

# Serpent Newsletter

P.O. Box 954 Mundelein, Illinois 60060 USA

Newsletter for Serpent Enthusiasts

September 27, 2014

## A Note from the Editor

For this edition of the newsletter, I briefly considered changing the masthead to read *Ophicleide Newsletter* .....never has such a large percentage of the content of an edition had so little about the serpent and so much about its progeny. Well, let the underdog have its day, says I. Plus, not much on serpents has happened in the last half a year.

This edition also has some articles that are much longer than usual for these pages. I feel some difficulty over this, since the publication is after all a newsletter and not a magazine or journal. But as there are no other equivalent larger publications devoted to our favorite instruments, I decided that I would print what needed to be said to give sufficient coverage.

In this edition I am starting to utilize some of the great library of images that I downloaded from the website of Will Kimball, professor of trombone at Brigham Young University. He has done a great job collecting old serpent and ophicleide images, all public domain of course, and they may be viewed by searching for *Serpent & Ophicleide: History and Images*, or by going directly to the URL which is <http://kimballtrombone.com/2010/ophicleide-history-and-images>. All historical images in this particular edition of the newsletter came from his website gallery.

With larger newsletters due to all the content about serpents and ophicleides that keeps appearing, and increasing postage costs, the newsletter coffers are being stretched, and until I get a copy of this issue in my hands to weigh, I don't know how depleted the funds will be. We need to have more donations to the cause, above the recommended minimums, in order to keep afloat. So this is an open solicitation for donations. If you value this newsletter, please consider making a donation, and if you simply have not renewed your subscription by making a minimum donation recently, please consider doing that soon.

Paul Schmidt

## Workshops

- Nigel Nathan and Thelma Griffiths will host the 2015 Serpentarium at Boswedden House in Cape Cornwall, the same location as the 2011 event. This is the eleventh happening of the biennial event, and is open to those who are interested in the serpent and related instruments: players, makers, restorers and collectors. There will be coaching sessions and ensemble playing, breaks for hiking and enjoying rugged coastal countryside, and overall the aim is to stimulate enthusiasm for the instrument whilst having fun. The date will be over the Spring Bank Holiday weekend, which is the same as the Memorial Day weekend in the States, i.e. Friday the 22nd through Monday the 25th of May. Phil Humphries will be facilitating, as usual, and the costs are expected to be £275 per person for the three days, room and board included. Non-combatants (non-playing friends or family members) will be given a slight break in cost, £225. Boswedden House's website is undergoing revision, so at this time there is no information there regarding the event. Interested persons must contact Nigel by email, phone or mail using the information provided in this newsletter in the *About the Organization* section.

The next Serpentarium in 2017 will be back at Carlops, near Edinburgh in Scotland, hosted by Murray and Patsy Campbell.

- There was an ophicleide presence at this year's Vintage Band Festival in Northfield, Minnesota. An article on this can be found in this newsletter in the *Where Serpents Gather* section.

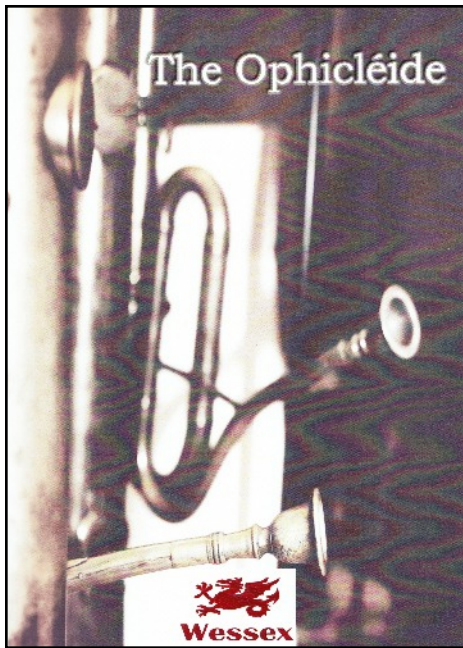
## New Materials

- *The Ophicleide*, by Tony George, 2014. Published by Wessex Tubas. Obtained from Wessex, [www.wessex-tubas.com](http://www.wessex-tubas.com).

Tony George has provided a useful new book intended to introduce new players to the ophicleide. While primarily

intended to accompany the ophicleides being sold by Wessex Tubas (see separate article in this newsletter), it is also available for sale separately.

The book is wire-bound (similar to wire spiral binding), has thick clear plastic covers, and a fairly heavy paper weight for the internal 60 pages. The first few pages provide a set of easy exercises to help the players become familiar with the ophicleide that they are only holding for the first time. These exercises are provided twice, in keys optimized for the C and the B-flat ophicleides. Next are more advanced exercises taken from 19th century tutor books (including those by Blanchetreau, Caussin, Cornette, Franck, Garnier, Guilbaut, Schultz and Volberon), and there are also duets. Tony has advised this newsletter that he has completed the recording process for a set of companion accompaniments for these duets, where he plays one part and the student plays the other part. These recordings are expected to be linked from the Wessex website. The music in the book concludes with a few extracts from the ophicleide's solo repertoire.



Tony has set all music on computer, as opposed to simply using the often hard-to-read facsimiles of the original method books. In addition to the sheet music, Tony has included a page on the ophicleide mouthpiece, a page of condensed history of the instrument, two fingering charts for instruments in C and B-flat, and his one-page author's biography.

Some of the named selections in the book include six *petits airs* from Franck's method book, five *duets* by Cornette, *Duo 6* from *10 Duos pour deux ophicleïdes* by Hartman, *Richard Coeur De Lion* by Gretry, Bellini's *Motif De Stranieri*, Donizetti's *L'Elisire d'Amore*, the *Polonaise* from *Introduction and Polonaise* by Demerresman, Handel's *Happy We*, and the *Fantasia on Atilla* that Arthus Phasey wrote for ophicleide virtuoso Sam Hughes, and many other

selections. Some of the orchestral excerpts included in the book are from *Elijah*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *King Lear*, the *Cavatine De Pasquerello* from the opera *Benvenuto Cellini*, and the well-known parts from *Symphonie Fantastique*, as well as others. Tony peppers the selections with little bits of advice, well-earned wisdom (e.g. "remember that the low range is often a little sharp", and "try altering the pitch [on this piece] down to A-435...you'll find that the instrument feels and responds quite differently and some of the fingerings won't work quite as well"), and insight into the music and how to approach it.

This is a nicely done and very useful introduction and tutor book for the ophicleide, and should be a good addition to your existing collection of method books.

- Chris Gutteridge found another movie to add to the serpent filmography. The 1936 dramatized historical biography *Rembrandt*, directed by Alexander Korda and starring Charles Laughton, Gertrude Lawrence, and Elsa Lanchester, about the adult life of master painter Rembrandt van Rijn, includes the serpent in several shots during a tavern scene starting around 44 minutes into the movie. The serpent 'player' is clearly only mugging for the camera, and the sound appears to be a tuba or trombone. This movie is available on DVD as part of the *Eclipse* series of the Criterion Collection, Series 16.

- Tony George is participating in a new recording of Donizetti's *Les Martyrs* with the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, playing ophicleide. He is using the prototype of the new Wessex B-flat ophicleide for some of it. A review of this recording will be found in a future edition of this newsletter.

- A friend of Doug Yeo's wrote with some information about a serpent sighting in classical literature. "The novel is Alexandre Dumas's *La Comtesse de Charney*. The novel is a part of Dumas' *Marie Antoinette* series of novels about the French Revolution. They're hard to find complete in decent translations, only the last one has a new translation, the others are over 100 years old. They're not Dumas's best work, and I'm not even sure how much of them was written by Dumas. Friends helped him with some novels, most notable Auguste Maquet. I'm not sure if Maquet helped with this series, but I think he might have. The writing is uneven enough between volumes, but of course that could be the translations--all by unnamed persons. [The serpent mention] is on page 11, first two paragraphs. Don't let the page number fool you. *La Comtesse* is in 3 volumes; this is volume 3. What is new to me is that the player was named a 'serpent', at least according to Dumas."

The interesting text is, "It was the fashion in those days for a horn to be played in church services; and as the horn most in favor was coiled like a snake, not only did the instrument receive a name indicative of its shape, but the horn player was also called a *serpent*."

“The church and the Mayor’s office stood side by side. As the church *serpent* also acted as janitor for the townhouse, and was therefore dependent equally upon Mayor and upon the priest, Monsieur de Longpré sent for the *serpent* and questioned him [about the keys to the church].”

● In both the September 2013 and April 2014 editions of this newsletter, it was mentioned that William Perry’s new composition *Brass From the Past: Suite for Ophicleide and Orchestra* was going to be recorded in June of this year by the Raidió Teilifís Éireann (RTÉ) National Symphony Orchestra in Dublin, under the direction of Paul Phillips. Nick Byrne wrote with an update, “The recording was all done and finished in June over 2 days. I have heard the first edit from Naxos and it has turned out pretty nicely. As far as I am aware, it’s in the hands of Naxos as they do what they do I guess.....and it will be released in the new year.”

Nick also added, “I’m happy to say that I will also be recording another solo ophicleide CD in early December with a wide and somewhat eclectic repertoire planned.....watch this space!”

## About the Organization

The Serpent Newsletter is distributed according to two regions, each with its own representative. All financial contributions and new subscriptions should be sent to the proper regional representative. Announcements, editorial items, comments and photographs should be sent to the editorial address.

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Suggested minimum contribution for non-European subscribers is \$15 for 4 issues (2 years); these subscriptions are required for individuals, and institutions that manage to receive the newsletter without contributions are doing so entirely at the discretion of the regional representative. Rates for the UK are £5 for 2 years, for Europe £6 or 10 Euros; in these cases the handling of subscriptions is more formal. As of April 2012, all newsletters distributed in the European region will be electronic, not printed; newsletters distributed elsewhere remain in printed form. Non-UK/EU contributions may be made using PayPal, sent to the email address ocleide@earthlink.net



11 key ophicleide by Lecomte

## Adventures in Lapping

by Paul Schmidt

We all have one on our serpents, but probably don’t know what to call it. You know, that string thing that wraps around the end of the bocal (or for that matter, is it a crook, or a mouthpipe?) and makes an airtight seal where it fits into the body of the serpent. This is the only “moving part” on most serpents, and is certainly the part that gets the most wear and tear under normal use. But what happens when the lapping fails to hold tight, or leaks, or comes unraveled? This short article details one player’s adventures in repairing a damaged bocal.

I bought my first serpent early in 1988 from Christopher Monk, and having used it regularly over 26 years, it seemed amazing to me that nothing came off or wore out. But in truth the bocal lapping was showing its age, and in recent years some had bunched up or become tangled and frayed. At a recent playing engagement, the bocal refused to go into the instrument and I had to unravel most of the thread and rewrap some of it as an emergency measure to get a usable serpent. With more playing coming up, new lapping was needed, and quickly.

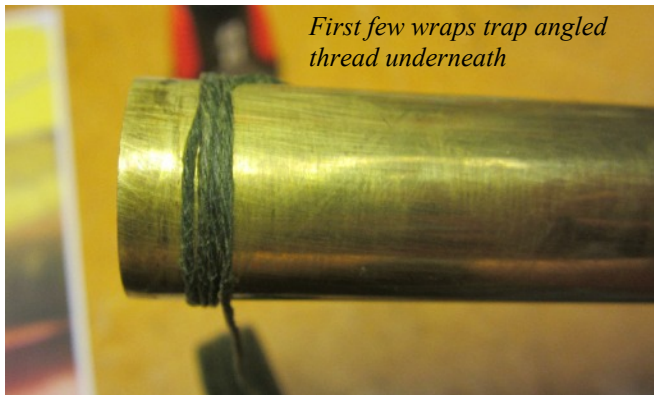


I completely removed the old lapping thread and cleaned the adhesives, grease and wax from the last few inches of the bocal. Then I placed it on top of my clothes washing machine, which has a convenient flat top next to the doorway to my house, while I put on my shoes to go out. Unfortunately I got a phone call and the washer went into a spin cycle while I was in the other room, and the bocal vibrated off onto the floor. At first I thought no harm was done, but on closer inspection I saw the large end of the brass tubing had a flattened dent, making it out-of-round. Clearly this would need to be fixed before lapping could take place. A local music store charged me for repair, then handed back a bocal that was still not circular, but also slightly flared on the end. Next I went to a fellow who repairs trumpets and woodwinds in his garage, and he used part of a trumpet bell mandrel and a die plate (a thick metal plate with a series of graduated diameter smooth-edged holes in it) to work over the end of the bocal until it was smooth, round, and no longer flared.

Armed with a section of the old thread and the lapped bocal from my Kaiser serpent, I started an odyssey that took me

from hobby shop to crafts store to sewing supplies stores to hardware stores, with a suitable thread of the correct diameter as the goal. I soon found that my Monk serpent, like most, requires a peculiar size of thread unknown to retail emporiums in my area. Many sympathetic salespeople stared, blinkingly, at the Kaiser bocal and mumbled that such a thread was unknown to exist in the free world. "Maybe in Europe, but not in the U.S.A.," said one.

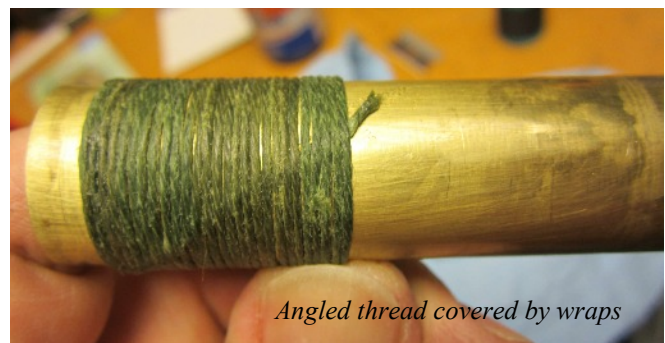
I bought a nice Coats & Clark brand "Dual Duty Plus craft & button thread" that, while it matched what was on the Kaiser, was on closer inspection still too thin for the Monk. Another shopping trip produced marginally better results in a large Hobby Lobby store where the sales lady steered me away from the 'sewing' section, and past the 'crafts' section (each section of the store had different kinds of threads) and into the hitherto unexplored jewelry section. *Eureka!* A peg on the wall held a thick cotton thread called "On-A-String (brand) Waxed Linen Cord #844027", and it was even the same dark green color as the original Monk lapping thread. Actually, this product was not ideal, since I was not too keen on the 'waxed' part. Sure, I would be waxing it later on, but wax was not too desirable when first wrapping it. I would have to try it and see what happened.



Since I insert my bocal by screwing it into the serpent in a clockwise rotation, it was important to wrap the lapping thread in a direction that would not cause it to loosen during the process, i.e. the thread needed to be wrapped in a counter-clockwise direction. Following the example of the original thread on my Monk, I decided to secure the end of the thread by tucking it under the lapping, as opposed to anchoring it in a small hole as is done by Kaiser (although that is also a good way to do it); in my case, I did not want to drill a hole where there was not one already. To encourage the thread to give up some of its impregnated wax, I clamped a piece of scrap metal in a vise and heated it with a propane torch, then laid the first few inches of thread on the heated metal and worked it over with tissue paper to absorb the melted wax. Satisfied that I had removed as much wax as possible using my improvised method, I commenced the lapping process.

I started by laying about 1.25" (3 cm) of thread in parallel with the bocal; this would be the thread which would be tucked under the lapping to prevent unraveling. Then the

first couple of counter-clockwise wraps were made and the thread adjusted for desired position and tightness. A few drops of CA glue (i.e. "Super Glue") were applied to the tucked under thread and also the wraps. I used a thin formula of CA glue here, so that it would wick freely into and under the thread, as opposed to using a thicker formula that might form a dried clump of glue. With the CA glue cured by spraying it with a CA glue accelerant, I no longer needed to hold the thread in place. I then applied a layer of rubber cement to the bocal in the area where I planned to cover it with lapping, making the cement as thin as possible. The use of rubber cement as underlayment for bocal lapping was suggested by other experienced bocal people that I consulted, as it forms a supple base that discourages the lapping from sliding around on the metal, even if the cement does not actually adhere to the thread. After the cement had partially dried, I started wrapping the thread.



I was concerned that the thread might be too thick, so I left a slight space between wraps so that the thread could be flattened and still have some space to expand to in the process. When the last wrap was made just beyond the end of the cemented region of the bocal, I applied a few more drops of the thin CA glue and let it wick into and under the last couple of wraps, and sprayed the accelerant. A razor blade was used to cut off the excess thread. I then waited to give the rubber cement about half an hour to dry and the CA glue time to fully cure.

Next, I used a block of beeswax and carefully rubbed wax onto the lapping and rubbed it in with my finger. But I was careful to not apply so much wax that it would completely fill the spaces between the wraps. Then I started to slowly and carefully work the bocal into the receiver on the serpent. It was reluctant at first, so I used some woodwind cork grease and added a bit more as needed as I continued to twist the bocal in with the aforementioned clockwise rotation. Since the fit was very tight, I held the receiver tightly in my other hand to prevent strain to the rest of the instrument... I envisioned snapping off the top bend of the serpent due to my efforts!

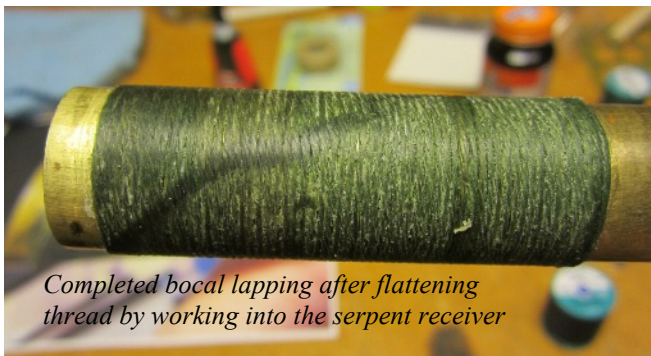
After removing the bocal, also with a clockwise twisting action and never reversing the direction of rotation, I noted that the threads had indeed been flattened and now filled the previously empty spaces. If the thread had been the perfect thickness, it might not have flattened as much, but there is

no downside to this, especially when the rubber cement underlay is there it keep the thread wraps from shifting sideways. I then applied a more liberal layer of cork grease and worked the bocal back in and out a couple of times.



End of wrap secured with CA (super) glue

I have now used the serpent for perhaps a dozen playing situations, and the bocal lapping has been just fine. Nothing has come undone, it seals well and is stiff enough to prevent the bocal drifting up or down as I play. I still do need to be careful when inserting or removing the bocal, holding the receiver firmly, but I expect this to ease up a bit over time.



Completed bocal lapping after flattening thread by working into the serpent receiver

Thanks to Nick Perry, Russ Kaiser, Daniel Deitch and others for their advice.

## Getting Serpents

Here is the list of Serpent makers who have made themselves known to us. Many instruments are available through dealers, and all makers will deal directly with individual customers.

Christopher Monk Instruments  
(c/o Nicholas Perry)  
224 North Street  
Luton  
LU2 7QN  
England

Phone: +44 (0)1582 457 992  
<nicholas@perry2185.freemove.co.uk>  
(see Christopher Monk Instruments website URL at lower right)  
(serpents, early cimbasso, bass horns)

David Harding  
The Early Music Shop  
Salts Mill, Victoria Road  
Saltaire  
West Yorkshire BD18 3LA  
England  
Phone: +44 (0) 1274 288 100  
<www.earlymusicshop.com>  
(resin serpents)

Serpents Ribo  
(c/o Pierre Ribo)  
Rue Van Oost, 40  
1030 Bruxelles  
Belgium  
Phone: 0032 497 574 496  
<pierre.ribo@souslesplatanes.be>  
(Serpents)

Kaiser Serpents  
<http://www.kaiserserpents.com>  
(fiberglass serpents after Baudouin)

Serpentones Lopez  
Juan Lopez Romera, maker  
<http://serponton.com/>  
(wooden serpents & cornetti)

Wessex Tubas  
Jonathan Hodgetts (UK)  
Andy Loree (USA)  
[www.wessex-tubas.co.uk](http://www.wessex-tubas.co.uk)  
[www.wessex-tubas.com](http://www.wessex-tubas.com)  
(ophicleides)



Wetter/Berger Serpents  
Stephen Berger  
CH-2336 Les Bois  
Phone: 0041 (0) 3296 11188  
Matthias Wetter  
CH-8475 Ossingen  
Phone: 0041 (0) 5231 73184  
Switzerland  
<info@serpentmakers.ch>  
<www.wetterberger.ch>  
<www.serpentmakers.ch>  
(alzhorns and serpents, both wood and carbon fiber)

Christopher Monk Instruments  
(c/o Jeremy West)  
+44 (0)1388 526999  
<www.jeremywest.co.uk/christopher-monk-instruments.html>  
<hmcornett@gmail.com>  
(cornetti)

Sam Goble Historical Mouthpieces  
phone: +44 (0) 77 8056 4370  
<www.samgoble.com>  
<info@samgoble.com>  
(cornett and serpent mouthpieces)

Build an experimental serpent from plans via  
<[www.serpentwebsite.com](http://www.serpentwebsite.com)>



Captain Haddock lets loose with an appropriate oath in chapter 10 (page 30 in the Methuen edition of 1947) of the Tintin adventure titled "The Shooting Star" (L'Étoile mystérieuse), by Georges Remi (aka Hergé)

## In Memoriam

- Tony Gray

Tony Gray, who died on April 14 of 2014 at the age of 86, was a co-founder of a musical comedy act whose brand of anarchic slapstick inspired Monty Python. During the satire boom of the late 1950s and early 1960s, he was a member of the most famous trio of musical clowns in London; their specialties included bubble-blowing automata and exploding camels. The group, which consisted of Tony and his younger brother Douglas (known as the Alberts), and Bruce Lacey, had their own show *An Evening of British Rubbish* in the West End for nearly a year in 1963. A typical Alberts performance was described as “moth-eaten men in beards and baggy Edwardian clothes strode on and off the stage; there were a great many random bangs and explosions, trumpets were blown, jokes were muttered and shouted, usually into the wings; the stuffed camel had its tail turned like a starting handle to the accompaniment of further bangs and more dirty men in ancient military uniforms strode on and off shouting at each other; someone appeared dressed as a bee; a mechanical dummy was wheeled on to deliver a monosyllabic political speech; a musician in grubby white tie and tails attempted to play the cello, and subversive figures winking at the audience and slyly tapping their noses were seen to lay a charge of dynamite under his chair, reel out the cable to a plunger and finally blow themselves up with another thunderous bang.”



Tony, a skinny, rather nervous man with pale blue eyes and a straggly beard, was described by one admirer as “looking like an eccentric yachting enthusiast from before the First World War”. More loquacious than his brother Douglas, he tended to do more of the physical clowning; Douglas (proficient to varying degrees on an eclectic range of instruments from the balalaika and serpent to the bagpipes) provided the musical accompaniment.

Audiences were left variously enthralled, bemused, or furious and wanting their money back. “I am not sure why I

laughed,” confessed one critic. “There was a certain resistance at first.” Tony Gray believed there was a nightmare element to their humor: “Its basis is that if something can go wrong, it will. It also suggests that everything in life is funny and that can be dangerous.”

Anthony Gray was born in St. Mary Abbots, west London, on December 22 1927, was educated at the Oratory School, Kensington, and during the war he and his brother Douglas were evacuated to Penzance, where they took to ganging up together and playing practical jokes on people who were nasty to them. The Grays left school after the war and both spent their National Service in Egypt, Tony salvaging burnt-out tanks in the Western Desert. Later he and Douglas worked as printers and played at jazz clubs in London.

The Alberts’ antic humor attracted the attention of Peter Cook who in 1962 engaged them to perform a comedy routine, and Lenny Bruce saw their act and engaged them to tour America. By the time they arrived in New York, Bruce was under arrest on charges of obscenity but their show *An Evening of British Rubbish* was a success. During the 1960s, John Wells worked with the Alberts on a short film about a heavier-than-air flying machine in which they ran down a hillside in Hampstead Heath wearing a skeletal fuselage and flapping madly before falling into a pond. This Flying Alberts film can be viewed on YouTube at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6HQZkl0IJY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6HQZkl0IJY) and Tony can be seen by himself singing the song *When I Was Seventeen* at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBYodIy0uD8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GBYodIy0uD8).

The Alberts appeared in films by Ken Russell, Billy Wilder’s *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*, the television in *A Show Called Fred* (a successor to *The Goon Show*) with Spike Milligan and Peter Sellers, and in a Royal Command Performance at the London Palladium. In 1979 they were contracted by the Covent Garden Opera Company to take character roles in productions of *Peter Grimes* and *Benvenuto Cellini*. Throughout their stage careers, the Grays continued to support themselves by driving newspaper delivery vans, taking *The Sunday Telegraph* from the printing works to far-flung parts of East Anglia, where they both bought themselves old rectories, which they filled with dusty collections of books, toys and old vehicles. “I suppose we are cosseted a bit, like Spitfire pilots,” Tony reflected.

Tony Gray was also a serpentist.

- Robert Stabile, *a.k.a. Professor Hokum W. Jeebs*

The tradition of the traveling vaudeville performer lived on in the unlikely and delightful form of Hokum W. Jeebs. Born to an Italian-American family in Syracuse, New York in 1951 as Robert Stabile, Hokum started his professional career falling off piano benches for laughs at community talent shows. A degree in Music Education led to a job teaching public school music. On weekends he played ragtime in bars, directed musical theatre and was a church choir conductor. Four years later he packed his trunks and

headed west to the streets of San Francisco. There he developed a street show in the style of a classic vaudeville act. Hokum has performed that act in thousands of places all over the United States and abroad. His trunks moved to Florida where he plied his trade with Disney World, dinner theaters and cruise ships.



*Hokum W. Jeebs playing his Piano a la Cart, with serpentist Andrew van der Beek accompanying, First International Serpent Festival 1989, photo by Paul Schmidt*

While playing honky tonk piano at Disney World in 1985, Hokum was asked if he wanted to play a Bicycle Piano. He said yes and got the job at the EPCOT Center. The bicycle piano there was meant to be ridden to a location and then played, but was not intended to be played while it was being ridden. After modifications, Hokum was able to play while rising, and another career was born: piano dancer. The next year, he was sent to Tokyo Disneyland where they enjoyed the Bicycle Piano so much, they had two players plus a tuner/technician and a staff to keep it going non-stop in their equivalent to the Main Street USA attraction in the stateside Disney parks. Hokum was riding and playing seven hours a day: piano as aerobic exercise!

Returning to the States, Hokum decided to build his own bicycle piano and market it around the country. His friend Tom Roberts in Syracuse built the new improved bicycle piano in his frame shop, *Tom's Mechanical Emporium*, in 1987. Since *Bicycle Piano* was just too bland, Hokum considered other names such as *The Piano Roller* and even *The Minstrel Cycle*. He finally chose *Piano a la Cart* as a play on *à la carte* because it both cleverly described the act but also because it also described the function of request pianists everywhere, to provide little bits of music on demand.

The act *Hokum W. Jeebs Piano Ala Cart* rolled onto the scene and has been featured at numerous festivals and fairs across North America. Early in this period, the already multi-instrumental Hokum acquired a Monk serpent and 'being on the list' was invited to participate in the First International Serpent Festival that took place in Columbia, South Carolina, in October of 1989. He participated in the

workshop sessions, was part of the *United Serpents Grande Band*, played in the concerts, and entertained the other serpentists with his *Piano a la Cart* act on the patio just outside Craig Kridel's office at the Museum of Education. Hokum stated at the festival that he had been inspired to become the world's greatest jazz serpentist!

In 1992, Hokum settled in Seattle and founded Hokum Hall, a venue devoted to the arts of vaudeville, ragtime and silent movies, featuring a 1929 Mighty Wurlitzer Theatre Pipe Organ. In 2003 Hokum returned to his traveling roots and has appeared at many odd places. In his spare time, he became a noted Italian chef. He continued to play vaudeville shows using many instruments, including serpent, and to work as a theatre and church organist in the Seattle area.



*Hokum W. Jeebs playing his Piano a la Cart, with organist and glass 'armonica virtuoso' Dennis James (playing a Monk 'worm') riding and accompanying, First International Serpent Festival 1989, photo by Paul Schmidt*

Hokum W. Jeebs was fatally stabbed in the chest on February 16, 2011 at home he shared with his partner, Dr. Anita Shaffer in the West Seattle town of Fauntleroy. The police report suggested that the homeless man who wielded the knife had been invited to the home, presumably for reasons related to the medical marijuana growing operation in the home's basement, and apparently something had gone wrong during the transaction.

*The above information was edited from reports in the Seattle Times, local obituaries, the Puget Sound Theater Organ Society website, and the archives of this newsletter.*

- Christopher Jarvis Haley Hogwood

Famed early music director, keyboardist, lecturer and advocate Christopher Hogwood died on 24 September 2014. Although he was not a serpentist, he was interested in the possibilities, and received this newsletter by special arrangement for years. R.I.P.

## Where Serpents Gather

- Vintage Band Festival, August 2, 2014

The college town of Northfield, Minnesota, has held three wonderful Vintage Band Festivals so far, in 2006, 2010, and 2013. The next three day festival is scheduled to take place on August 28-31 in 2016. Festival organizers decided to hold a special interim one-day festival in 2014 to help “bridge the gap” and raise some funds via additional donations.

Since most vintage bands come from far enough away that a one-day event was not sufficient enticement to travel, this short festival consisted of fourteen groups, most of which were local to Northfield. The groups also tended towards more contemporary, although there was some limited vintage instrument presence. The day began at 8 AM with the New Prague Community Band playing in Bridge Square, and Paul Schmidt arrived from Illinois with his ophicleide, setting up for a half hour solo session in the riverfront gazebo behind the historic Archer House hotel. At 9 AM, the Bridge Square stage was taken over by the aptly named Bridge Square Band, and Paul moved to serenade outdoor breakfasters at the Tavern that is part of the Archer House structure; a small crowd of passersby also stopped to listen across the street by the library.



*Clark Wolf and Paul Schmidt performing as the Roving Ophicleides at the Vintage Band Festival in Northfield*

Paul was taking a break from playing to enjoy one of the bands in Bridge Square, when Clark Wolf from Ames, Iowa showed up with his vintage Boosey double-belled euphonium and C ophicleide. Now a duet going by the traditional name of the *Roving Ophicleides* (“You never know where they might appear!”), Clark and Paul returned to the gazebo to select and run through the music, giving a concert in the process for some hotel guests. Festival artistic director Paul Niemisto had requested that the Roving Ophicleides favor some of the establishments that had made donations to the event, so the next performance took place around noon on the street in front of the Quality Bakery. The owners, band players themselves, were ecstatic to have the

ophicleides playing in front and came out to offer the players food and refreshing cold drinks. After playing, Paul noticed that his open case had collected some money from the passing audience, certainly the first time the Roving Ophicleides had been successful as buskers!

The duet next appeared in the indoor stage at Hogan Brothers Acoustic Café, which is also the town ice cream parlor, and gathered an enthusiastic and staying audience. After enjoying a fine lunch of Indian dishes at the Chapati restaurant that is part of the Archer House, the ophicleides took in part of the concerts of the Minnesota State Band and Cannon Falls Community Band and talked to the



*“La femme, faible créature” 1860 print by Carlo Gripp published in L’Illustration, February 4, 1860, p. 77*

bandmembers about the playing characteristics of the ophicleide. Next, they crossed the river to perform a set on the riverwalk outdoor dining area of Froggy Bottoms River Pub. Hearing what appeared to be an unscheduled band playing across the river, Paul and Clark crossed the arched pedestrian bridge to the multi-level outdoor riverside café of the Contented Cow Pub, where a tuba-euphonium nonet calling themselves *The Tuba Dorks* was playing a nice set on the stage. When the proprietor remarked that the stage was going to be empty for an hour once the tubas were done, the Roving Ophicleides did one more half hour set for an audience of diners, members of the tuba ensemble, and arriving members of the rock band that was to follow later. Departing to find a place for dinner but not liking the choices nearby, Clark and Paul returned to the Contented Cow and were pleasantly surprised when the proprietor offered them free dinner in exchange for their earlier concert.

Afterwards, the two returned to Bridge Square for the last half of the concluding concert of the day, performed by the Copper Street Brass Quintet of Minneapolis. Clark headed home for Iowa and Paul drove to a Wisconsin hotel that would put him in a good driving distance for a concert the next day with the Civil War ensemble, the 1st Brigade Band.



The ophicleides had a lot of fun playing for the festival audience, as well as talking shop about ophicleides and taking in music by the other bands. Hopefully, the members of earlier incarnations of the Roving Ophicleides will be able to join the latest members to put on an even better set of performances in Northfield in 2016!

- Nick Byrne in Australia as formed a new ensemble, the *Sydney Ophicleide Quartet*. The group is made up of Nick, his colleague Scott Kinmont from Sydney Symphony Orchestra, and two talented students at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, Jono Ramsey & Brad Lucas, who Nick teaches ophicleide to, in addition to their mainstream instruments. Nick wrote, “The speed at which the guys have picked up the instrument to the point of playing concerts now is phenomenal, with our first [recital] being undertaken late last year. Almost too fast!! In the quartet we play three instruments in C with Scott on the bottom part on a Bb, one instrument being my own, two more are owned by the Conservatorium and the SSO owns the other. It’s really a great group to get together and just play through some repertoire, and is something I’ve been dreaming of for some years.”



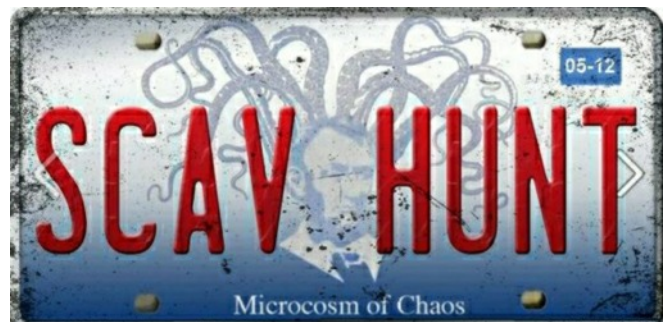
*The Sydney Ophicleide Quartet, Scott Kinmont and Nick Byrne (front), and Jono Ramsey and Brad Lucas*

The quartet can be viewed on YouTube playing Handel’s *Adagio & Allegro HWV338*, arranged by Ben Manstead, by searching for *Sydney Ophicleide Quartet plays Handel-HD*, or by entering the URL of [www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFYxchC-nck&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NFYxchC-nck&feature=youtu.be) into your web browser.

Nick sent a follow up email in late September, “The quartet is going great-guns. We performed at the Sydney International Brass fest alongside Roland Szentpali, who performed on serpent and original cimbasso, where we performed Bach’s *Fugue in G minor* and Handel’s *Adagio & Allegro* (as per our YouTube video). I also performed the Kummer *Variations* alongside Christopher Gordon’s *Look Away* for solo ophicleide, and Scott Kinmont performed a duo improvisation with Roland based on a renaissance *cantus firmus*, which was mesmerizing. Also performed was Poncielli’s *Concerto for Flicorno Bassi* on a 5-valve euphonium by Besson that was manufactured in the same year the concerto was written - 1872. We have several further projects planned together as a quartet, as well as some interesting YouTube videos to come.”

- Doug Yeo wrote, “Our ASU Brass Faculty played a concert at the Phoenix Musical Instrument Museum on March 26. Each of the four of us, David Hickman on trumpet, John Ericson on horn, Deanna Swoboda on tuba, and me, played a solo. I played Cliff Bevan’s *Variations on The Pesky Serpent* on my Baudouin serpent, with Aimee Fincher as my piano accompanist. In addition, John, Deanna and I premiered a new piece by Canadian composer Elizabeth Raum titled *Relationships* that was commissioned by John, Deanna and me. We have a low brass trio (horn, bass trombone, tuba) and we’ll be recording a CD next month.

Besides the aforementioned selections, the ASU program included John Harmon’s *Silhouette* played on tuba by Deanna Swoboda, Jane Zwerneman’s *Sonnet* played by John Ericson on horn, Miroslaw Gasienc’s *Elegy in Memoriam Gustave Mahler*, and Alessandro Marcello’s *Concerto in G Minor*, the latter two selections played by the entire quartet.



- Second Annual University of Chicago Scavenger Hunt

In early May of 2014, a student at the University of Chicago, Kent Fernandez, contacted this newsletter with an unusual request. The U of C hosts an annual scavenger hunt that is purportedly the largest of its kind in the world. Teams of students, often organized according to a curriculum or a dormitory or fraternity, would be presenting the results of the usually very fiendishly difficult hunt lists at noon on Sunday, May 11 at Ida Noyes Hall. Some of the lists included a requirement to ‘locate and present’ a serpent player, with simply locating a serpent being worth partial

credit. I suggested John Weber, who was game but unfortunately unavailable at that time. Finally I decided that an appearance could be squeezed in before a gig later that afternoon, and agreed to be presented with serpent. Because Kent advised that the proceedings were likely to be crowded and chaotic due to frantic last minute scrambling to complete some home-made items on the lists, I decided not to risk a wooden serpent and took a more robust instrument by Kaiser.

To put things in perspective, here are just a few of the other items on the hunt list. \* FIRE A CANNON. Must be a historical cannon or an accurate reconstruction (made before the Hunt). Please don't destroy anything that doesn't have it coming. [40 points] \* Before *Gray's Anatomy* came in and made things standardized and boring, anatomical drawings sometimes depicted the body doing activities and hanging out. Using photography, update this form of art to the modern day, showing skeletal, muscular, and/or nervous systems feeling the richness of life as a UChicago student. [10 points] \* If only I were fortunate enough to have a fortune cookie papier mâché out of only fortune cookie fortunes in my future. [four-tunate points] \* Like a vinyl record, but wood. Should be playable. Should be totally rockin'. [33 RPM points] (*one team actually managed to get a laser-etched platter of wood, with the groove containing about 12 seconds of music, but the record player broke and could not be repaired in time for judging*) \* At Judgment, a single mournful yodel. [1 point. 1 bonus point if we shed a tear] \* Did you know 'Narsil' is almost an anagram for 'Snail'? Bring us a blade made from the shards of several Snail menu items. Must be rigid. Must be delicious. [9.95 points with tax and tip] (*Narsil is a famous sword from The Lord of the Rings, and the Snail is a Thai restaurant in Hyde Park that is popular with the students*) \* Bring us an Animusic-style instrument that plays itself. Once activated, it should perform, unaided, a composition of no less than 90



H.G. Hine's 'The Waits at Seven Dials' portrays a group of 'Christmas waits', *Illustrated London News*, December 1853

seconds. While your device may have electronic components, it must not produce electronic music. [175 points. 50 bonus points if the music is played by multiple distinct mechanisms that join in gradually as it proceeds] \* Model a Canadian Tuxedo. No, not a jean jacket. A full

denim tuxedo comprising jacket, pants, tie, cummerbund or vest, belt, and pocket square. [ˈEh?-teen points] \* Barbershop rendition of *The Ballad of Bilbo Baggins*, as originally performed by Leonard Nimoy. And if your quartet is not in costume as hobbits who are also Starfleet members, we just don't see the point. [2 x 4 points] \* Ich bin ein Berliner? Nein! Ich bin ein Berliner essen einen Berliner. [1/6 points for a person eating a pastry, 6/1 points for a pastry eating a person] \* Finally, the Libertarian dream realized! Elevate yourself at Judgment with a pair of boots that lift the wearer half a foot when the straps are pulled. [You get yourself 24 points] \* Smuggle your Wookiee into Rockefeller to deliver a Chewbacca laurate address at the lectern. [3 points] (*that's Rockefeller Memorial Chapel, the central and dominant feature on the U of C campus*) \* Give your class some Bohemian air. Accompany your professor with a walking bass. [8 points] \* Safety first! Have one team member participate in at least two Scav Olympics events equipped with a bike helmet, elbow pads, ski goggles, shin guards, safety whistle, lacrosse rib guards, fire-retardant lab coat, water wings, jockstrap, and pillows strapped fore and aft to the torso. [11 points] - An ear wax candle! No, not an earwax candle. That would be gross! Just an ear-shaped candle made out of good old-fashioned beeswax. [5 points] - An earwax candle! [1 point] - *well, you see how it goes, there are 308 such items on the hunt list.*

Kent's team was named Snell-Hitchcock, after their dormitory building. I arrived at the famous Ida Noyes Hall at the appointed time, found the place absolutely packed with sweaty, odiferous students and such an assortment of contraptions and costumes as would make Hieronymus Bosch have nightmares. Members of Snell-Hitchcock were on hand to guide me, their prized 'find', to the judging floor, and soon the committee of judges stopped by. I had learned that my team's theme song for this event was *Everything Is Awesome* by Shawn Patterson, the theme song from *The Lego Movie*. Just to do a better job at being a 'find' than simply showing up with a serpent, I had downloaded the sheet music from the internet and had produced a serpent-suitable arrangement and memorized it. Both the team members and the judges were ecstatic when not only was the serpent presented along with a player, but the player was proven to be such by performing in this fashion. The team thanked me with the gift of a gift card to the Panera restaurant chain. Departing the hall, I heard the plaintive sounds of a serpent in the process of trying to be played, and the sounds led me to another team's area where a student was just putting a Monk serpent away in its fiberboard case. Upon inquiry, the student revealed that she had borrowed the instrument from one of the faculty who owned it, but had not touched it in many years. I recalled once sending a copy of this newsletter to a U of C faculty member, but could not recall who it was. Kent contacted me a few days later, "Our team got 2nd place! 1st place only had 30 points more than us which was a very close race."

It was a lot of fun to participate in this event.  
*by Paul Schmidt*

## Néos Ophicléide

● Getting a serpent or ophicleide to play presents a problem not readily or lightly dismissed. In the case of the serpent, unless one is very lucky, it is unlikely that a good playing antique will be available and the prospective player must look exclusively at modern reproductions. With established makers like Monk, Wetterberger, Harding, Kaiser, and Ribo around to choose from, the main challenge is coming up with the money and then usually waiting while the maker produces an instrument to order. With the ophicleide, the situation is different in that there are almost always a number of antique ophicleides for sale at any given time, in early brass shops and online. However, a great many of the old ophicleides are in poor condition, are not made by good makers, are not in the desired key, or are otherwise just not ‘good players’. Over the years, makers such as Robb Stewart and Manchester Brassworks produced modern ophicleides, but both Robb and Derek Farnell have indicated that they are no longer in the ophicleide making business. There have also been a few one-off instruments made as special orders by makers of saxophones, but it can be assumed that these would most likely be very nonstandard, very expensive, and of unknown playing quality until after delivery, and then it is too late.

In early 2014, this newsletter received a tip from Russ Kaiser that Wessex Tubas, a company in Andover, Hampshire in England (near Winchester), has contracted with their associates in China’s largest instrument manufactory (possibly *Jinbao*, but this is not specified by Wessex) to reproduce a series of ophicleide models based on originals made by Gautrot in France. The first model to be produced was going to be a B-flat instrument, with a C model following, and possibly quinticlaves after that. Tony George was already in possession of the B-flat prototype and was completing his evaluation, recommending changes to the factory to be incorporated into the production instruments.

At the same time, an email was received from Gilles Elie of the French antique instrument reseller *Instrumentique*, [www.instrumentiq.com](http://www.instrumentiq.com), announcing a new program to produce copies of good antique ophicleides in factories in Europe. Along with this came a questionnaire to the newsletter inquiring level of interest in the project, whether the copy should be C or B-flat, and how many keys should it have? Unlike Wessex, who was already in the serious stage of actually producing instruments, it appears that the *Instrumentique* project is not so far along at the time of this writing, although Gilles seemed to suggest that a prototype was ‘in the hands of’ a top expert.

Something of this potential importance needed to be followed up on, so a correspondence was begun between this newsletter and Jonathan Hodgetts of Wessex, and also with Tony George. Tony felt that based on the quality and playability of the prototype, the production instruments should be good players. Jonathan was interested to get his

new instrument reviewed for the newsletter readership, but everyone agreed that it would be best for the review instrument to be purchased through normal channels and at the usual price, with full return privileges as per the normal Wessex policy. The first batch of ophicleides was due to arrive from the factory in late August, so an order was placed with Andy Loree of Michigan, who acts as the USA representative for Wessex. Their ophicleide is available with three finishes; plain brass, polished brass with clear lacquer, and brass with silver plating. Because the price for silver was only slightly more than that for brass, the newsletter order was for the silver one. The instrument arrived in the first days of September, just in time to allow for some familiarity before producing a review in this issue of the newsletter.

Since that time, it appears that Wessex has decided to remove the option for plain brass finish. As of this writing, the lacquered brass instrument is selling for \$2,900, or £2,040.00 including VAT, and the silver-plated instrument is listed at \$3,250, or £2,595.00 including VAT. Wessex has advised this newsletter that there are still a few instruments from the first production batch that remain unsold, and could therefore be shipped immediately. Two more batches are in the pipeline for delivery later this year and early next year. The C ophicleide is officially being worked on at this time. For more information and terms, see their websites [www.wessex-tubas.co.uk/product/bb-ophicleide](http://www.wessex-tubas.co.uk/product/bb-ophicleide), or [www.wessex-tubas.com/category/brass-2/ophicleide-brass-2-2/](http://www.wessex-tubas.com/category/brass-2/ophicleide-brass-2-2/) if you are in the USA or the Americas.

### ● The Wessex B-flat Ophicleide: First Impressions

by Paul Schmidt

I was very eager to see whether this new project by Wessex Tubas was actually going to produce a good playing ophicleide of at least decent quality. While I have been content with the two instruments that I currently own, and had no burning desire to add another to my collection, since through this newsletter I act as clearing house for much serpent and ophicleide information, I felt that it was important to get some kind of evaluation out as soon as possible. I considered trying to talk a better established player (or really, just a *better* player) into doing the work of evaluation, but I finally determined that I should approach the situation as a hobbyist player, and put the evaluation in that perspective.



I discussed the instrument with Tony George before making the purchase, since I wanted some sense that I would not be wasting my personal funds on a total unknown. And indeed, that is the same sense of security for others that I hope to provide here in these pages, and in the companion YouTube video that I prepared; search for *Wessex ophicleide demonstration (B flat version)*, or use this URL [www.youtube.com/edit?o=U&video\\_id=vzZu8tVwobk&feature=vm](http://www.youtube.com/edit?o=U&video_id=vzZu8tVwobk&feature=vm). You can also view a shorter demonstration by Tony that Wessex has posted on YouTube by searching for *Tony George demonstrates the Wessex ophicleide*, or by using this URL [www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQX6A8DWB-Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aQX6A8DWB-Y).

First, Tony had advised me that the prototype instrument that he was asked to evaluate had one tone hole in the wrong place, the brass was much too thick, it needed guards over some of the lower tone holes, and there were issues with the bocal such as not having a tuning slide and needing a different mouthpiece receiver. Otherwise he thought it would make for a nice instrument. Second, I had correspondence with professional tuba players who either played, or knew people who played, Wessex instruments, in order to get their opinions of quality of manufacture and their opinions of Wessex and their products (all were favorable). Third, I corresponded with Wessex about return privileges if I did not like the instrument, and also when was the first batch of production instruments going to be ready, since I was keen to start checking my instrument out as soon as possible. With an August delivery planned, I made the necessary down payment, and right on schedule I got an email from Andy Loree that the instruments were in the States *en route* to Michigan, and it was time to pay the remaining balance. I should note here that Wessex accepts PayPal, Visa, Mastercard, and American Express, as well as cash if the purchase is made at their showroom(s). The Wessex warranty is a 14 day right of refusal if you don't like and instrument after receiving it, and a three year coverage against defects in materials and workmanship.



*Paul Schmidt giving his Wessex ophicleide its first blow*

I also want to note that in every case, my emails to Wessex, both in England and in the States, were always returned promptly and with good information. The instruments are indeed made in a factory in China that is for all intents and purposes unreachable by customers except through two people, Jonathan Hodgetts and Andy Loree, and this has to be considered realistically by potential buyers. On the other hand, an ophicleide is not a complex instrument where one might worry about fine mechanisms such as valves, so as long as the proportions, materials used, and craftsmanship are adequate, the result should be a good instrument. Such is the theory at least, hence this review.

My ophicleide was delivered promptly to my office by FedEx in good condition, snug in its case and in a heavy cardboard shipping box. The packing tape showed no signs of having been cut, reapplied or taped over, so my assumption was that the box was undisturbed since leaving the factory. Jonathan had advised me that he goes to China, with his China-born wife, to inspect every shipment before it leaves the factory, and inspections are also made by himself or by Andy before the instruments are forwarded to the customers; the condition of the box and its tape did make me wonder whether that latter inspection had taken place in the States, besides verifying that there was no external trauma to the box. I also wondered how Wessex could be sure that an ophicleide was good before shipment, and Jonathan answered this question by advising that both he and Andy, and some of the Chinese workers, are experienced low brass players, and that all of them were in the process of learning to play ophicleide, so as production continues the inspections will get more thorough. He also advised that the ophicleides are made in the factory's saxophone shop and except for playing they get the same inspections that any saxophone would, which should cover most aspects of the instrument.



I want to start my review by describing the hard case provided by Wessex. The case style is that of a road case, and it appears to be made from wood, with a faux leather covering which on my case was coming unglued at one corner but was otherwise in good condition. All edges and corners are protected by aluminum or steel strips, angles and fittings. In my opinion, the rim of the case opening is not tapered sufficiently to adequately lock the top and bottom case halves together when the case is closed, so the case is not as robust in this regard as I would like. The front of the

case is held closed by four steel latches, none of which are equipped with a lock. A large comfortable handle is provided for carrying the case, and although it seems sufficiently strong, it still remains that it is a single-piece handle that has been molded out of a rubbery feeling plastic, with molded in faux leather-texturing and stitching. One end of the case is equipped with luggage style rollers such as most suitcases have these days, and the opposite end of the case has a towing handle that is identical to the main handle. The inside of the case is nicely blocked with what feels like Styrofoam under a layer of plush fabric. There is one plastic-reinforced hole for the included mouthpiece. Lifting a cloth strap in the center of the case opens a hidden compartment that is like a case-within-the-case, having blocking for the bocal and included neck strap. For the money, this seems to be a very decent case, but I would not trust the instrument in it for an airline flight, mostly because of concerns over the latches and lack of an interlocking valance around the opening; I think Wessex could add locking latches and a valance without increasing cost significantly.



*The hard shell case provided by Wessex for their ophicleide*

The ophicleide itself was much more impressive. The craftsmanship appears to be very good, and the only blemish I have been able to notice is some very slight ripples in the brass in the area of the bell flare. I would not have noticed these on a raw brass instrument, and probably would not have noticed on a polished and lacquered instrument either. My instrument, being finished with bright silver, is like a mirror, and it was the distortions in reflections of nearby objects that drew my attention to the unevenness of the metal in this area. Jonathan noted, when advised of this, said that he was aware of this issue and was working to see if the factory can improve this without increasing the cost of the instrument; i.e. some slight blemishes are to be expected at this price point, but they are trying to do better. I consider this to be a very minor fault.

On the lookout for other faults, I carefully inspected solder joints, plating, pivot points, tone hole seals (air tightness between pads and tone hole chimneys), stability of keywork, evenness of the bell rim rollover, fit and finish of metal edges, and quality of the mouthpiece receiver. I found no faults in these areas, noticing only that the single screw that is used both to lock the first hole (the 'bell' hole) keywork during transport and also for tuning that hole by degree of space between the open hole pad, was much too loose in its threaded hole, so it buzzed annoyingly when resonating to certain notes, primarily the E above middle C. Jonathan said he was aware of this issue and further production would fix

the problem, and otherwise something like cork grease or wax in the threads would silence the buzzing.

Tony George has prepared a fingering chart for the Wessex ophicleide, based on his own evaluation, although he notes that of course these are just suggested starting places and players will have to discover the best fingerings for their particular instruments and playing habits, as with any other ophicleide. I checked my instrument throughout the range, with the exception of a few notes at the top which my feeble embouchure seems unable to manage, against Tony's chart. I found that the amount of difficulty in producing the desired in-tune pitches was about the same as my 1835-ish antique ophicleide that I usually play. As I experience with the serpent, as well as my other ophicleides, my own lack of talent and skill in the 'perfect pitch' category does allow my pitch center to drift if I am not playing in ensemble. Of course this tends to progressively sour the intonation the longer I allow the pitch drift to continue, as fingerings that worked just fine a minute ago no longer give the correct pitch. I don't experience this to quite the same degree with my main old instrument as I do with my Wessex, although I have observed that I usually start out much better and then get worse the longer I play the Wessex. I attribute this to progressive strain and mis-position of the mouthpiece, and worsening bad posture and attendant lack of breath support, due almost entirely to the considerable weight of the instrument. While my main old ophicleide reads 6.23 pounds (2.82 kg) on my postal scale, my Wessex reads 8.65 pounds (3.92 kg), a 38% greater weight. This is partially due to the silver plating, which makes any instrument heavier, but the main reason is that the Wessex is made from much thicker brass. (But then, so were the Gautrots and others.)



Jonathan advised that the factory reduced the weight somewhat after Tony advised that the prototype was too heavy, but they are using the thinnest brass available to the factory's saxophone department. Anyone who has experience with saxophones knows that they are indeed made from a much heavier brass than what is usually used on modern brass instruments, and the hand worked older ophicleides tend to have thinner metal, and hence lighter weight, than later ophicleides that were mass produced. I don't personally have extensive experience with ophicleide weight comparisons, but I have noticed that many later instruments do feel heavy to me, and some of those were

Gautrot instruments. So my conclusion is that this Wessex is as heavy as it is because 1) it is a copy of a Gautrot model, 2) it is presumably a copy of a later mass produced instrument, 3) it is made in a saxophone factory that is using whichever brass thickness they have available, and 4) it is after all a great big B flat and not a petite C instrument. I consider the weight to be the most significant complaint I have with the Wessex, although this is not really any worse than many others out there and should not affect playability as long as the instrument is adequately supported by neck strap or by resting on a chair if the player is seated.

As I play the Wessex, my other complaint is that the keywork feels awkward and stiff. It feels awkward to me because almost all of my playing is on an admittedly oddball original instrument that has key levers in slightly different places than most other instruments. I have no doubt that Wessex has accurately reproduced the key levers from the original Gautrot model, so this is more of an issue to me than it would be for pretty much anyone else. As for the stiff keywork, the keys themselves pivot freely but some of the key springs are adjusted much too firmly for my tastes, and even for anyone's tastes they are significantly uneven in their resistance to finger pressure. This of course is adjustable by any qualified saxophone repair technician, but I have alerted Wessex to this so hopefully the factory can pay more attention in this regard.



*Two sets of overlapped keys on the Wessex ophicleide; This is one of the least standardized aspects of the ophicleide*

I have observed that the ring for the neck strap is mounted rather high on the body of the instrument; this may be a 'feature' of the original Gautrot, or perhaps the factory placed it there because it seemed correct to them because of their saxophone experience. The high ring position also means that the neckstrap length must be adjusted shorter than it would be otherwise, and on the included neckstrap this results in the strap being too tight to pull over my head without loosening it first, an inconvenience. I have recommended to Jonathan that he investigate using a slightly better baritone saxophone neckstrap, of a design that keeps the neck loop larger while still allowing overall length adjustment, and he replied that he is indeed looking into this providing something better, and he is also considering asking the factory to lower the ring somewhat. I have also suggested to Wessex that the ring would be easier to clip onto with the neckstrap if it were oriented vertically instead of horizontally.

I am quite pleased with the playing characteristics of my Wessex. Ophicleides, while not as primitive as serpents, are still instruments that require more effort and attention to get an even timbre and good intonation. I have not taken the time yet to study and learn new fingerings for the Wessex, and with the exception of a couple notes that simply must be fingered differently from what I am used to with my main ophicleide, I have been using my familiar fingerings when test playing and demonstrating the Wessex. I also have tried to avoid great effort in liping notes into tune when I have recorded my demonstration. When you view my YouTube video, you will be able to tell that I am not using the best fingerings, but still it is comforting that it can be played even this well without idealized fingerings. When I sat with a tuner, I found that using Tony George's chart improved many of the notes which are less than ideal on the video. Reviewing the chart, I don't think anyone would consider that the Wessex requires *unusual* fingerings, just that like any such instrument the player must come to an accommodation with it to get the best results.



*One of two key guards added by Wessex per Tony George*

I found the timbre on the notes obtained using the right hand keys to be fuller and more in tune than those on my main old instrument. The only note that I have consistent trouble with is the E natural above middle C, the same one that produces the resonance that disturbs the screw on the first key lever. Unless I play it assertively, it seems that the instrument just does not really want to play the note that my lips are aiming for, and I get a thin and strained sounding note that is not exactly the pitch I want. When I try to play it at a lower volume or more subtly, this note either does not want to sound or it produces a thin sound that has some coarseness to it. This is what I would normally conclude is a case of the player trying to produce a note that is different from what the instrument wants to resonate to, suggesting that a different fingering would work better, but I have not spent time figuring this out so far. I also tend to have problems on my main ophicleide in this range, so some of the problem is due to what I am doing with my support and embouchure (which strangely is not an issue when I play in that range with modern brass). I don't think there is anything wrong with the Wessex in this regard, at least not something that has a manufacturing fault as its cause.

The Wessex, like many other ophicleides, has some overlapping on the keywork at the bottom of the instrument, near the bottom bow. Most instruments that I have

personally seen have two keys overlapping at the bottom end, so depending on where the player puts the fingertip either one tone hole opens or two adjacent tone holes open. The Wessex has two such key pairs, whereas my own old ophicleide has no key overlap. This is not easily adjustable, by bending the keys for example, if the player prefers not to have this feature (some ophicleides have keywork that is less stout and therefore more readily bent). Per Tony's recommendation, the Wessex ophicleide has guards over the outside key on the bottom bow and also over the two inside keys that might otherwise get caught on the player's pants.

The Wessex comes with a single mouthpiece that has a standard euphonium shank, cup and rim. When I use the mouthpieces that came with my Conn and Yamaha euphoniums, I cannot tell the difference when playing them in the Wessex. I believe that this is by design, since Tony and Jonathan mentioned that they tried to make this instrument more compatible with modern mouthpieces, regardless of what the original Gautrot had. By comparison, my main old ophicleide has a huge mouthpiece shank. I also cannot detect any conicity in the mouthpiece cup, a feature that many original ophicleide mouthpieces have; some of the old ones are almost like bass French horn mouthpieces!



*Typical Wessex tapered tone hole chimney and pad resonator*

The bocal, or crook if you prefer, has apparently been adapted by Wessex to have a tuning slide where the Gautrot original did not. The bottom of the resulting tuning slide also sports a conspicuously modern water key (that's *spit valve* to us Yanks). I have tried the Wessex tuned to A=440 on the tuner and also against a recording of me playing the other half of duets on my main old ophicleide, and had no significant problem playing in tune with my familiar fingerings. I also briefly compared intonation against a fellow player in the 1st Brigade Band, where the instruments are tuned to A=445 or 448, and with the tuning slide pushed in most of the way I could easily play in that situation. I think even higher tuning can be managed with this instrument. With another instrument to play against, I found it much easier to play in tune, or at least match intonation, which if course is usually the case when dealing with older conical brasses.

The tuning slide moves freely and the water key works well. I did notice on my Wessex that I could not completely lock the bocal in position on the ophicleide, since the

thumbscrew that tightens this joint has insufficient authority. Jonathan advised that this is being investigated. However, with the thumbscrew tightened only as much as is easily comfortable using the fingers, the bocal is held tightly enough that it is not going to flop around loosely, and it requires some force to swivel the bocal in this situation.

The rims of the tone hole chimneys are tapered, a feature often seen on historical keyed brasses but less often seen on modern saxophones. I have to assume that the factory did this because the Gautrot original had this; I view it is a mark of quality and attention to detail. The pads in the keys over the tone holes are fitted with what appear to be standard saxophone pads, including the metal resonator disks in their centers. I recall having a conversation with a Chicago area saxophone specialist who was describing the reasons for the saxophone resonators, and at least some of it had to do with making the intonation more stable with the key closed, as the varying vibratory pressure inside the bore with the key closed had a more solid reflecting wall inside the tone hole opening; with the key open the significance of the resonator disk was reduced. Simply making the instrument louder was another reason. At the time I wondered how resonators on pads used for an ophicleide would influence the playing characteristics, and based on my observations so far with my Wessex, I still don't know.

In conclusion, it is my opinion that Wessex has provided a useful service in making a good playing modern reproduction ophicleide of decent quality available at an accessible price and with good likelihood of ready availability in the future. It seems certain that Wessex will produce the C model soon, and I hope that the E-flat quinticlavé happens, as I would almost certainly buy one.



*Kingham ophicleide case, closed*

## More Exciting News

- In the April 2014 edition of this newsletter, J.C. Sherman's new reproduction contrabass serpent, dubbed *Gabriel*, was introduced. Sherman had indicated that it was up for sale, and now Kenneth Moffett, president of the East Tennessee Concert Band, writes "Regarding the piece on J.C. Sherman's contrabass serpent in your April newsletter, you might be interested to know that it has been sold. I negotiated its purchase, being seduced by its elegant design. J.C. and I convened midway at Cincinnati awhile back for the exchange. A brief trying-out in the hotel room brought a knock on the door; it seems this was a floor where pilots and

such expect quiet daytime sleeping conditions! Embarrassing.”

“I will give it a debut with the Greater Knoxville Chapter of the American Recorder Society, where I exercise my Harding serpent, once they reconvene in the fall. That gives me the rest of the summer to figure out some of the fingerings and try to make those weak notes, an ever amusing serpent feature, sound sort of OK!”



*Kingham ophicleide case, open*

● Doug Yeo wrote, “An ophicleide player in England, Adam Reynolds, asked me what I do for an ophicleide case. I told him about mine, made by the BSO case maker, but I suggested he have Kingham Cases in England make him one. He did, and I have forwarded photos [that Adam sent].” For more information, see Kingham’s website <http://kingham.merion.co.uk/>

● Clark Wolf of Iowa wrote, “We’ve always been concerned about our son Jonathan. Instead of picking a respectable instrument, he started on violin when he was in nursery school. This was his own choice, I must add! We tried to direct his interests in more appropriate directions but he would have none of it. For a violinist, he does well enough, but we have always been concerned that the natural limitations of the instrument would become frustrating to him. As a parent I sometimes feel defensive: It’s not our fault. He has been surrounded by Large Brass Instruments all his life. The house is full of them. We used to hope that he might outgrow his childish attraction for the violin, but it seems too late for that now. I more or less gave up hope a few years ago when he played the Mendelssohn *Concerto* with our local orchestra. Sometimes loving your children means standing by and watching them make their own horrible life-warping mistakes. I note that he is the only violinist in the family.”

“Recently however, there have been signs of greater maturity. For a school project, he made what can best be described as a *PVCpent Forveille*. The attached picture was taken on our back porch. It is not clear why he was asked to ‘Take that damned thing outside!’ before his demonstration concert.”

“His grandfather consented to give a short master class on the lawn. This was followed by an impromptu recital. While



*Jonathan Wolf with his 'PVCpent Forveille'*

we experimented with several different large mouthpieces, Jonathan found that the sound was best when he simply used the PVC without any additions. It’s very ugly and sounds charmingly horrendous!”

● The Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment has posted a video on YouTube that has ophicleideist John Elliot introducing his instrument. While there is nothing original in his brief description, of more interest to us is the video segment that follows, of John and Tony George playing the famous *Dies Irae* theme with the orchestra during what appears to be a rehearsal or recording session of the Berlioz *Symphonie Fantastique*. View it by searching for *Two minutes on...the Ophicleide*, or by using the URL [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qt0W1Keaqtk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Qt0W1Keaqtk).

● Doug Yeo sent a link to a website about the history of the St. Albans Symphony Orchestra [St. Albans is a town located northwest of London, just outside the M25 ring road], [www.saso.org.uk/about/history/](http://www.saso.org.uk/about/history/). Notable in the article is the apparent presence of a serpent, played by the orchestra’s director, bassoonist Lewis Covey-Crump. One of his children was famous tenor Rogers Covey-Crump, who sang with David Munrow’s Early Music Consort of London, the Consort of Musicke, the Hilliard Ensemble, the Medieval Ensemble of London, and the Landini, Deller and Taverner Consorts, among others, and who was often paired with another great, tenor Nigel Rogers.



*Lewis Covey-Crump posing with an English Military serpent*

*The orchestra, when asked, was not able to provide any context for this photo, or why their former director would have posed with a serpent, if the orchestra used a serpent, or whether Covey-Crump actually played the serpent*