), <http://www.grovemusic.com>, quoting A. B. Marx, *Die Musik des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (1855).

¹² Judith Silber Ballan, "Marxian programmatic music: a stage in Mendelssohn's musical development," *Mendelssohn Studies* ed. R. Larry Todd (Cambridge, 1992), 152.

¹³ Eduard Devrient, *Recollections*, p. 35. Quoted in Ballan, 151.

grand operas of Spontini, and his friendship with Marx, who introduced him to progressive ideas of musical expressiveness, led him to push the envelope of his largely classical training. As the young Felix's "creative center shifted to the garden [an expansive installation on the family's new estate on which no expense was spared for landscaping], where he played games with his friends,"¹⁴ it was inevitable, then, that his recent exposure to the 1825 reissue of A. W. Schlegel's Shakespeare translations would inspire in him, as he confided to his sister Fanny, a "desire to undertake an 'immense boldness'—to dream the 'midsummernightsdream.'"¹⁵

This "immense boldness," based on Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ("despite some notable operatic and non-programmatic predecessors"¹⁶) is in reality an entirely new genre, a programmatic concert overture. When Mendelssohn showed the first draft of the overture to Marx, the friend and critic, in his own admittedly self-serving account, suggested some changes:

The dance of the elves with its introductory chords was as one would later know it. Then—well, then there followed an overture, cheerful, pleasantly agitated, perfectly delightful, perfectly praiseworthy—only I could perceive no *Midsummer Night's Dream* in it. Sincerely feeling that it was my duty as a friend, I told him this in candor. He was taken aback, irritated, even hurt, and ran out without taking his leave.¹⁷

A few days later Marx received an envelope containing pieces of torn-up manuscript paper and a note from Felix apologizing for his precipitous departure: "You

¹⁴ Todd, 161.

¹⁵ In a letter dated July 7, 1826. Quoted in Todd, 161.

¹⁶ Douglass Seaton, "Symphony and overture," *the Cambridge Companion to Mendelssohn*, edited by Peter Mercer-Taylor (Cambridge University Press, 2004), 98.

¹⁷ A. B. Marx, *Erinnerungen aus meinem Leben* (Berlin, 1865), quoted in R. Larry Todd, *Mendelssohn: "The Hebrides" and Other Overtures* (Cambridge, 1993), 12.

are always right! But now come and help."¹⁸ Marx continues his account in a manner that reminds us of his own philosophical underpinnings:

I did not fail to respond; I hurried over and explained that, as I saw it, such a score, since it serves as a prologue, must give a true and complete reflection of the drama. He went to work with fire and absolute dedication. At least the wanderings of the young pairs of lovers could be salvaged from the first draft, in the first motive (E, D# D \natural , C#); everything else was created anew. It was pointless to resist! 'It's too full! too much!' he cried, when I wanted him to make room for the ruffians and even for Bottom's ardent ass's braying. It was done, the overture became the one we now know. . .¹⁹

In the space of a month, then, from his letter to Fanny on July 7 to the completed score dated August 6, and with promptings for revisions by Marx, Mendelssohn produced, as Todd describes it, "a seminal work of German musical romanticism."²⁰ In typical Mendelssohnian fashion, however, the overture has one leg in both worlds, classical and romantic. While the composer, urged on by Marx, successfully confronted the challenge of writing a work more representative of Shakespeare's characters—to be expected of Romantic composers, he nevertheless produced a work with classical symmetries. Even though the form and melodic material "owe more to expressive content than to the functional requirements,"²¹ there is a regularity of phrase and attention to sonata principle that belies Felix's classical training. Plantinga observes that the overture "fits comfortably into a sonata-allegro structure that is entirely regular except for its alternation between E major and E minor."²² Pelto, analyzing microcosmic formal issues, remarks that

¹⁸ Todd, *The Hebrides and Other Overtures*, 12-13.

¹⁹ Todd, *The Hebrides and Other Overtures*, 13.

²⁰ Todd, *Mendelssohn*, 161.

²¹ Seaton, 100.

²² Leon Plantinga, *Romantic Music, A History of Musical Style in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1984), 249.

While Mendelssohn uses illustrative details within sections of his tradition-based forms, they typically do not generate formal units such as phrases. However, they are contained within phrases, the lengths and arrangements of which continue to reflect classical formal concerns.²³

Indeed, Mendelssohn later, in a conversation with Johann Christian Lobe, affirmed that “you can examine all the musical elements; nowhere will you find in my overture anything at all that Beethoven did not have and practice, unless’—he smiled roguishly—‘you want to consider it as new ground that I used the ophicleide.’”²⁴

In spite of the young Felix’s fidelity to classical forms and symmetries, virtually every element of the overture was influenced by his illustrative intent. The four-chord motto that opens the work, “harmonically unconventional, ambiguous, and dreamlike,”²⁵ with its reversal of traditional tonic-to-dominant motion and introduction of modal mixture on the penultimate chord (I-V-iv-I) is commonly understood to imply departure from the real world and entry into a fantasy world. The same chords recur at the beginning of the recapitulation and finally at the end of the coda, where they release the listener from Puck’s spell, returning us to reality. While some thematic material is explicitly representative (the fairies and Bottom), other material is less specific. Thus, Mendelssohn maintains, as Pelto says, “connections with the extramusical source in a manner consistent with his distaste for musical ‘spelling-books’”²⁶

Beyond formal, thematic, and harmonic issues, the most Romantic element of

²³ William Lyle Pelto, *Musical Structure and Extramusical Meaning in the Concert Overtures of Felix Mendelssohn* (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1993), footnote, p. 102.

²⁴ Johann Christian Lobe, “Conversations with Felix Mendelssohn,” tr. Susan Gillespie, *Mendelssohn and His World*, ed. R. Larry Todd (Princeton, 1991), 194-95.

²⁵ Todd, *Mendelssohn, A Life In Music*, 163.

²⁶ Pelto, 119-120.

Mendelssohn's Overture to "A Midsummer Night's Dream" is its orchestration, seen specifically in the use of the ophicleide, or English bass horn, as Mendelssohn himself rather indirectly pointed out.²⁷ Felix had already worked with wind instruments, notably in the *Notturmo* in C major, (composed in 1824, and revised fifteen years later in 1839 as *Ouverture für Harmoniemusik*, Op. 24), and the *Trumpet Overture* in C major, Op. 101 (1826), which Todd, citing its "use of a recurring motto, third-related harmonies, and colorful approach to orchestration," considers "an unjustly neglected *Vorstudie* for its more famous sibling,"²⁸ the *Midsummer Night's Dream Overture*.

While it has been commonly accepted as fact that Mendelssohn wrote the *Midsummer Night's Dream Overture* for ophicleide, the composer really had another instrument in mind. Clifford Bevan is not alone when he mentioned only the ophicleide in connection with the overture in the first edition of *The Tuba Family*;²⁹ Gary Bird, in his 1992 dissertation does the same.³⁰ In his much more exhaustively researched second edition (2000) and citing primary sources, Bevan corrects the historical record, as does Todd (1993).³¹ Both writers note the absence of a brass bass instrument in the first draft housed in the Bodleian Library, Oxford, but the presence in the final version ("MS autogr. Mendelssohn vo. 32, Kraków")³² of *Corno inglese di basso* (English bass horn), between Fagotti and Corni in E. This discovery supports Marx's claim to have influenced Mendelssohn's illustrative intent by "[making] room for the ruffians and even

²⁷ See reference to Lobe's conversation, above.

²⁸ Todd, *Mendelssohn, A Life*, 161.

²⁹ Clifford Bevan, *The Tuba Family* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1978), 65-66.

³⁰ Gary Bird, *A Musical Comparison of the Serpent and Ophicleide in Selected Compositions of the Nineteenth Century* (D.M. dissertation: Indiana University, 1992), 34-39.

³¹ Todd, *The Hebrides and other overtures*, 13-15.

³² Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, 2nd edition, 483.

for Bottom's ass's braying."³³ Because the ophicleide was rapidly replacing the members of the serpent family, this newly-invented instrument was often used in place of the original English bass horn. When Mendelssohn published the score in 1835, along with additional incidental music for the play, ophicleide was the instrument specified. "But," as Todd says, "the original inspiration for this part was the 'pretty, deep sound' of the English bass horn."³⁴

Mendelssohn encountered the English bass horn in 1824, on holiday at Bad Doberan, near Rostock on the Baltic, where it was part of the resort's wind band (flute, paired clarinets, oboes, bassoons, French horns, trumpet and bass horn). Felix was sufficiently captivated by the instrument that, in a letter to his sister Fanny, he included a sketch to validate his visual observation that it resembled "a watering can or a syringe," and noted its "lovely, deep tone."³⁵ It was for this ensemble that he composed the above-mentioned *Notturmo*.

That, in Mendelssohn's imagination, the English bass horn possessed traits in addition to its "lovely, deep tone" is demonstrated not only in the orchestration of the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but also in a letter he wrote to sisters Fanny and Rebecka on June 25, 1829, the day after the first London performance. Having had difficulty finding a performer for the instrument before the rehearsals, Mendelssohn described the scene in which Sir George Smart, apparently ignorant of the instrument, finally rounded up a player and coached him privately, with Mendelssohn and Charles

³³ See footnote 17, above.

³⁴ Todd, *The Hebrides and other overtures*, 15.

³⁵ Both Bevan (*The Tuba Family*, 2nd edition, 484), and Todd (*Mendelssohn, A Life*, 131) refer to this letter.

Neate present. Mendelssohn “had to correct Smart’s impression that the instrument should sound ‘schön [noble],³⁶ and instead should present a more rustic, unrefined character, as befitted Nick Bottom’s nature. In a practice typical of the use of these unusual bass instruments (not only in London, but Paris as well), the “unfortunate player of this very exposed part” was recruited from military bands—in this case, probably from the Coldstream Guards.³⁷

Mendelssohn scored the overture for a standard classical orchestra that Haydn would have been familiar with (with the exception of an added the English bass horn³⁸)—pairs of flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, horns, trumpets, timpani, “Corno Inglese di Basso,” and strings. Gary Bird, interested primarily in the English bass horn’s³⁹ bass function, has calculated that the bass horn is active 29.9% of the overture (205 of 686 measures); of that time, it functions as a bass voice 83.4% and receives a

³⁶ Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, 2nd edition. Bevan’s account of the incident in the letter is worth quoting here in full: “On 24 June 1829 the first British performance of the overture was conducted by Mendelssohn himself, at the Argyll Rooms, London, in a concert for the victims of floods in Silesia. (Another was given on 13 July.) The orchestra had been assembled by Smart, who was immensely proud of his friendship with Mendelssohn whom he had previously met in Berlin. However, as Mendelssohn relates in a letter he write home to his sisters Fanny and Rebecka on 25 June, at the 10 o’clock rehearsal on the day before the concert the bass horn was missing, and an irate Mendelssohn took Smart to task. Smart promised that ‘the man with the beer-bass’ would be present, and the next morning ‘along came the fellow with the bass horn.’ (*Bierbaß* was a German dialect word for another instrument of the people, the Handbassel, a small string bass used for dance music.) Mendelssohn’s account of the proceedings is graphic. ‘I accompanied him at the keyboard . . . Neate [Charles Neate, a director of the Philharmonic Society] walking around me, while Smart encouraged the soldier [bass horn player], asking about his wife and children, giving him snuff. . .’ Mendelssohn had to correct Smart’s impression that the instrument should sound ‘schön [noble]’, and at the end the player went off home, taking his part with him. ‘The scene was divine.’”

³⁷ *Ibid.* This player was “unfortunate” precisely because he would have been unused to performing such “very exposed” parts individually in an ensemble so different from his usual musical and social context.

³⁸ Haydn did, though, write serpent parts with skill and understanding in several works for wind band: see Friend R. Overton, “The Serpent Orchestration of Joseph Haydn from 1791,” *Internationaler Musikwissenschaftlicher Kongress zum Mozartjahr 1991* (Baden, Austria: 1991).

³⁹ While Bird refers to the instrument Mendelssohn wrote for as the ‘ophicleide,’ (and indeed that is what the composer later accepted), I will substitute the designation in the original score.

soloistic treatment 11.7% of the time. He concludes that “the use of the [bass horn] by Mendelssohn and its position within the orchestra can best be described as a wind section bass instrument,” particularly to the woodwinds (the brass—trumpets and horns—serve a primarily harmonic function), but also as bass to the horns, and occasionally doubling the contrabass.⁴⁰

When one goes beyond a harmonic and textural analysis of Mendelssohn’s scoring for the English bass horn and considers its characteristic, illustrative function as well as its contributions of tone color, the instrument achieves an importance quite beyond its role as an additional bass instrument. Todd, in his exploration of the relationships between three major overtures Mendelssohn wrote during his student period but only published in 1835,⁴¹ identifies six themes related to Shakespeare’s play (see Table 2) that weave together in a coherent sonata form (see Table 3). By comparing the bass horn’s use to the programmatic themes one can discern Mendelssohn’s reasons for including such an unusual instrument in his overture.

⁴⁰ Bird, 36-40.

⁴¹ The three overtures are *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Hebrides*, and *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*, published as a set, *Drei Concert-Ouverturen*, thus vindicating Todd’s focus on the three. *The Hebrides and other overtures*, vii.

Table 2. Programmatic Themes in the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*⁴²

a. transformation motto

b. fairies

c. Theseus' court

d. lovers

e. Bottom and the tradesmen

f. The hunt

Table 3. Thematic Analysis of Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*⁴³ (Thematic designations in this analysis correspond to the themes as presented in Table 2.)

Exposition							Development						
First group			Bridge	Second Group		Closing							
\hat{a}	b (a')	c (f')	(c')	(b')	d	e	f (c)	f	b (a'')	b horn calls	b' (a'')	(c'')	(d')
I	i	I	V	V	V	V	v	ii	VII	vi			
1	8	62		130	194	222	250	270		316		376	
Reprise							Coda						
\hat{a}	b	d	e	(c')	c	f							
I	i	VI	V	I	I	I	i		I	I			
394	434	450	517	542	586	594	620	643	663	682			

⁴² Adapted from Todd, *The Hebrides and other overtures*, 55.

⁴³ Todd, *The Hebrides and other overtures*, 54.

In the exposition (mm. 1-250), the English bass horn functions in two primary settings: participating in Theseus's court (c), and representing the rustic tradesmen (e). For Theseus's court it provides not only the grand descending bass line for majestic wind chords (along with other instruments), but also participates as an equal in a canonic section that soon dissipates the grandeur of (c), leading to a momentary return of the fairy theme (b). Following *fortissimo* entrances of the subject first in the flutes and oboes, then the clarinets, and followed by the bassoons and horns, the bass horn is entrusted with the fourth statement alone, two octaves higher than its release in the previous measure, expected to balance the entire wind section (trumpets and horns included), all at a *fortissimo* dynamic level (mm. 78-94). That Mendelssohn chose to score this section as he did demonstrates not only the capabilities of the instrument, but also the high regard he obviously had for its ability to contribute to a refined, imposing musical statement (see Example 1).

The bass horn's involvement with Bottom and the tradesmen presents an entirely different musical aesthetic. Along with the horns, timpani, cellos and basses the bass horn raucously interrupts the passion of the lovers' theme (d) to introduce the tradesmen and mimic Bottom's transformation to a braying donkey (theme e—see Example 2). While the violins certainly bear the greatest responsibility for the braying, the roughness that a serpent-based instrument can contribute only heightens the effect that Marx encouraged Mendelssohn to pursue.

Even as the bass horn supplies the obligatory bass line throughout the overture, however, its role is often interruptive, or signals, in the company of other instruments,

Example 1. Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Canonic Section in Theseus' Court Theme⁴⁴

The image displays a page of a musical score, page 9, starting at measure 76. The score is arranged in a system with multiple staves. The instruments and parts are as follows:

- Fl. I & II (Flutes)
- Ob. I & II (Oboes)
- Cl. I & II (A) (Clarinets)
- Fg. I & II (Fagotti)
- Cor. I & II (E) (Cori)
- Trb. I & II (E) (Trombe)
- Oph. (Ophicleide)
- Timp. (Timpani)
- VI. I & II (Violini)
- Va. (Viola)
- Bassi (Bassi)

The score features various musical notations including dynamics such as *ff* (fortissimo) and *f* (forte), articulation marks like accents and staccato, and phrasing slurs. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 2/4. The page number '9' is located in the top right corner.

⁴⁴ Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, *Music to A Midsummer Night's Dream by Shakespeare*, Op. 61, edited by Christian Martin Schmidt (Wiesbaden: Breitkopf & Härtel, 2000).

83

Fl. I
Fl. II

Ob. I

Ob. II

Cl. I (A)

Cl. II (A)

Fg. I

Fg. II

Cor. I (E)
Cor. II (E)

Trb. I (E)
Trb. II (E)

Oph.

Tump.

Vi. I

Vi. II

Va.

Bassi

ff *sf* *f*

Example 2. Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Bottom and the Tradesmen⁴⁵

22

190

Fl. I
Fl. II

Ob. I
Ob. II

Cl. I
(A) II

Fg. I
Fg. II

Cor. I
(E) II

Trb. I
(E) II

Oph.

Timp.

Vl. I

Vl. II

Va.

Bassi

cresc.

f

ff

a 2

a 3

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

C

198

Fl. I II

Ob. I II

Cl. I (A) II

Fg. I II

Cor. I (E) II

Oph.

Temp.

VI. I

VI. II

Va.

Bassi

the interaction of the fairy and real worlds. Thus, in the exposition when the fairy theme returns to signal the second key area (mm. 98-130), it plays cadential long tones reminiscent of the unmeasured four-chord motto of the introduction, finally confirming the new key with a V-I motion as the low voice of a three-note chord along with the two bassoons (mm. 128-130). Similarly, the bass horn participates, independently voiced again, in a sighing motion that the winds supply over part of the lovers' theme (mm. 162-166). In one of the few examples of sharing a musical line (except for the orchestral tutti), the bass horn doubles the lower horn and trumpet in the final statement of the horn calls that end the exposition.

Absent in the development, the bass horn returns in the recapitulation, first underlying the fairy theme as in the exposition when the theme inserted itself after the grand music for Theseus' court. This time, however, it appears in a much more spare, exposed manner following first a single bassoon, then a single horn, and plays what Todd calls "the all-important fourth E-B,"⁴⁶ which outlines the tetrachord on which the overture is based (mm. 412-420), still in long-note values suggesting the timelessness of the introductory chords. A few bars later (m. 428), the bass horn single-handedly begins the additive process of introducing the winds who will soon present the lovers' theme. With the exception of providing the bass to some fanfare insertions, the bass horn reprises its raucous role with Bottom and the Tradesmen as well as a member of Theseus' court, leading to the tonic reinforcements of the orchestral tutti of the false ending.

⁴⁶ Todd, *The Hebrides and other overtures*, 57.

Throughout this overture we can see examples of the two natures of this English bass horn of Mendelssohn's experience: an instrument capable of functioning well with others to produce sophisticated musical expression (he did include it in his *Notturmo* for winds, after all), and an instrument of the people, more often associated with outdoor and military activities that do not call for elegance and grace. Even as it provided a reinforcing bass line (seldom doubling other instruments, except in the orchestral tutti of the theme for Theseus' court), it related significantly to the composer's expressive intent. In these two guises the bass horn contributes significantly to the composer's programmatic purposes, a hallmark of Romantic attention to tone color. For Mendelssohn, then, the English bass horn, a derivative of the serpent, is indeed an instrument of Romantic color.

Use of Brass Bass Instruments in Later Works

The Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is not the only work for which Mendelssohn originally specified the *Corno Inglese di Basso* or, as often titled, Basshorn; he also scored for the serpent and ophicleide—and, in spite of Todd's remark that "Mendelssohn did not live long enough to witness the tuba established in the orchestra and did not write for that instrument,"⁴⁷ he does appear to have written for the tuba in one work (see Table 4). The issue of intended instrument is further clouded, as alluded to earlier, by a habit of asking for one instrument in manuscript (English bass horn), but substituting another for publication (ophicleide), as can be

⁴⁷ Todd, *The Hebrides and other overtures.*, 84.

seen in the Incidental Music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Op. 61, written over 15 years later. Further examination remains to be done on other of Mendelssohn's works in light of his programmatic, Romantic use of the English bass horn in the Overture to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Table 4. Mendelssohn's Works that include a Forerunner of the Tuba

Year	Instrument	Work
1824 (1852)	Corno Inglese di Basso (Contrafagotto und Basshorn)	<i>Notturmo</i> (<i>Ouvertüre für Vollständige Harmonie-Musik</i> , Op. 24)
1826	Corno Inglese di Basso	Overture to <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i>
1828	Serpente e Contra Fagotto	<i>Ouvertüre: Meerestille und Glückliche Fahrt</i> , Op. 27
1832	Serpent	<i>Symphony No. 5</i> , Reformation
1836	Contrafagott und Basshorn	<i>Trauer-Marsch</i> , Op. 103 for Harmonie- Musik (no basshorn in the orchestral version)
1836	Serpente	<i>St. Paulus</i> , Op. 36
1843	Corno Inglese di Basso (manuscript) Ophicleide (as published)	Incidental music to <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> , Op. 61
1846	Ophicleide and Tuba	<i>Festgesang an die Künstler</i> , Op. 68
1847	Keyed Ophicleide	<i>Elias</i> , Op. 70

CHAPTER 4

BERLIOZ AND *SYMPHONIE FANTASTIQUE*

An Expressive Young Man

Compared to Felix Mendelssohn, it is not hard to discern the Romantic influences that shaped the music of Hector Berlioz. While Mendelssohn's early life and career proceeded without significant conflict or serious impediment, Berlioz's life (1803-1869) and career was anything but smooth, and his music continued to be a source of controversy long after his death. Even as he cultivated the image of the struggling, suffering Romantic artist, he composed music "so original and so apart from the musical mainstream of his time that he is misunderstood not only by his contemporaries but also by succeeding generations."¹ Mendelssohn, who liked Berlioz personally, was not alone as he considered the *Symphonie fantastique* "contrived passion represented through every possible exaggerated orchestral means . . . indifferent drivel, mere grunting, shouting and screaming back and forth," in contrast to the individual—"that friendly, quiet, meditative person, calmly and assuredly going his way. . ."² Charles Rosen, a modern commentator, implies that there are two kinds of Berlioz listeners: idolaters and critics. One accepts virtually unquestioningly the freshness, originality and expressiveness of the music; the other cannot get beyond what seems to be "the clumsiness of his harmony, the naïveté of his counterpoint, and the negligence of his

¹ Rey M. Longyear, *Nineteenth-Century Romanticism in Music*, third edition (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1988), 135-136.

² Quoted by Edward T. Cone in his Norton Scores edition of Hector Berlioz, *Fantastic Symphony* (New York, 1971), 282.

forms.”³ Fortunately, Rosen mediates between the two views, finding expressive, constructive explanations for Berlioz’s putative harmonic, contrapuntal and formal inadequacies.

Like Abraham Mendelssohn, Louis-Joseph Berlioz took charge of his son’s education, but without the considerable resources available in Berlin, tutoring him in the classics, geography, history, and of course the sciences, in preparation for a career in medicine. Music was a part of this free-style curriculum, particularly after the young Hector discovered his father’s old flageolet. Dr. Berlioz soon purchased for his son a flute along with Devienne’s *Méthode de flute théorique et pratique*,⁴ supplementing “in a very lucid and logical way—as the pupil looked back on it—how to read notes and sing at sight.”⁵ Even though there was no piano in the village of La Côte (Barzun notes that this was not unusual—“there were very few pianos anywhere in the first two decades of the nineteenth century”⁶), there was a National Guard band with typical instrumentation of the day.⁷ Along with the patriotic and military repertoire of the National Guard band, there were other opportunities available: some of the band members assembled occasionally to play chamber music; at parties and dances in the community Berlioz played guitar and his uncle Felix Marmion sang and played violin; he doubtless heard popular airs and tunes from current operas-comiques of Grétry, Dalayrac, Boieldieu; he was also certainly exposed to environmental music—the litanies

³ Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 544-545.

⁴ Holoman, 11.

⁵ Jacques Barzun, *Berlioz and His Century* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982), 26.

⁶ Barzun, 27.

⁷ David Cairns lists twenty-one players in an 1820 inventory: 1 piccolo, 10 clarinets, 3 horns, 1 bassoon, 1 trumpet, 1 serpent, 1 tambourine, 1 bass drum, 1 cymbal player, and 1 player of the pavilion chinois or ‘Jingling Johnny’, in *Berlioz*, volume one, *The Making of an Artist 1803-1832* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 68.

of the church, hunting horns, shepherds' pipes and other work songs of the field laborers and household servants.⁸ Thanks to his varied and unconventional experiences Berlioz was able to develop early on what Donald Jay Grout called "an extraordinary aural imagination,"⁹ producing perhaps the greatest orchestrational talent of the nineteenth century. His work with the National Guard band in La Côte prepared him to handle wind and percussion instruments with confidence—a skill not all conventionally trained musicians in a strings-based context were able to develop. Included in those wind instruments that were common to him was the serpent, serving in the band and also in the services of the church. It is hardly surprising, then, that Berlioz used the serpent and its successor the ophicleide when he began writing for orchestra.

In Paris, even as he attempted to study medicine to appease his father, Berlioz was quite naturally drawn to the opera and its dramatic effects, finally able to experience in person what he had only been able to read about and study in fragments growing up in La Côte. Within three weeks of his arrival in Paris, Berlioz "was able to fulfill one of the dreams of his childhood"—seeing a performance of Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride*, and by mid-decade he had certainly seen Spontini's *Olympie* (in which the ophicleide had been used for the first time in 1819), *La Vestale*, and *Fernand Cortez*, as well as operas by a newer generation of composers—Rossini, Auber, Meyerbeer, and Weber.¹⁰ Even before forsaking medicine for music, a source of frustration for his parents, he was accepted as a student of Jean-François Le Sueur, one of the foremost

⁸ Cairns, 67.

⁹ Donald Jay Grout, *A History of Western Music*, first edition (New York: Norton, 1960), 536

¹⁰ Holoman, 20.

composition teachers of the time—but only after the master insisted that he complete some remedial work in elementary harmony with a fellow student. Holoman observed of this relationship, “Le Sueur’s notions of ‘imitative’ dramatic music—that is, a musical rhetoric *dominated by references to nature and human passions* [emphasis added]—became the crux of Berlioz’s own musical thought.”¹¹

The years 1827 and 1828 saw three significant events that confirmed Berlioz’s romanticism and put him on a new path of composition that would lead inexorably to the *Symphonie fantastique*. First was the arrival of a company of English actors to present Shakespeare’s plays—an event that attracted the French intelligentsia and proved to be a shaping influence on French Romanticism. In the troupe was a young, beautiful actress, Harriet Smithson, who virtually took Paris by storm, and who became the object of Berlioz’s obsessive infatuation (this was event number 2). The third seminal event was the inaugural performance of the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire, founded by Habeneck to promote symphonic music and expose the French public to Beethoven. Through Beethoven, Berlioz discovered that instrumental music could carry descriptive, emotive intent quite independent of a sung text. Combined with influence from Weber,¹² this confluence of Shakespearean tragedy, Beethovenian expressiveness, and his obsessive love for an unattainable woman, the stage was set for Berlioz to produce, early in his career, what is still his best known work.

¹¹ Holoman, 26-27.

¹² Julian Rushton, *The Music of Berlioz* (Oxford University Press: 2001), 13.

A Diabolical Symphony

It is hard to imagine another first symphony as daring, as audacious as Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*. Johannes Brahms, in the very center of German symphonic tradition yet oppressed by the titanic ghost of Beethoven, finally completed his first symphony at the age of forty-three (1876) some twenty years after he began. Berlioz, on the other hand, having only recently discovered Beethoven's symphonies, at the age of twenty-seven (1830) wrote a symphony not only stimulated by the master, but according to Rushton, as a perversion of his Fifth, Sixth ('Pastoral'), and Ninth Symphonies.¹³ "Not only was it daring of Berlioz to base an orchestral work on his own experiences; it was daring to write a symphony at all." Crediting Barry Brook, he points out that the average output of French symphonies since 1800 had been fewer than one a year."¹⁴ Rushton's assertion alone justifies the view that this is a Romantic symphony.

There can be no doubt that the audience for the first performance of *Symphonie fantastique* recognized, even before the downbeat, they were about to hear something entirely new. Even its title marks the upcoming work as unique: originally it read *Épisode de la vie d'un artiste, Symphonie fantastique en cinq parties*. In the relatively small confines of the Salle du Conservatoire were ranged some 130 musicians, certainly a much larger orchestra than used in the same room for Beethoven symphonies presented by Habeneck and the Société des Concerts du Conservatoire. It was not, however, merely a larger version of Beethoven's ensemble; the size was also a result of

¹³ Rushton, 252-253.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

the many new and unusual instruments Berlioz wrote for, allowing not primarily for more power and dynamics, but for greater flexibility and variety of tone color. In only a couple of instances did Berlioz call for more of any particular instrument than was common—for instance, four harps instead of the usual one, and an array of percussion that included four timpanists. Alongside the traditional orchestral instruments such as natural horns and trumpets were the new valved horns (these were specifically saved until the fourth movement), *cornets à pistons* (originally a single *trompette à piston* in Eb), ophicleide (until now only used in the opera house), and in the original manuscript¹⁵ the ancient and decidedly non-orchestral serpent (the serpent was soon replaced by a second ophicleide).

After the first three movements make use of a standard orchestra, the ophicleide and serpent¹⁶, along with several other instruments, are finally introduced in the fourth and fifth movements, when the *artiste* referred to in the title and the program transitions from the pleasant scenes earlier in the work and, in a drug-induced sleep, dreams of various horrors. While these two instruments of necessity provide the lowest voice of any grouping in which they are scored, virtually every occurrence is intended to be expressive, and Berlioz takes advantage of their unique characteristics. Serving a bass function, as they do for either brass or woodwind, does not negate their descriptive contributions to the work's program. In fact, Berlioz's own description of the ophicleide vindicates his use of the instrument for expressive purposes:

¹⁵ See Cone's textual notes regarding sources in Hector Berlioz, *Fantastic Symphony*, edited by Edward T. Cone (New York: W. W. Norton, Inc., 1971), 208-211.

¹⁶ In this paper, I will refer to Berlioz's original instrumentation, ophicleide and serpent, rather than the later-accepted two ophicleides as reflected in Cone's "authoritative score," *ibid.*

The sound of [its] low tones is rough; . . . Nothing is more clumsy—I could almost say, more monstrous—nothing less appropriate in combination with the rest of the orchestra than those more or less rapid passages played as solos in the medium range of the ophicleide in certain modern operas. They are like an escaped bull jumping around in a drawing-room.¹⁷

Bird's analysis reveals Berlioz's intentional usage of the ophicleide: in the *March au supplice* it plays 54% of the time (93 of 173 measures); of that 54% it functions as a bass voice 75.2%, and as a single bass voice 47.3%. It receives soloistic treatment 70.9% of the time. In the fifth movement, *Songe d'une nuit du sabbat*, there is less overlap of function, reflected in lower percentages for each of Bird's categories: it plays 33.5% of the time (176 of 524 measures); of that 33.5% it functions as a bass voice 47%, and as a single bass voice only 16.4%, indicating that it doubles other instruments. It receives soloistic treatment 52.2% of the time, but for much of that time, it is more exposed than in the fourth movement. The serpent's more limited usage (20.9%, or 110 of 524 measures) is reflected in its 79% soloistic treatment and 21.9% bass function.¹⁸

Two timpanists begin the *Marche au supplice* with an ominous rhythmic figure, in contrast to the distant-thunder chords that merely hint at the storm at the end of the previous movement, *Scène aux champs*. Stopped horns, contributing a newly sinister mood, confirm the change of tone; they are joined successively by bassoons, clarinet, and finally ophicleide (the serpent only appears for reinforcement at the end of the movement) and third trombone. Together they create a crescendo that shatters the

¹⁷ Hector Berlioz and Richard Strauss, *Treatise on Instrumentation*, translated by Theodore Front (New York: Dover Publications, 1991, and unabridged republication of the edition originally published by Edwin F. Kalmus, New York, 1948), 337.

¹⁸ Bird, 57-59.

preceding bucolic scene. Su Lian Tan considers the ophicleide in this crescendo to be a substitute for the second timpani, which cannot reinforce the chord with a note in the dominant.¹⁹ However, the ophicleide has a different rhythm, syncopated along with the rest of the woodwinds and brass, unlike the timpani rhythm which reinforces the beat in opposition to the syncopation. More significant is Tan's reminder that "The timbral quality of the ophicleide [on this pitch] is rough. . . . If clarity and power were what he wanted here, he certainly could have achieved that quite easily by putting their notes an octave higher."²⁰ Combine the rough timbre of the ophicleide's low range with the trombone scored only a third higher and also in its lower range, and Berlioz has created a murky, menacing bass interval to go with the stopped horns, other instruments scored low in their ranges, and timpani using uncommon sponge-covered sticks. Only after the climax in m. 17, when the cellos and basses enter with the primary descending theme, do we hear ordinary instrumental sounds. Even then, though, the bassoons overlay that melody with a contorted, straining line in their upper register. The ophicleide reappears as part of a demonic interjection in m. 40, again a third below the trombone though not as low in its range.

Throughout this movement the ophicleide serves an independent, unique function, apart from any definable descriptive intent. For the second theme, beginning in m. 62, the ophicleide alone serves a rhythmic, propulsive function, playing alternating Bb octaves that fill in the more separated timpani figures, under the brass and woodwind melodic statement (see Example 3).

¹⁹ Su Lian Tan, *Hector Berlioz, Symphonie Fantastique, Op. 14: An exploration of Musical Timbre* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1997), 62-63.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 63.

Example 3. *Symphonie fantastique* IV, *Marche au supplice* (mm. 60-71)²¹

96

60

F

Fl.

Hb.

Cl. (U)

Bns

(Sib)

Cors (avec les cylindres, tous les sons ouverts)

(Mib)

Tromp. (Sib)

C. à P. (Sib)

Tromb.

Oph. I solo

Timb.

Vas

Altos

Vlles

C.-B.

²¹ Hector Berlioz, *New Edition of the Complete Works, Volume 16, Symphonie fantastique*, edited by Nicholas Temperley (Kassel: Barenreiter, 2000).

66

Fl.

Ob.

Cl. (Ut)

Ins.

(Sik)

Cor.

(Mit)

Tromp. (Sik)

Cl. à P. (Sik)

Tromb.

II

mf

III

f

mf

ph.

I

mf

mf

Timb.

mf

mf

ns

ff

ff

ff

ff

ff

B.

ff

G

In m. 78, while the horns, cornets and trumpets have a descending fifth then rising a step, the ophicleide is the only instrument that outlines the descending tonic triad. After repeating earlier sections, the trombones, bassoons and ophicleide combine on the head motive of the first theme, sequentially distorting what began as the only standard, non-descriptive sounds in the march. The entire orchestra then inverts the first theme, initiating a frenzied drive in the strings with shrieks and howls in the rest of the orchestra, climaxing with the woodwinds and brass shouting together on sustained pitches of a Db major chord, while only the ophicleide, joined finally by the serpent, outline the complete triad (see Example 4). Apparently Berlioz had great faith in the two instruments' agility as well as their ability to balance the entire orchestra. Had he been writing this originally for tuba(s), Berlioz would not have worried about balance, but would have questioned their agility.²² This figure is much easier to play on a keyed instrument.

Because of the highly descriptive nature of the two final movements of *Symphonie fantastique*, the mere presence of an ophicleide and serpent, regardless of function—bass or soloistic, alone or doubling other instruments—is a sign of their expressive purpose. The first entrance of the ophicleide in the *Songe d'une nuit du sabbat* (m. 6) demonstrates this. It obviously serves a bass function, but after the diabolical opening with the muted strings tremolo followed by frantic scalewise passages under a shriek in the oboes, bassoons and clarinet in C, the ophicleide's descent dynamically and tonally to its low C under the clarinet, bassoons, horns and

²² Berlioz, *Treatise*, 339.

Example 4. *Symphonie fantastique*, IV, *Marche au supplice* (mm. 150-155)²³

110

23 Il n'y a pas de faute de copie ici; c'est bien l'accord de SOL NATUREL MINEUR qui frotte de très près l'accord de RÉ BÉMOL MAJEUR; l'auteur recommande aux violons et altos de ne pas corriger leurs parties en mettant des \flat aux RÉ quintes de l'accord de SOL. [HB]

²³ Hector Berlioz, *New Edition*.

trombones can only serve an expressive purpose for the listener. When the entire orchestra explodes on a unison Eb at the *Allegro assai* (m. 29), the ophicleide is necessarily right in the middle of the conflagration (tonally as well as figuratively—Berlioz scores it in its most powerful, high register).

In the approach to the *Dies irae*, Berlioz takes the listener out of the concert hall by introducing bells:

the first instruments in the piece without precedent. . . Here, for the first time, Berlioz uses an instrument that is decidedly not orchestral (and impractical), but whose realism is all-important. It is as if fences which surrounded wild animals, and which allowed people to observe them, had been removed. This is meant to be shocking, and especially when real bells, rather than chimes, are used.²⁴

The cathedral-like realism of the bells is enhanced, and their religious connotation confirmed when the ancient chant of the *Dies irae* is played by the serpent, along with four bassoons and ophicleide. The significance of the serpent's presence cannot have been lost on a contemporary French audience. Berlioz as well as most of his listeners would have been well-acquainted with the ecclesiastical use of the serpent. His description of the serpent in the *Treatise* validates his choice of instrument:

The truly barbaric tone of this instrument would be much better suited for the bloody cult of the Druids than for that of the Catholic church, where it is still in use—as a monstrous symbol for the lack of understanding and the coarseness of taste and feeling which have governed the application of music in our churches since times immemorial. Only one case is to be excepted: masses for the dead, where the serpent serves to double the dreadful choir of the *Dies Irae*. Here its cold and awful blaring is doubtless appropriate; it even seems to assume a character of mournful poetry when accompanying the text, imbued with all the horrors of death and the revenge of an irate God. The instrument might also be used in secular compositions based on similar ideas; but its use must be limited to this purpose only. Moreover, its tone blends poorly with the other timbres of

²⁴ Su Lian Tan, 78.

the orchestra and of voices. As the bass of a great mass of wind instruments it cannot match the bass tuba or even the ophicleide.²⁵

Sometime between the first performance in 1830 and publication in 1845, Berlioz decided to substitute a second ophicleide for the serpent; perhaps the reality that accomplished serpentists were rare²⁶ convinced him that another ophicleide would be a suitably rough-sounding substitute, or perhaps he discovered that despite the instrument's immediately recognizable symbolism to a French audience, it balanced the other instruments inadequately.

With three notable exceptions the ophicleide and serpent function as a bass voice to the trombones in the *Ronde du Sabbat* which follows the *Dies irae*; in each instance the ophicleide alone outlines a chord (mm. 399-403—see Example 5, 520-524 with bassoons) or fill spaces with scalewise figuration (serpent included, mm. 480-484) while the rest of the orchestra plays sustained-chord rhythmic figures. These instances, along with the similar situation in the *Marche au supplice* noted earlier, bear witness to Berlioz's confidence in the ophicleide and serpent to be able to balance an entire orchestra of 130 musicians creating music for horrific, diabolical scenes in a truly Romantic symphony.

Subsequent Orchestration Practice

While *Symphonie fantastique* is the only major orchestral work for which Berlioz originally scored for the serpent, virtually all include a part for ophicleide, sometimes

²⁵ Berlioz, *Treatise*, 348.

²⁶ In directions written into his autograph score, Berlioz directed that "if the church serpent plays out of tune, as most of them do, an ophicleide will be more suitable. See Hector Berlioz, *New Edition of the Complete Works*, Vol. 16: *Symphonie fantastique*, xv.

calling for as many as six (see Table 5).

Table 5. Berlioz's Works that include Ophicleide or Serpent

Year	Instrument	Work
1826	2 ophicleides	Overture to <i>Les Francs-juges</i>
1830	1 ophicleide, 1 serpent (published in 1845 for 2 ophicleides)	<i>Symphonie fantastique</i>
1831	1 ophicleide	<i>Grande Ouverture du Roi Lear</i>
1831-32	1 ophicleide	<i>Lélio</i>
1834	1 ophicleide	<i>Harold en Italie</i>
1834-37	1 ophicleide	<i>Benvenuto Cellini</i>
1837	6 ophicleides	<i>Grande mess des morts (Requiem)</i>
1839	1 ophicleide	Overture to <i>Waverly</i>
1839	1 ophicleide	<i>Roméo et Juliette</i>
1840	4 ophicleides	<i>Grande symphonie funébre et triomphale</i>
1844	1 ophicleide	<i>Ouverture du Corsaire</i>
1845-46	1 ophicleide, 1 tuba	<i>La Damnation de Faust</i>
1849	1 ophicleide, 1 tuba	<i>Te Deum</i>
1856-58	1 ophicleide	<i>Les Troyens</i>

Example 5. *Symphonie fantastique*, V, Dream of a Witches' Sabbath (mm. 397-405)²⁷

150

397

P. Fl.

Fl.

Hb.

P. Cl. (Mib)

Cl. (U)

Bns

(Mib)

Cors

(U)

Tromp. (Mib)

C. à P. (Sib)

Tromb.

Oph.

Timb. II

(bagues de bois recouvert en peau)

Vns

Altos

Vlies

C. B.

²⁷ Hector Berlioz, *New Edition*.

Berlioz's Delay in Sanctioning the Use of Tuba

Even after Berlioz had encountered the tuba on his German travels, he continued to write for ophicleide and insist on its use when available. In *La Damnation de Faust*, his first score to call for the tuba, and the *Te Deum*, the tuba and the ophicleide are scored in unison throughout, with occasional octave divisions.²⁸ Book assumes that, even with the new German tubas now available in Paris, as well as Adolph Sax's new bass instruments, Berlioz wrote specifically for the two instruments, desiring the effect of their combined sounds: "Omitting either instrument from works scored for both . . . , the resultant sonority will not be characteristic of that which Berlioz intended."²⁹ Even considering his attention to tone color, it is also likely that Berlioz was merely being pragmatic, not knowing, based on his German travels, what instrument would be available to play his music. As a matter of course, however, he normally did not approve of substitutions, except when the original was unavailable: "It is strange that a composer, however great he may be, should not be allowed to write for his orchestra as he chooses; and, especially, that he should not be free to abstain from the use of certain instruments whenever he sees fit to do so."³⁰ It was only when preparing a German publication of the *Symphonie fantastique* in the early 1850s that he allowed tubas to be substituted for the two ophicleides.

²⁸ Brian L. Book, *View of Berlioz on the Use of the Ophicleide and Tuba In His Orchestral Works* (Research Problem in Lieu of Thesis: North Texas State University, 1982), 13-14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁰ Quoted in Book, 25.

CHAPTER 5

WAGNER, RIENZI, AND *DER FLIEGENDE HOLLÄNDER*

An Unconventional Man Working With Conventions

All three composers considered in this study were strong-willed, self-actuated individuals; however, three more different individuals and the circumstances that produced them can hardly be imagined. Mendelssohn, with a precocious, phenomenal intellect, had available to him any walk of life that wealth and position could secure, yet dedicated himself from childhood to music, even as he pursued other interests. Berlioz, no less intelligent, but blessed with fewer resources and much less exposure (dare we say none?) to sophisticated art music and cultural experiences, chose from an unusually early age to become a composer, without understanding the cost or implications, struggling even in his established career against the adverse effects of a late start as well as the active opposition of his family. Wagner had cultural resources available, and the opportunity to pursue what he chose, but no strong direction or encouragement from his family; in fact, in face of the young boy's willfulness, one could describe his family's relationship as benign neglect,³¹ particularly after his step-father died, thus losing two fathers before he was even ten years old. Nevertheless he knew, also from an early age, that he must be a composer if he were to realize his dreams.

Born into a theater-inclined family, Richard Wagner (1813-1883) demonstrated

³¹ Joachim Köhler disagrees with other biographers that step-father Ludwig Geyer took an active interest in Richard's education, noting that "Wagner himself repeatedly insisted that from the very outset he was thrown back on his own resources", in *Richard Wagner, The Last of the Titans* (Yale University Press, 2004), 16.

his literary and dramatic leanings before any musical gifts were obvious.³² Both father figures in his life pursued theatrical interests. Friedrich Wagner, a police official in Leipzig who dabbled in amateur productions and was an occasional drinking companion of E. T. A. Hoffman,³³ died when Richard was six months old. His stepfather Ludwig Geyer, who stepped effortlessly into the role of father only nine months after Friedrich's death (raising still-unresolved issues of paternity), was a poet, painter and actor who tried to steer the young boy into a career as a painter. Two sisters trained as actresses, and another sister and a brother became opera singers.

Wagner seems to have demonstrated no significant musical talent early on, in spite of his exposure to Geyer's abilities as a singer for several of Carl Maria von Weber's productions in Dresden and the family's musical interests in general. Gutman relates that

When Weber, on meeting the nine-year-old Richard, politely asked him whether he wanted to be a musician, Frau Johanna [his mother] informed the great man that, though the lad was mad about *Der Freischütz*, she had noticed no indication of musical talent. He was the only one of her children not to be given regular music lessons . . .³⁴

Wagner's peripatetic approach to his educational pursuits is apparent in his approach to learning to play the piano. His sole purpose was to be able to play the overture to *Der Freischütz*, and he prevailed on "a younger fellow named Spiess" to play it for him "whenever we met". Shortly, his mother agreed to lessons and "When I had finally gotten far enough to play the *Freischütz* overture, if only haltingly, all by

³² Burnett James, *Wagner and the Romantic Disaster* (New York: Hippocrene Books, 1983), 13.

³³ Köhler, 7.

³⁴ Robert W. Gutman, *Richard Wagner: The Man, His Mind and His Music* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990, 1968), 8.

myself, I considered the purpose of my training fulfilled and saw no reason to devote further efforts to perfecting my piano-playing."³⁵ In spite of others' efforts, and being enrolled in several schools in succession, the young Wagner seems to have been in complete control of his educational experiences. When he was fourteen and staying with a school friend's family in order to attend the Kreuzschule in Dresden, he "deliberately left [that] family . . . and set up for himself in a tiny garret, subsisting on 'thin Saxon coffee' and a few other basic necessities, occupying his spare hours making translations from the Greek as well as trying his embryo hand at vast tragedies on the Shakespearean model."³⁶ After transferring to the Nicholaischule in Leipzig in 1828, where he lived with Adolph Wagner, Friedrich's brother, he announced at the age of fifteen that "his schooldays were over and that henceforth he would make his own way in the world, learning only what he wanted to learn."³⁷

During this educational free-for-all Wagner discovered Beethoven, whose music, as for Mendelssohn and Berlioz, became a significant influence. After having immersed himself in Greek tragedy and Shakespeare's dramas (another commonality with Mendelssohn and Berlioz), he finally felt the full force of Beethoven's music, particularly *Fidelio* and the Ninth Symphony. Such a confluence of artistic influences provoked in this headstrong adolescent the realization that, for his own dramas (which he had already been writing) to come alive, he must compose his own music for them. "It was entirely typical of Wagner," says Burnett James,

³⁵ Richard Wagner, *My Life*, translated by Andrew Gray, edited by Mary Whittall (New York: Da Capo Press, 1992, an unabridged republication of the edition published in Cambridge, England, in 1983), 29.

³⁶ Köhler, 19.

³⁷ James, 22.

that although he had no musical training and knew nothing of the techniques of composition, he none the less resolved to get down to the business of providing the necessary music for his plays without further delay; typical of his unquenchable tenacity of purpose and determination to ride roughshod over all difficulties and every obstacle. What had to be done, had to be done; there was never any alternative.³⁸

While the gift of hindsight does not diminish the appearance of naïve arrogance of such a position, we also recognize that Wagner's life vindicated his vision.

Accordingly, he tried to teach himself using Logier's *Méthode des Generalbasses*; he took lessons from a local composer and conductor, Müller, in harmony and counterpoint; and for a short while he took violin lessons. In spite of his own desires, Wagner's absence from school could not last; he soon entered the Thomasschule in Leipzig to prepare for the university. At the university he was admitted as a music student "of the second rank and with limited privileges,"³⁹ and began to study counterpoint with Theodore Weinlig, a relationship that lasted, if we are to believe Wagner's own testimony, for six months.

It is a mark of Wagner's genius and will that, once he determined a goal, he allowed nothing to deter his achievement of that goal. Ignorance, lack of skills, external barriers—everything was overcome, and every sacrifice was made to accomplish the object of his ambition. Even failure did not stand in his way. A performance of his Overture in Bb in Leipzig on Christmas Day 1830 turned out to be a fiasco; its poorly calculated bass drum beat, at "almost maniacally regular intervals . . . began by arousing the audience's curiosity, continued by causing it annoyance, and

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 25.

ended by unleashing its unbridled hilarity."⁴⁰ This embarrassment, for a man "who never, throughout his life, took kindly to being ridiculed,"⁴¹ surely proved to be an object lesson in instrumentation. We may assume that, in spite of the absence of any record on the subject, he dedicated the same energy to learning the necessary craft of orchestration, including, when it became available, Berlioz's *Treatise on Instrumentation*, which he "is known to have studied in detail."⁴² Based on his composition lessons which culminated with Weinlig, it is not hard to imagine that Wagner would seek out the person or persons from whom he could learn the best information on instrumental usage.

In spite of the obsessive abundance of Wagner's writings, and on an unending myriad of subjects, it is surprising that he wrote almost nothing about the art of instrumentation. Dahlhaus observed ironically that "however often he may have spoken of drama as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*—a 'total artwork' or a synthesis of all the arts . . . he was correspondingly sparing with specific statements on the subject of music."⁴³ Understanding his approach to orchestration is a more complex, challenging task than with Mendelssohn and Berlioz. It is, however, possible to glean some concepts from his dense and voluminous writings.

Wagner combines in himself the dual role of poet and musician as he created his music dramas. Poet and musician have, though, separate responsibilities: they are like two travelers who have started from one departure point, from thence to journey straight ahead in the opposite directions. Arrived at the opposite point

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴² Köhler, 129.

⁴³ John Deathridge and Carl Dahlhaus, *The New Grove Wagner* (New York: Norton, 1980, 1984), 82.

of the earth, they meet again; each has wandered round one half the planet. They fall a-questioning one another, and each tells each what he has seen and found. The poet describes the plains, the mountains, valleys, fields, the men and beasts which he has met upon his distant journey through the mainland. The musician has voyaged across the seas, and recounts the wonders of the ocean: on its breast he has often been nigh to sinking, and its deeps and strange-shaped monsters have filled him half with terror, half with joy.⁴⁴

As he explains this metaphor (a technique he often used when his convoluted reasoning proved inadequate) we learn that the poet, whose realm is words, has the responsibility for any descriptive specifics, while the musician, dealing with the sounds of the orchestra, expresses the inner essence, the feelings and emotions aroused by the poet's particulars. Thus, when he functions as musician (composer), Wagner marshals the individual components, or instruments, of the orchestra to express the conditions, sensations, and impressions stimulated by the poet's story. "For Wagner," notes Köhler, "music always expressed ideas that went beyond the world of actual sound."⁴⁵ Words were actually necessary to make the music's meaning clear. Discussing operatic music in 1834, Wagner wrote that "the essence of dramatic art is certainly not based on particular subjects or points of view but on whether it succeeds in grasping and representing the inner essence of all human action and life: in other words, the Idea."⁴⁶

By intention, then, Wagner uses the orchestra as a Romantic, to express feelings, and emotions; in effect, though, he treats the orchestra as did his Classical forebears, as a matter of balance and symmetry, even when he wrote for specific tone

⁴⁴ Richard Wagner, *Wagner on Music and Drama, a compendium of Richard Wagner's prose works*, selected and arranged, and with an introduction, by Albert Goldman and Evert Sprinchorn, translated by H. Ashton Ellis (New York: Da Capo Press, 1981, an unabridged republication of the first edition published in New York by E. P. Dutton, 1964), 215.

⁴⁵ Köhler, 92.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Köhler, 74.

colors. Seldom did Wagner use individual instruments for a particular and repeatable purpose, especially in his early career when he included parts for the serpent and/or ophicleide, as in the early operas *Rienzi* and *Der fliegende Holländer*. In spite of his reputation as a master of the orchestra, and even considering the massive volume of literature on the man, major work still remains to be done on Wagner the orchestrator.

Rienzi, In the Mode of a Grand Opera

Wagner's early operas were based on the models he imitated and then rejected until he found his own voice: *Die Feen* (1834) in the style of the early Romantic German opera of E. T. A. Hoffman, Weber, and Marschner; *Das Liebesverbot* (1836) showing the Italian opera influences of Bellini, Donizetti and Auber;⁴⁷ and *Rienzi* (1840), a French grand opera "modeled less on Meyerbeer than on Spontini,"⁴⁸ who assisted in getting it accepted for performance in Dresden. After the premiere lasted over six hours, it was subsequently presented in two forms: split over two evenings, and in one evening with Wagner's own cuts. Wagner intended that it "should outdo all previous examples with sumptuous extravagance."⁴⁹ "Generously endowed with marches, processions and ballets," it was "deliberately planned so that it could not be given in a small theatre."⁵⁰ It proved to be quite popular in its time, "catching as it did

⁴⁷ Carl Dahlhaus, *Richard Wagner's Music Dramas*, translated by Mary Whittall (Cambridge University Press, 1979), 2-3.

⁴⁸ Dahlhaus in Deathridge and Dahlhaus, 130.

⁴⁹ Quoted in Barry Millington, "Rienzi, der Letzte der Tribunen," *Wagner and His Operas*, edited by Stanley Sadie (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 41.

⁵⁰ Millington, 43.

the rebellious spirit of the times."⁵¹ Today, the overture is performed more often than the entire opera.

There is very little that is remarkable about the scoring for serpent and ophicleide in *Rienzi*. Their score positions identify their basic function: the serpent, on a line below the bassoons, primarily functions as a third bassoon, also reinforcing the low strings; the ophicleide is written below the three trombones and generally functions with the brass. Neither instrument strays far from a bass role; when they do play a solo line it is usually in combination with other instruments, or in one case, as the first in a succession of entrances—never do they receive independent solo treatment. Considering the overture alone, Bird calculates that in its 60.8% of use (248 of 408 measures), the serpent serves a bass function 93.5% of the time and receives soloistic treatment 7.6%, but never as a single bass voice. The ophicleide's usage is similar: of 55.3% of use (226 of 408 measures), the ophicleide serves a bass function 96.9% of the time, with 3.9% soloistic treatment; 1.3% of its use is as a single bass voice, certainly a negligible amount.⁵² David Kuehn's more extensive analysis confirms the above conclusions, indicating that this type of scoring for serpent and ophicleide is typical of orchestral writing at the time.⁵³

⁵¹ Millington, 42.

⁵² Bird, 82-83.

⁵³ David Kuehn, *The Use of the Tuba in the Operas and Music Dramas of Richard Wagner* (D.M.A. Dissertation, University of Rochester, 1974), 18-30.

Der fliegende Holländer: Wagner Finds His Sea Legs

In a letter to Robert Schumann in 1843, Wagner wrote,

I yesterday achieved a triumphant success with my opera, *The Flying Dutchman* [which had just premiered] of which I am prouder than of the success of *Rienzi*, because in this new opera I strike out a way markedly different from anything to which the public is at present accustomed.⁵⁴

Conceived and partially written before *Rienzi* was even finished, *Der fliegende Holländer* does indeed mark a turning point; no longer imitative, this was his first attempt to “[unite] music so completely with the drama’s action, that this very marriage enables the action itself to gain that ideal freedom.”⁵⁵ From the very first notes of the overtures (and the overture is arguably the most significant part of *Rienzi*) it is obvious that Wagner has matured. There is a greater sense of musical continuity throughout; instead of a “number opera,” Dahlhaus coins for it the term “‘scene opera,’ [a] process of drawing separate arias, duets, ensembles and choruses together in complexes, instead of having them succeed one another as separate items.”⁵⁶ Wagner is able now to deal effectively with the characters’ inner lives, an aspect that was singularly lacking in *Rienzi* and the earlier operas. If his early operas could be termed “an embarrassment to Wagner enthusiasts” in spite of being “well-made,”⁵⁷ *Holländer* is the first that represents his more mature style that continues to develop through each successive music drama.

Holländer is the last opera for which Wagner specified the opficleide. It is

⁵⁴ Quoted in Alan David Aberbach, *The Ideas of Richard Wagner*, 2nd edition (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003; 1st edition 1984), 347.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Aberbach, 342.

⁵⁶ Dahlhaus, *Wagner’s Music Dramas*, 13.

⁵⁷ Dahlhaus, in Deathridge and Dahlhaus, 129.

positioned below the trombones, and most often provides a bass or unison/octave double with them, though it is not uncommon for it to also be linked in the same way with the bassoons and the low strings. While the overall impression from the entire score is that the ophicleide is used more sparingly than in *Rienzi*, Bird's usage calculations for the overture only show the difference is minimal: it plays 52% of the time, compared to 60.8% and 55.3% for the serpent and ophicleide respectively in *Rienzi*. While its bass function remains as high as in *Rienzi* (92.6%), it receives soloistic treatment 25.6% of the time (even as it serves a soloistic role, it is also functioning as a bass voice to other instruments), but comparably low percentage of use as a single bass voice (1.9% versus 0% and 1.3% in *Rienzi*).⁵⁸

While in *Rienzi* the serpent and ophicleide serve a generic bass role uncorrelated to the text or dramatic action, in *Der fliegende Holländer* the ophicleide is present at significant points in the action, and can often be said to fulfill an expressive role. This observation is not limited to the ophicleide; on the whole, the orchestral writing is much more colorful, and instruments appear to be chosen for reasons of timbre. The ophicleide is present whenever the trombones play the Dutchman motive in the overture (Example 6), in the opera when the Dutchman's ship first appears (Act 1, scene 1), and in the finale, at the transfiguration of the Dutchman and Senta (Act 3, scene 8.C).

⁵⁸ Bird, 89.

Example 6. *Der fliegende Holländer*, Overture (mm. 8-13)⁵⁹

The musical score is arranged in two systems. The first system includes:

- k1 Fl
- Fl 1,2
- Ob 1,2
- Klar (B) 1,2
- Fag 1,2
- Vent - Hr (F) 1,2
- Nat - Hr (D) 1,2
- Vent - Trp (F) 1,2
- Pos 1,2
- Pos 3
- Oph
- Pk

The second system includes:

- Viol I
- Viol II
- Br
- Vc
- Kb

Key markings and dynamics include:

- Measure 10: *più f* (for Flute 2, Oboe 2, Clarinet (B) 2, Bassoon 2, Horns (F), Horns (D), Trumpets (F), Trombones (3), Ophicleide, Percussion, Violins I and II, Brass, Violoncello, and Kontrabaß).
- Measure 11: *più f* (for Flute 2, Oboe 2, Clarinet (B) 2, Bassoon 2, Horns (F), Horns (D), Trumpets (F), Trombones (3), Ophicleide, Percussion, Violins I and II, Brass, Violoncello, and Kontrabaß).
- Measure 12: *più f marcato* (for Trombones (3), Ophicleide, Percussion, Violins I and II, Brass, Violoncello, and Kontrabaß).
- Measure 13: *ff* (for Flute 1, Flute 2, Oboe 2, Clarinet (B) 2, Bassoon 2, Horns (F), Horns (D), Trumpets (F), Trombones (3), Ophicleide, Percussion, Violins I and II, Brass, Violoncello, and Kontrabaß).

⁵⁹ Richard Wagner, *Sämtliche Werke*, Band 4, I, *Der fliegende Holländer* (Urfassung 1841), (Mainz, B. Schott's Söhne: 1983).

Two exceptions of ophicleide/trombone pairing on this theme occur, when Senta tells the story of the Dutchman (Act 2, scene 4), and after the Norwegian sailors and the chorus of maidens try to rouse the sailors on the Dutchman's silent ship and the Dutchman appears (Act 3, scene 7). Shortly after, when the Dutchman's ship begins to rouse, preparing for its ghostly departure, the trombones alone present the theme individually and sequentially, weaving the Dutchman's theme into the dance that began the scene and the ophicleide is given its own fragment of the theme (Act 3, scene 7, pp. 563-574). After the stormy arrival of the Dutchman's ship in Scene 1, and Daland and his sailors have calmed their own vessel and nerves, Daland sends his sailors below to rest; the ophicleide, bassoons and contrabasses are then given an unsettling ascending diminished seventh chord, telegraphing that all is not yet truly calm—the mysterious dark ship is still anchored within sight. The most colorful use of the ophicleide occurs in Scene 2, when the Dutchman steps onto land and sings his first aria. Along with pizzicato contrabasses the ophicleide and bassoons play long quarter-note downbeats that anchor a sinuous viola and cello line, amusingly descriptive of the Dutchman's first unsteady steps after having been so long on board ship. The ophicleide is even included with the violas, cellos and bassoons who introduce the first phrase of the Dutchman's recitative (Example 7). At the end of the recitative, as if encapsulating the Dutchman's reaction to his fate of eternal wandering, the ophicleide doubles the cello tremolo and contrabasses with a forlorn melodic phrase (Example 8).

Example 7. *Der fliegende Holländer*, Act 1 Scene 2, The Dutchman's Recitative (mm. 1-14)⁶⁰

Nr. 2. Arie

Sostenuto 5

Kleine Flöte

Flöten I,2

Oboen I,2

Klarinetten (B) I,2

Fagotte I,2

Ventilhörner (F) I,2

Naturhörner (C) I,2

Ventiltrompeten (F) I,2

Posaunen I,2 3

Ophikleide

Pauken (C,G)

HOLLÄNDER

Violinen I II

Bratschen

Violoncelli

Kontrabässe

pizz p

Bogen p

(Nat - Trp in D)

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

Rezitativ lento a tempo Rezitativ a tempo

Fag 1,2

Oph

HOLLÄNDER

Die Frist ist um,... und a-ber-mals ver-stri-chen sind sie-ben Jahr... Voll

Br

Vc

Kb

pizz

più moto Rezitativ

Ob 1,2

Klar (B) 1,2

Fag 1,2

Vent- Hr (F) 1,2

Nat- Hr (C) 1,2

1,2

Pos

3

Oph

HOLLÄNDER

Ü-ber-druß wirft mich das Meer ans Land... Ha!_ Stol-zer O-ze-an! In kur-zer Frist sollst du mich wie-der

Viol I

Viol II

Br

Vc, Kb

Bogen cresc

f

tremolo

tremolo

f

Example 8. *Der fliegende Holländer*, Act 1 Scene 2 (the end of the Dutchman's recitative, mm 175-180)⁶¹

The image displays a page of a musical score for the opera *Der fliegende Holländer*, Act 1 Scene 2, covering measures 170 to 175. The score is arranged in two systems. The first system includes staves for Kl F1, Fl 1, 2, Ob 1, 2, Klar (B) 1, 2, Fag 1, 2, Vent-Hr (F) 1, 2, Nat-Hr (C) 1, 2, Vent-Trp (F) 1, 2, Pos 1, 2, 3, Oph, and Pk. The second system includes staves for Viol I, Viol II, Br, Vc, and Kb. The music is in a minor key and 3/4 time. The Dutchman's recitative is indicated by a 'v' (vocal) marking. The score features various dynamics such as *ff*, *pp*, *dim*, and *piu p*. There are also performance instructions like *tremolo* and *p*. The measures are numbered 170 and 175 at the top of the page.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

The image shows a musical score for Wagner's 'Molto passionato' (180). The score is divided into two systems. The first system includes woodwinds: Klar (B) 1,2; Fag 1,2; Vent.-Hr (F) 1,2; Nat.-Hr (C) 1,2; Oph; and Pk. The second system includes strings: Viol I and II; Br; Vc; and Kb. The tempo is 'Molto passionato' (180). The key signature has two flats. The score features dynamic markings such as *p*, *cresc.*, *pp*, and *più p*. The woodwinds and strings play a melodic line that rises and then falls, with the ophicleide and trombone parts being particularly prominent.

The most obvious instance that Wagner was writing for a tone color different from the modern-day tuba comes at the Dutchman's response to Daland's initial challenge (Example 9); the lighter, reedier quality of the ophicleide would match the trombone sound closer than the resonant, fundamental-rich sound of the tuba, and would be more expressive of the Dutchman's despondence.

Just as Mendelssohn and Berlioz did, Wagner obviously expected the ophicleide to be able to balance the entire orchestra, and occasionally gave it a melodic statement—either outlining a chord or playing a scalewise line--while the entire orchestra sustains. For instance, when Daland's sailors are trying to rouse the Dutchman's sailors in Act 3, scene 7, the ophicleide adds its color and articulative punch to the low strings, first outlining an Ab major chord, then transforming it to minor, followed by a third chord, this time diminished (Example 10).

Example 9. *Der fliegende Holländer*, Act 1 Scene 3 (Daland's greeting/challenge of the Dutchman, mm. 47-55)⁶²

The musical score for Example 9 is a page from a score for Wagner's *Der fliegende Holländer*, Act 1 Scene 3. It covers measures 47 to 55. The tempo is marked "Lento". The score includes parts for:
 - Nat-Hr (C) 1,2
 - Pos 1,2 and 3
 - Oph
 - HOLLÄNDER (Dutchman)
 - DONALD (Daland)
 - Viol I and II
 - Br (Trumpet)
 - Vc (Violoncello)
 - Kb (Kontrabaß)
 The Dutchman's part includes the instruction "(Langes Stillschweigen.)" and "(ohne seine Stellung zu verlassen)". Daland's part includes the lyrics "Nen-ne dich! Wes Lan-des?" and "Weitkomm'ich her... Ver-wehrt bei". The score features a rehearsal mark "2" at the bottom.

While Wagner's opicleide scoring shows less independence than that of Mendelssohn and Berlioz, when he chooses to use it, its presence does add value, whether expressive or timbral, to the context. Unlike Mendelssohn and Berlioz, though, its use elaborates on the inner lives of the characters or expresses dramatic truth, rather than being descriptive of events or subjects. It is no less "Romantic" for all that, even as Wagner develops his own musical language.

⁶² *Ibid.*

Example 10. *Der fliegende Holländer*, Act 3 Scene 7 (mm. 413-424)⁶³

415

kl Fl
 Fl 1,2
 Ob 1,2
 Klar (C) 1,2
 Fag 1,2
 Vent - Hr (F) 1,2
 Nat - Hr (C) 1,2
 Pos 1,2
 3
 Oph
 Pk
 STEUERMANN
 CHOR DER SCHOTTISCHEN MATROSEN
 ho!
 Lieb Nach-barn, habt ihr Stimm' und Sprach',
 Lieb Nach-barn, habt ihr Stimm' und Sprach',
 415

⁶³ *Ibid.*

420

kl Fl
 Fl 1,2
 Ob 1,2
 Klar (C) 1,2
 Fag 1,2
 Vent - Hr (F) 1,2
 Nat - Hr (C) 1,2
 Vent - Trp (E) 1,2
 1,2
 Pos 3
 Oph
 Pk

(Von hier an beginnt es sich auf dem holländischen Schiffe zu regen.)

CHOR DER SCHOTTISCHEN MATROSEN
 so wa - chet auf und macht's uns nach! Wa - chet auf! Wa - chet
 so wa - chet auf und macht's uns nach! Wa - chet auf! Wa - chet

1
 Viol II
 Br
 Vc, Kb

420

tremolo
 meno f
 tremolo
 meno f
 tremolo
 meno f
 meno f

25

A Rapid Conversion to the Tuba

Even before Wagner arrived in Dresden in 1842 to prepare for rehearsals for the premiere of *Rienzi*, the tuba, which had been invented in Berlin in 1835, was making its

presence felt throughout Germany. In 1840 there was apparently one in Berlin, where Spontini was director of the Opera,⁶⁴ and a tuba may in fact have been used in *Rienzi* in Dresden. Wagner recounts that Spontini, after hearing a performance, said "I have heard in your *Rienzi* an instrument that you call 'Bass-tuba': I should not wish to ban this instrument from the orchestra: write me a part for it in *La Vestale*." Wagner says he

was delighted to carry out his wish, with moderation and discretion. When he heard the effect for the first time, at rehearsal, he threw me a truly tender glance of thanks, and the impression made on him by this not very difficult enrichment of his score was so lasting that he sent me afterwards a most friendly letter from Paris, begging me to forward him a copy of this instrumental addition. . . .⁶⁵

A tuba was in Dresden by 1844, and Bevan speculates that one could have been in use in Dresden as early as *Rienzi's* premiere.⁶⁶ Berlioz's experiences on his first tour of Germany in 1842-1843 seems to confirm Bevan's speculations: he was frustrated by the dearth of ophicleides but intrigued by the new tubas he found in Dresden and Brunswick; from Berlin he writes that "the bass tuba . . . has completely dislodged the ophicleide in Prussia, if indeed the latter was ever prevalent there, which I doubt."⁶⁷

Der fliegende Holländer marks the last time Wagner called for either ophicleide or serpent. If Bevan's speculation regarding *Rienzi* has any merit, then it is even more likely that *Holländer* was first performed on tuba, rather than ophicleide. *Eine Faust-Ouvertüre* (1840) is often credited as being the first work in which he scored for the

⁶⁴ Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, 2nd edition, 305.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 305.

⁶⁶ "It is likely that the ophicleide part was played on a valved instrument since there was a Bass-Tuba or valved ophicleide there by 1844." *Ibid.*, 304.

⁶⁷ Quoted in Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, 2nd edition, 209.

tuba. However, as it was written for a performance in Paris, ophicleide was more likely intended, and the famous opening, which has a solo tuba doubling the contrabasses, “was probably added during revision of the orchestration prior to 1855.”⁶⁸ After *Faust*, Wagner wrote for bass tuba or contrabass tuba exclusively.

Wagner’s Instrumental Innovations

Over time Wagner became convinced that the tuba did not provide a satisfactory bass to the trombones, preferring, as in the *Ring*, to have “3 Bb-F trombones, [and] 1 contrabass trombone which alternates with the ordinary bass trombone as appropriate.”⁶⁹ He considered the tuba more appropriately linked to the likewise-conical horn family, for which he had instruments built to bridge the compass between horn and contrabass tuba, known today as Wagner Tuben, which are actually members of the horn family. Several instrument makers had already experimented with this idea, notably Cervený, Sax, Mahillon and Distin. Jonathan Burton notes that, in spite of Wagner’s name attached to these instruments, “Wagner was exploratory but hardly revolutionary. He had been impressed by Adolphe Sax’s instruments—presumably saxhorns—which he had seen in Paris in 1853, and it was only when he was unable to procure either these or a suitable substitute that he ‘invented’ the new instruments.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 306.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 497-498. Also see Jonathan Burton, “Orchestration,” *The Wagner Compendium, a guide to Wagner’s life and music*, ed. Barry Millington (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992), 345.

⁷⁰ Burton, 343.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

An Historical Perspective

Additional investigation into Mendelssohn's and Berlioz's subsequent scoring for serpent and ophicleide would likely reveal that both composers, like Wagner, began to include these instruments for their bass-voice qualities, more than for their descriptive personalities. It is clear, though, from the historical narrative as well as from a consideration of the music that both Mendelssohn and Berlioz, in their first significant orchestral works, wrote for these instruments with expressive intent, based on their unique timbre and on their extra-musical associations. Whatever their subsequent usage, the introduction of the serpent and ophicleide into the orchestral pantheon was based on the new Romantic qualities of expressiveness, individuality and subjectivity.

A Performance Perspective

Investigating a composer's expectations, as this paper does, inevitably leads to issues of performance practice. As we confront the historical issues, we must ask ourselves if it is possible to recreate the conditions present when the composer wrote the work, and at the same time we must ask if it is even desirable. Often, performing on original instruments in today's ensembles is not an issue. Even if a serpent, English bass horn and ophicleide were available, would all the other instruments in the orchestra likewise be faithful to the period of first performance? Is the first performance to be emulated faithfully, or should we consider later contexts after the

composer has had a chance to adjust and fine-tune his score? What about the acoustical environment of the first performance? These questions and more have occupied performers and musicologists for many years.

In most contexts, these questions are resolved for us, before the first rehearsal: we are expected to perform on modern instruments. As thoughtful performers, though, part of our preparation should involve a consideration of historical issues and the acoustical issues inevitably raised by such consideration. For instance, does the tonal quality of the modern instrument differ from the original? Is it, then, important to try to recreate the composer's original timbral concept, within the confines of a modern context?

In the case of the four works considered in this study, I believe we should answer in the affirmative. Mendelssohn and Berlioz, as we have seen, chose their instruments precisely because of the allusions they offered, for very specific descriptive purposes directly related to their timbre. Wagner, while adopting a pre-existing orchestra that did not necessarily—or even often—treat the serpent and/or ophicleide expressively, nevertheless wrote for them (at least in *Der fliegende Holländer*) with an expressive intent, if not necessarily for their particular timbre. Careful choice of instrument will allow the modern-day performer to tailor his/her approach more closely to the composers' original conception. For Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, Julian Rushton has suggested the euphonium might be a better choice than the “post-Wagnerian” large-bore tuba:

The ophicleide is a noble instrument, but it would be foolish to take it into a modern orchestra with modern trombones; the blend, or lack of it, would be

quite wrong. But there is no need to replace it with the huge BBb tuba, whose bore, weight, and timbre are post-Wagnerian. The tenor, or euphonium, just because it would not be using its ideal register, is a better modern approximation.¹

Mitigating against this notion is Rushton's own reminder that "when we listen to a Berlioz *tutti* today, we nearly always hear qualities of sound unknown to him,"² particularly in the brass, because of the development of valves that allowed makers to create instruments of greater power and new colors, not to mention better intonation characteristics.³ While the euphonium, in its less-than-ideal range, might contribute a more accurate timbre, it might also offer challenges of its own, particularly in balancing the rest of the brass. John Eliot Gardiner's 1991 recording with the Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique,⁴ which recreated, as far as possible, the original concert in the original performance space, and uses ophicleide and serpent provides a model that should be considered when planning a current performance. This recording reminds us that the ophicleide/serpent combination still has a great deal of resonance of tone that euphoniums might not be able to provide in some excerpts, particularly in the fifth movement. The sound is still lighter, perhaps closer to a smaller-bore bass tuba. It is conceivable that a euphonium could be appropriate in the *Marche au supplice*. Whatever is chosen to replace the ophicleide and serpent, the performers must take care not to overpower the bassoons in the *Dies Irae*, and still provide the

¹ Julian Rushton, *The Musical Language of Berlioz* (Cambridge University Press, 1983), 89.

² *Ibid.*

³ Clifford Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, 2nd edition (Winchester, England: Piccolo Press, 2000), 142. The ophicleide's "widely conical bore provides virtually no more resistance," once the air passes through the leadpipe crook; this factor "thus confers less control over pitch than the tuba."

⁴ Hector Berlioz, *Symphonie fantastique*, Orchestre Révolutionnaire et Romantique, conducted by John Eliot Gardiner, Philips 434 402-2.

rough, sinister timbre of the original instruments. For *Symphonie fantastique* a bass tuba would, however, be a more acceptable choice than Rushton's feared post-Wagnerian BBb (contrabass) tuba.

Euphonium might be a more acceptable choice for Mendelssohn's *Midsummer Night's Dream Overture*, where the range requirements, comfortable for English bass horn and ophicleide, are extreme for even the bass tuba in F. An excellent recording of the Overture that demonstrates the ophicleide's contribution along with other period instruments is by the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century, conducted by Frans Brüggen, with Stephen Wick on ophicleide.⁵ While, as Bevan rather testily reminds us, the ophicleide is still not the original instrument Mendelssohn wrote for, it was at least sanctioned by the composer in published parts, though still "not a satisfactory substitute for bass horn."⁶ Even the power of the rest of the orchestra occasionally tends to overpower the ophicleide, though there are places where its unique timbre does come through. One can imagine the euphonium in the range written providing a similar color.

When Wagner finally forsook the models he successively emulated and tried to surpass, his orchestral writing became more colorful and expressive. Finally, in *Der fliegende Holländer* Wagner begins to assert his own personality. Dahlhaus observes that the music "[no longer] illustrate[s] the text and the stage action so much as the

⁵ Felix Mendelssohn, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century, conducted by Frans Brüggen, Glossa GCD 921101.

⁶ Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, 2nd edition, 485-486. "It is ironic that in the 1970's some conductors and orchestras, under the impression that they were giving historically-informed performances, began to use ophicleide rather than tuba. They were in fact ignoring Mendelssohn's express wish for a particular sound: though preferable to the tuba, the ophicleide is not a satisfactory substitute for bass horn."

text and the stage action illustrate the music.”⁷ In contrast to Mendelssohn and Berlioz, As Wagner develops the inner lives of his subjects and attempts to express certain absolute truths, the purpose of his instrumental choices is to facilitate such interiority, rather than to suggest external subjects. The primary issue for Wagner performances is one of balance and not, as we have seen in Chapter 5, of timbre.

Unlike the two other composers, Wagner was able to develop his orchestrational skills even as the instruments continued to evolve. Hence, we have, embedded in his scores, his best thoughts on the marshalling of instrumental forces. Even the early scores such as *Rienzi* and *Der fliegende Holländer* benefit from understanding Wagner’s subsequent development. His writing for these operas is not much different from the tuba part in *Die Meistersinger*, for instance. Any perceived performance problems in Wagner’s work are perhaps best addressed by his own words in response to a complaint by “the excellent harpist”⁸ August Tombo that the part in *Das Rheingold* was unplayable, “You cannot expect me to be able to play the harp; you see what effects I want to achieve; now arrange your part as you like.”⁹

⁷ Carl Dahlhaus, “Wagner’s Place in the History of Music,” *Wagner Handbook*, edited by Ulrich Müller and Peter Wapnewski, Translation edited by John Deatheridge (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 103.

⁸ Richard Strauss referred to Tombo in this way, quoted in Jonathan Burton, “Orchestration,” *The Wagner Compendium, a guide to Wagner’s life and music*, ed. Barry Millington (New York: Schirmer Books, 1992), 337.

⁹ *Ibid.*

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