

You Play A WHAT????

By Brian Bowman

The most frequently asked question of a musician is “What instrument do you play?” When I explain that I play the euphonium the incredulous reply is “You play a what??” While the name “euphonium” is not familiar to many, this instrument with its beautiful rich tone is the chief tenor soloist in the military, brass and concert bands.

The history of the euphonium begins in the early 18th century when many string instruments had reached some state of perfection but most wind instruments were still in their infancy. A forerunner of the euphonium family, the serpent, was used in military bands as a marching bass during this period. The serpent derived its name from its snake-like appearance and was originally used to support the bass part in church choirs. This ungainly instrument was constructed of wood, brass, or silver. It was played with a deep-cup mouthpiece made of horn or ivory and had six finger holes. Later models were more elaborate and had several keys. Qualifications for playing the serpent were good musicianship and an excellent sense of pitch as intonation was a serious problem. The addition of extra keys in the 19th century probably led to a deterioration of playing because performers falsely assumed that these keys cured intonation problems. As a result of this deterioration in performance the serpent began receiving much criticism from musicians and composers. Notably the musicologist Burney compared the serpent's tone quality in incompetent hands to that of a “great hungry or rather angry Essex calf.”



In 1821 Halary, a French instrument maker patented a group of keyed bugles including a bass member called the ophicleide. It appeared much as a combination of the modern bassoon and baritone saxophone, and was played with a deep cup mouthpiece. The use of keys to cover tone holes allowed instrument makers to design instruments with better intonation and more power than the serpent. As with the serpent, the performer had to have an excellent ear and flexible lips to play in tune. The ophicleide was made in several keys and sizes and was used in the 19th century orchestra as well as in military bands of the time. Although the instrument had virtually disappeared from the military bands by the turn of the century, the instrument was still sold in France in 1922.

During the second and third decades of the 19th century valve mechanisms were developed which revolutionized instrument design and manufacture. In 1842, Adolph Sax established a wind instrument factory in Paris where he gained high regard as an inventor and designer of wind instruments. He developed a complete family of valved brass instruments from soprano to bass which are direct antecedents of many brass instruments used today. These instruments were developed mainly for use in the military band and revolutionized these units by their use developing into the famous brass bands of the United Kingdom today.

As these new instruments became available, composers began writing for them. In Germany Wagner established the tuba group by scoring the “Ring” for two tenor tubas, two bass tubas, and one contrabass tuba. The tenor tuba later became popular with other composers (Strauss, Holst, and Ravel). This tenor tuba was essentially the same tenor voiced instrument as the tenor saxhorn developed in the military band which is the euphonium today.

A problem in nomenclature appeared as different variations of tenor voiced instruments were developed. The tenor horn in England was the same instrument as the althorn in Germany and the alto, mib of France. The tenor horn in Germany became the baritone in England and the baryton in France. The Baryton in Germany became the euphonium in England and the basse, sib in France. Although slight variations in construction were present all these instruments had approximately the same pitch and range. Because of our military tradition (English) we use the terms baritone and euphonium to describe the instruments of today.

Meredith Wilson brought the euphonium second-hand fame in the title song from “The Music Man.” The double-belled instrument mentioned here does exist. Early in the 20th century this novelty was obtained by the addition of a small bell section to the main euphonium. This small bell section was used for trombone like effects and was triggered by the use of an extra valve.



One of the most frequent questions among students and band directors is “What is the difference between the baritone horn and the euphonium?” In England, brass bands and military bands have used two different tenor brass instruments both in Bb. The baritone horn is the smaller of the two. Although similar in appearance to the euphonium, the baritone has a smaller bore and a brighter lighter tone quality. The euphonium is a larger bore instrument possessing a more powerful and richer tone quality. American instrument manufacturers have endeavored to combine the best qualities of the two instruments and the result is the baritone horn in general use in school bands today. These instruments are satisfactory for many occasions but lack the fullness and richness of the larger bore euphonium.

Many times audiences have been misled by the program listing of “baritone soloist” confusing the instrument with the baritone voice. To avoid this confusion, the soloist should be listed as “euphonium soloist.” Today in America the terms baritone horn and euphonium have become interchangeable regardless of the instrument used.

The addition of a 4th valve to the euphonium is very desirable as it not only expands the range of the instrument, but can be used to improve intonation and facilitate certain technical passages. This 4th valve, when depressed, lowers the fundamental pitch from Bb to F. By using the 4th valve in conjunction with the other 3 valves, low notes below the bass clef can be played with ease and intonation in both the lower and upper registers may be corrected. The word euphonium is derived from the Greek “euphonia” meaning “well-sounding,” and true to its name, the outstanding quality of the euphonium is its deep, rich tone quality. Too often the younger player will overlook the tone aspect of playing while striving for a flashy technical performance. Care should be taken to develop the proper embouchure and breath-support to sustain a deep, rich, lush, smooth tone quality. Hand in hand with the development of a beautiful sound is the training of the ear and lips to overcome natural intonation deficiencies. The technical aspects of performance should be diligently worked out along with the tonal aspects so that the soloist may perform with ease the most demanding technical solo or passage while maintaining the rich quality of the more melodic parts. Far too many players devote themselves to one phase or the other while what is really needed is the well-rounded musician who is capable of performing all styles of music.

In order to enhance the tone quality, vibrato is used in almost all euphonium playing. Several methods of producing the vibrato are used, including diaphragmic, throat and jaw vibrato, each named for the portion of anatomy used to produce it. The author prefers the jaw vibrato as it is usually a smoother, more controlled vibrato and also helps keep the embouchure from being too tight in younger players. Speed and depth of vibrato are subject to certain general guidelines which must be observed. Fine recordings are available not only of euphonium soloists, but of fine string soloists as well as vocalists. These recordings will help the student hear the different speeds and styles of vibrato.

Different periods and styles of music dictate different types or speeds and depths of vibrato. A dramatic, fiery declamation would indicate a faster, narrower vibrato than a slow lyrical passage or a blues section. In some types of music, no vibrato is desirable. An average speed would be between 5 and 7 beats per second for a normal vibrato. Care should be taken to avoid the overdone, wide vibrato that distorts the tone. The vibrato should at all times enhance the musical effect and beautify the tone quality. The euphonium in band literature has long been compared to its counterpart in the orchestra, the cello. As most early band literature consisted of orchestral transcriptions, the comparison was quite appropriate. As the concert band gained popularity,

The euphonium soon became recognized as a solo instrument of great expression and a full rich tone. Simone Mantia, the euphonium soloist with Sousa’s band became well known as did other soloists, including Arthur Pryor, trombone and Herbert L. Clarke, cornet. These men not only performed on their instruments thrilling audiences all over the world, but composed and arranged solos for themselves. These solos usually contained a theme or popular song of the day with technical and melodic variations.

For the first part of this century, these audience-pleaser type solos were the only original euphonium literature available. The serious euphonium student was forced to borrow literature from other wind and string instruments and even vocal literature. This transcribed literature offered a full range and variety of musical style to help develop the euphonium player in various styles and periods of music.

In the past few decades, several composers have been writing original literature for the euphonium. French publications have been imported written for the French counterpart of the euphonium, the saxhorn. Composers in colleges and universities have taken an interest in composing new music for this medium. It is the author’s hope that this spark of interest will continue and grow. With this new interest, a new field of performance may be opening up to the accomplished and well-schooled euphonium player that of a concert recitalist.

So when people ask “What do you play?” perhaps the best answer is “I play a brass instrument which has a rich, deep tone quality, one which has an important role in band music, and has an uncharted potential as a recital and concert instrument...**I play the euphonium!!.**”