

Some Clarity About the Cimbasso

by Douglas Yeo, Bass Trombonist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra

If you put ten brass players in a room and ask each of them “What’s a cimbasso?”, you are likely to get ten different answers, each delivered with authority and each likely only partly correct. Of all the brass instruments that have been developed in the last 400 years, there seems to be more confusion about the cimbasso than any other instrument. Herewith is a modest attempt to provide some clarity and to offer suggestions for modern performance practice.

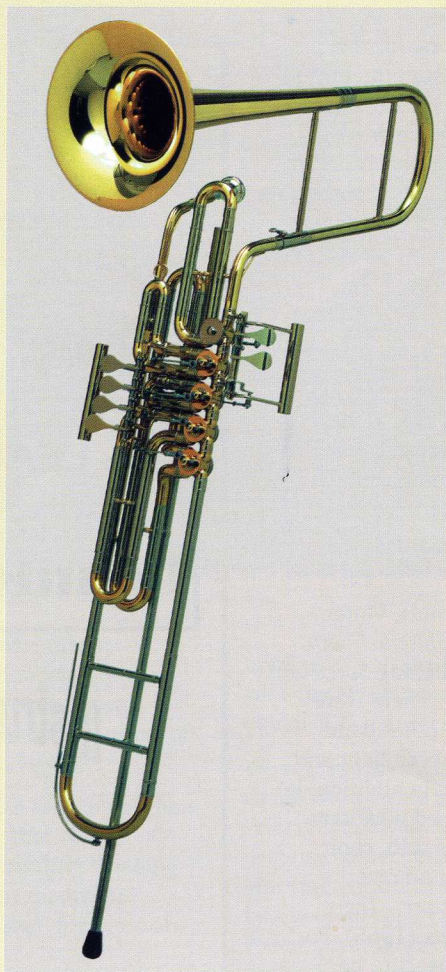
Much confusion about the cimbasso arises from the fact that the word itself has an unclear etymology. Many theories have been put forth that purport to explain the origin of the word, but the most logical is the most simple of all and one clearly supported by the evidence – both instruments and literature. Cimbasso, as Renato Meucci has maintained, is short hand for “Corno in basso” or “bass horn.” With this information we begin a journey to the 19th century to discuss the evolution of bass brasses.

I have previously written about the serpent and ophicleide and their impact on composers who in the 19th century were looking for a suitable bass to the brass family. Invented in France, both the serpent and ophicleide (literally “keyed serpent”) were but two of the many instruments that evolved in the search for a suitable bottom of the brass section. The Russian bassoon (neither Russian nor a bassoon but a form of upright serpent with a dragon shaped bell), serpent à pavilion, serpent Forveille, ophimonocleide, Saxhorns and bombardon were all regional flavors that came and went as each country found its own solution to the bass problem. The bass horn had its birth in England (Frichot, a Frenchman, was the inventor) as a form of upright serpent made of metal. With its upward facing bell the English bass horn had more projection than the wooden serpent and its compact sound blended well with small bore trombones and woodwinds.

The Italian “corno de basso” (a bass horn of wood with a metal bell) entered the vernacular as “cimbasso”. From being a specific instrument with a specific name, the word “cimbasso” rapidly came to mean the best available bottom brass

instrument and what instrument was actually used depended on the time period and nationality of the composer and player. The late 18th century generic bass horn found itself supplanted by the ophicleide – both 9-11 keyed and three-valved varieties – yet in Italy, when a newer instrument came upon the scene, the name cimbasso was still assigned to the lowest brass part. Confused? There’s still more to the tale!

When the bombardon (a form of early tuba with three piston valves) found its way from Germany to Italy, it was also referred to as “cimbasso”. Early Verdi works called for the wood/metal bass horn called “cimbasso”, however the valved ophicleide and bombardon seem to have actually been used in many performances. By 1872, Verdi was clearly dissatisfied with the bombardon as the bass of the trombone section. In a letter to his publisher, Ricordi, Verdi wrote: “I wish to insist once again on a fourth trombone – that bombardon is not possible. I would



Meinl-Weston 41 cimbasso in E.
Courtesy Meinl-Weston. Used with permission.



Douglas Yeo at the National Music Museum (Vermillion, South Dakota, USA) with early cimbasso by Piana, c. 1815. In the display case are found (left to right) copper serpent, English bass horn, military serpent, buccin and Russian bassoon (bells only).

prefer a trombone basso which is of the same family of the others...In a word, do whatever you like, but not that devilish bombardon which will not blend with the others.” Verdi’s deprecation showed him to find the conical bored bombardon blending unsatisfactorily with trombones. Trombone sections in Italy at that time consisted of two tenor trombones in B flat and a bass trombone in F, all with piston valves and not slides. By 1881 Verdi had visited the factory of Giuseppe Pelitti Jr., a noted Italian brass instrument maker, to oversee the construction of what came to be known as the “trombone contrabasso Verdi”, a Bflat contrabass trombone (with valves) that became Verdi’s favoured bottom brass instrument. Even after the introduction of the bass tuba to Italy, Verdi’s stature led to the valved Bflat contrabass trombone becoming the preferred bass brass for all of Verdi’s works as well as those of many other Italian composers. In his later works, when Verdi (and, later, Puccini) wrote for “cimbasso” or “trombone basso”, it was the Bflat piston valve contrabass trombone that the composer had in mind.

In recent decades, a modern instrument in F, also named “cimbasso”, has become the instrument of choice for Verdi and Puccini bass brass parts. This cylindrical instrument is a form of valve trombone in F. While a sensible solution for modern performance, several points must be kept in mind. Verdi and others who scored for the cimbasso were explicitly writing for a section of four piston-valved trombones. Now that trombones have forsaken the pistons and slide trombones are universally in use, the use of a slide contrabass trombone in Bflat or F would seem to be the modern solution that most conforms to Verdi’s explicit instructions.

There is another consideration as well: the cylindrical bore contrabass trombone is a world apart from the conical bore tuba. Experience has shown that tuba and bass trombone players both bring a completely different sound to the modern cimbasso/contrabass trombone in F. Verdi's unhappiness with the bombardon (and later the bass tuba) and his desire for a matched set of trombones to play his four low brass parts leads me to conclude that the cimbasso/contrabass trombone should be played by a bass trombone player with a large bass trombone mouthpiece. This gives the instrument a distinctive trombone sound. Since Verdi's cimbasso parts were never written lower than B below the bass clef staff, the range of the instrument is exactly right for a bass trombonist to play.



Clifford Bevan with early cimbasso (reproduction) by Nicholas Perry.

With this brief summary, we see that music calling for cimbasso has been played at various times by a wood/metal form of upright serpent specifically called

"cimbasso" (the "early cimbasso"), keyed and valved ophicleides, bombardon, valve trombone in BB flat (Verdi's "valved cimbasso"), contrabass valve trombone in F (the "modern cimbasso"), and contrabass slide trombone in BBflat or F. Which instrument to actually use in a performance of 18th and 19th century music that calls for "cimbasso" would be the subject of an informed conversation between a player and the conductor (and as John Webb's cartoon shows,

there are those doubling fees to consider as well!), but there is one thing we DO know: if you're playing Verdi, don't use a tuba!

Douglas Yeo is bass trombonist of the Boston Symphony and has been playing historical brasses since 1994. He may be contacted through his website, www.yeodoug.com

Further reading: Clifford Bevan, "The Tuba Family." Piccolo Press, 2000.

Douglas Yeo, "Exploring the Serpent and Ophicleide," *The Brass Herald*, Issue 7,

Renato Meucci (translated by William Waterhouse), "The Cimbasso and Related Instruments in 19th-century Italy." *Galpin Society Journal*, Number XLIX, March 1996.

Craig Kridel, "Questions and Answers: Bass Horns and Russian bassoons." *International Tuba/Euphonium Association Journal*, Summer 2003.



"As long as the conductor THINKS it's a cimbasso..."

Cartoon courtesy John Webb, Editions BIM (*Trombomania* 1)

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