

THE Musical Times ESTABLISHED IN 1844

The Misuse of the Trombone

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Source: *The Musical Times*, Vol. 66, No. 988 (Jun. 1, 1925), pp. 524-525

Published by: [Musical Times Publications Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/912843>

Accessed: 26/11/2014 13:50

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elements that play so large a part in Celtic poetry. But the three Acts in which John sets about and wins the object of his quest are full of easy, melodious tunes, not quite so sparkling perhaps as those of Sullivan, but equally light and graceful. A theme which appears many times in the score :



might easily have for its complement :



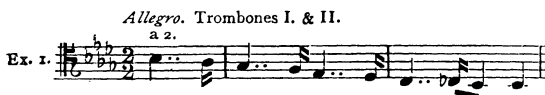
The maimed version of the orchestral score heard at Liverpool could not give us an indication of its merits. But, as the Symphony played under Sir Dan Godfrey a few weeks ago reminded us, Stanford was a master of his craft. Surely, with Carnegie Trusts and the revival of interest in Stanford, this little opera will have its chance some day? It has all the elements which appeal to the average audience, and gives full opportunity for stage effects of every kind. A representative performance is due if we are to avoid the charge of pusillanimity.

THE MISUSE OF THE TROMBONE

By J. A. WESTRUP

We live in an irreverent age. There is no respecting of persons in the world, nor of instruments in the orchestra. The aristocracy which was the strong pillar of our forefathers is now compelled to cut capers worthy only of the clarinet. The noble sackbut that once lifted up its jubilant voice in simple four-part harmony is now condemned to dance, a monarch become puppet, to any inconsequent strains that may be forced upon it. To be plain, modern composers have misused the trombone, and if present tendencies continue, it will become a plaything instead of an instrument, subject rather to the caprice than to the intelligence of the composer.

No one will deny that the trombone's chief assets are tone and dynamic range. Its *crescendo* can be the most powerful in the orchestra; its tone is equally the most noble and dignified of any brass instrument now in use. It would seem then an elementary point of orchestral technique to assign to this instrument passages in which it is permitted to produce this characteristic tone. Good players of course enjoy a technical facility which makes rapid passages quite possible and even effective. But there are limits. It is obvious that in the following example from the first movement of Franck's Symphony it is not possible to produce adequate tone both on the C flat and on the succeeding B flat :



The distance covered by the slide in this minute fraction of time is approximately 21-in. If composers would only take the trouble to make simple mathematical calculations of this kind before setting down such passages, much of the totally ineffective brass writing in modern works would be avoided. This scale-passage in Balfour Gardiner's 'Shepherd Fennel's Dance' is equally unsatisfactory for the tenor trombone :



But the case becomes worse when we find the following in Holst's 'Jupiter' :

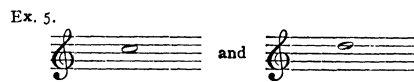


Of course it is quite playable. The composer, a trombone-player himself, would hardly have written anything absolutely impossible. But I contend that passages of this kind, especially those necessitating rapid jumps from remote positions, are ineffective, simply because the instrument is not given a chance to do full justice to its tone. It is a peculiarly perverse characteristic of innovators that they try to bolster up their claims to originality by what is too often termed a 'daring' method of orchestration. But there is nothing new in these gambols of the trombone. Haydn, who was a progressive composer, assigns to his bass trombone the most vigorous antics. But we do not lift up our hands and say, 'How daring, how brilliant!' We make some commonplace remark of quite a different kind, picked up from books, or the lecture-room. This sort of thing is frequent in 'The Creation' :



Beethoven frequently uses the trombones in the same way to support the voice in florid fugue subjects. But everyone who has heard the Mass in D knows the unsatisfactory 'fire-spitting' effect of this contrapuntal writing.

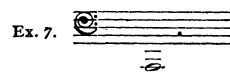
About a year ago a letter appeared in the *Musical Times* complaining of the extreme height of trumpet parts. The same applies to the trombone. There is no reason why the extreme harmonics of the tenor trombone



should not occasionally be employed, though the expediency of writing them *pianissimo* as Strauss does in 'Tod und Verklärung' is at least doubtful.* But whole melodies in this register, especially when an innumerable number of other instruments are doubling, are unnecessary, and tiring to the player. Here is a passage from 'Uranus' :



Little is gained by ignoring the workable compass of an instrument. Forsyth† says of Wagner's

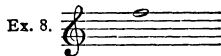


for the bassoon, 'This is, perhaps, one of the things

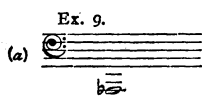
* See also Schönberg, 'Fünf Orchesterstücke' (Op. 16).
† 'Orchestration,' p. 233.

in which it is better not to imitate Wagner.' He might have pointed the moral that the inadvisable notes of an instrument are as much to be avoided as those which are impossible.

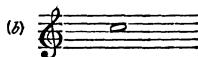
If composers are going to write the extreme notes as though they were normal, why not continue the harmonic series up to the 12th



on the tenor trombone, and treat it like an exalted horn? All the four notes (C, D, E flat, F) are 'possible.' But what is the use of the trumpet if the trombone is normally going to command this extensive compass? The trombone cannot have it both ways. At present, like Peer Gynt, it is 'nor one thing nor the other, only so-so.' Orchestration is becoming ridiculous when the same performer has to play



one minute and



the next. Such invasion of the fields of tuba and trumpet is superfluous.

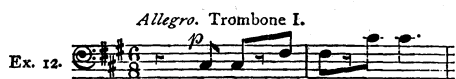
Nor is the trombone essentially a solo instrument. The beginning of the 'Tuba mirum'* in Mozart's 'Requiem' sounds all right, but when it comes to:



the lesson is almost too forcibly driven home. The opening sounds satisfactory, because all the notes except one are what would be 'open' notes of the harmonic series if the trombone were a 'natural' instrument. The truth remains that however chromatic our modern brass instruments may be, the best effect is obtained by using them as though they were producing mainly these open notes. This does not mean that other notes are to be excluded or that scale-passages are bad, but simply that 'fanfare' passages are the most effective. Mendelssohn's arrangement of 'Wachet auf' in 'St. Paul' is a good example. Wagner's scores abound with instances. The following,† selected quite at random, will serve:



It is true that this is not a harmonic series as such on the tenor trombone, but it sounds as if it is, which is all that really matters. Such passages are just as effective *piano*—e.g.,



from 'Peer Gynt.'

* The Germans cling pathetically to the belief that the last trumpet is a trombone. Cf. Brahms's 'Requiem,' p. 202 (miniature score).
† 'Rheingold,' p. 369 (miniature score).

The other way in which the trombone can perform its proper *ἔργον* is by sustaining long notes. This sounds an obvious truism, but an examination of contemporary scores will show to what extent it is neglected. The classical composers were not entirely foolish when they used the trombone in this way. What could be more electrifying than the entry of the trombones in bar 185 of the Gloria of Beethoven's Mass in D, or the chord of D major at the very end of Brahms's second Symphony? But composers have become so fascinated by the acrobatic possibilities of what is in reality a very dignified instrument that they must keep it ever on the move. 'Moderns, beware!' said Pope, a motto which might well be inscribed on the portals of our musical institutions. In the concert-halls it would merely appear fatuous, so long as composers treat instruments in so cavalier a fashion. It may, indeed, be the fault of players for cultivating the *staccato* and *sforzando* at the expense of the *sostenuto*. But it is clearly the composer who is responsible for writing florid and ineffective passages.

There are three main points to be summarised: (1, elementary, but often disregarded), passages in which the slide has to travel such a distance as to render proper tone-production impossible should not be written; (2), the first effective way of writing for the trombone is the 'fanfare'; (3), the second is the *sostenuto*. I have omitted the short *staccato* snaps beloved of our players, because the effect of these is percussive rather than tonal, and so they hardly come inside the sphere of what is peculiarly suited to the trombone. In conclusion, it may be remarked that points (2) and (3) apply with nearly equal force to other brass instruments.

Gramophone Notes

By 'Discus'

COLUMBIA

The outstanding orchestral record of the month is that of the 'Enigma' Variations, conducted by Sir Henry Wood, in eight parts. Although there are a few weak spots—e.g., in the *Finale*—the result as a whole is excellent. I have heard more fairy-like performances of 'Dorabella,' but Sir Henry is 'a 1 out' to good purpose in the brilliant and vigorous Variations. Some of the wood-wind reproduction is among the best I have known.

For the benefit of readers who may wish to obtain certain Variations alone, here is their disposition on the four records: (1) Theme and Variations 1-7; (2) Variations 8-10; (3) 11-13; (4) Variation 14 and *Finale*. What a masterpiece this is! Are there six better modern orchestral works?

We are in luck with Haydn these days. Here is the 'Emperor' Quartet, played by the London String Quartet—a fine bit of playing and recording (three d.-s.).

One violin and one pianoforte record are to hand—both first-rate. Leo Strockov plays the Rimsky-Korsakov 'Chanson Hindoue' and Sarasate's transcription of Moszkowski's 'Guitarre'; and Poufshnov the Debussy Arabesque in G and a Glazounov Polka (both 10-in. d.-s.). The pianoforte tone is notably good.

I am all for the use of string quartet accompaniment to vocal solos, but they should be better written than those used with Dora Labbette's singing of 'The Flowers of the Forest' and 'Ye Banks and Braes.' The harmonization of the