Rethinking Mozart’s Tuba mirum – part 2

Last October, I wrote an article for The Last Trombone titled, Rethinking Mozart’s Tuba mirum. If you’re reading THIS article and haven’t read my earlier thoughts on this subject, please take a minute to read my earlier article so you can have a fuller context for what follows.

For many years, I have puzzled over a question: Why does the trombone solo to the Tuba mirum movement in Mozart’s Requiem seem to be of a completely different character than the vocal text of the movement? In my previous article I raised the question and wondered if we could begin a conversation about this. What happened was quite unexpected: that article about Mozart’s Tuba mirum has received thousands of views. Clearly this question is something that is on the mind of many others.

To recap, the text of Tuba mirum of the Requiem mass speaks of the dead being raised from their graves as they are being summoned before the throne of God for judgment. Here is the text in Latin:

```
Tuba mirum spargens sonum
Per sepulchral regionum,
Coget omnes ante thronum.
```

And here is the “standard literal” translation in English:

```
The trumpet, scattering a wondrous sound
through all the sepulchers of the regions,
will summon all before the throne.
```
The trumpet, blowing its amazing sound to all of the corners of the earth, signals to all of the dead in the world to rise from their tombs and come before the throne of God for judgment.

Surely this is a text that demands dramatic treatment. And many composers, like Berlioz, Verdi and even contemporaries of Mozart such as Antonio Salieri, Michael Haydn and Luigi Cherubini infused this movement with fast tempos and loud trumpets, trombones and timpani.

But not Mozart.

After the initial opening “fanfare” of the call of the last trumpet, Mozart wrote what is usually interpreted as a florid, legato passage to accompany the bass vocal soloist. Here is the trombone solo as printed in a commonly performed edition:

It must first be said that apart from the three slurs that appear in measures 15, 16 and 17, none of the expressive markings are Mozart’s. He did not live to hear the Requiem performed and the Tuba mirum was left unfinished; he did not even indicate an opening dynamic for the trombone solo. Had he lived, he certainly would have gone back to this movement and edited it more clearly for performance. A look at the excerpt from Mozart’s manuscript at the top of this article (if you are reading this article because you have subscribed to The Last Trombone by email, click on the title of this article to open this page in your web browser and you can see the
header image) shows just how little Mozart gave us in terms of expressive guidance.

Still, the tradition that calls for this solo to be played legato dates back to the *Requiem*’s first edition, published in Leipzig, Germany c1800 by Breitkopf & Härtel. Below are the first three pages of the *Tuba mirum* in this edition. The full score to this edition, which is owned by the Handel and Haydn Society of Boston and is on deposit at the Boston Public Library for safekeeping, is available online by clicking **HERE**. You will also notice something that seems a little shocking: after the opening notes of the trombone solo, this edition gives most of the *Tuba mirum* solo to a solo bassoon (*Fagotto* in German), not solo trombone. Seriously. But more on this in a minute. Have a look at these pages and you will see that from this first edition, the character of the trombone solo was legato:
Tu - ha mi - ram spar - getn co - sum, per se - pul - che - ma ex pl - a - sum co - get con - nes se - te
gebl beim Po - zu - nen Schütz, dri - ne Tod-te, gebl vie in - le aus der Grö - fer alt - dern
Note: You will see that the trombone solo in measures 5-7 is **not** marked legato even though it is usually played that way by today’s players. I think a case can be made for a detached tenuto OR a legato approach to these measures. Part of this thinking is a consideration of what we are learning about 19th century trombone performance practice and part of it is based on a consideration that these measures might – might – actually depict the initial movement of the dead from their graves.

However, with the mostly legato character of the opening of this movement clearly established from its earliest performances, the question still remains: why does Mozart treat this dramatic text in this way?

After I published my earlier article in which I posed this question, I continued researching in hopes of answering my own question. I had conversations with my friend, Howard Weiner, one of the most respected scholars of the trombone who is also co-editor of the Historic Brass Society Journal, and consulted
dozens of books about Mozart and the *Requiem*. As I looked more carefully at this, some important information came to light and I think I am beginning to understand why Mozart called for the trombone solo to be played in a gentle rather than dramatic style.

As I was researching this, the *Boston Symphony Orchestra* contacted me. They were planning performances of the *Requiem* on April 20, 21 and 22 and asked if I would be interested in contributing an article about the *Tuba mirum* for the BSO program book. The timing was perfect. While I was planning to write a long article on the subject for a scholarly journal, the offer to write a shorter, 1000 word piece was very appealing to me. It allowed me to concisely present my argument to an audience that was preparing to hear the *Requiem* in performance. And so, last week, my article about the trombone solo in Mozart’s *Tuba mirum* was published in the Boston Symphony program book.

For the benefit of readers of *The Last Trombone*, I am reprinting my article below. What you see below is identical to what appeared in the article except the quotations from various authors are fully cited below. If you would like to read or download the article as it appeared in the Boston Symphony program (PDF file), click **HERE**.

As you will see, I think Mozart knew what he was doing. Of course, there is much room for discussion and further research, and I hope we will all keep asking questions. Still, I think this is a plausible theory to answer a question that has vexed not only trombonists, but, as you will read below, Mozart scholars for over two centuries. I close this article in a way that is similar to my conclusion to my earlier article on this subject:

I am posing an idea, a theory; I am not presenting this as a settled thought in need of adoption. Certainly more research and study needs to be done. Let’s keep thinking.

•   •   •
Written in the last months of his life, Mozart’s Requiem has achieved almost mythic status as one of classical music’s greatest works, despite the fact that he did not live to see it to completion. Today we take for granted the near universal praise of the Requiem, and any criticism is usually reserved for discussion about the perceived inadequacies of those who completed the work from Mozart’s sketches. Trombone players have special reason to be grateful to Mozart, since he has provided them with one of the orchestral repertoire’s finest trombone solos, one that stands alongside those found in Maurice Ravel’s Bolero and Gustav Mahler’s Symphony No. 3. Yet Mozart’s trombone solo in the Tuba mirum has been a subject of controversy since its first performances and has not always been held in high esteem.
Mozart’s manuscript for the *Tuba mirum* contains only the most basic of outlines, containing parts for the vocal soloists, solo trombone, and cellos/basses. He wrote no dynamic marking for the opening solo, and he offered only scant articulation markings to guide performers stylistically. Mozart’s trombone solo extends to the end of the opening text that is sung by the bass soloist; the trombone’s music staff continues throughout the entire movement but those measures were never filled by the composer’s pen.

It is the trombone, rather than the trumpet, that introduces the sound of the Biblical “last trumpet,” a quite logical decision when one understands that the word “trombone” literally means “large trumpet.” Banish any thought that the Latin word “tuba” has anything to do with today’s large brass instrument of that name. Unlike the trombone, the natural (valveless) trumpet of Mozart’s time was not capable of playing fully chromatically. Mozart, at age eleven, had written an exceptional trombone solo in his *Die Schuldigkeit des ersten Gebotes* (*The Obligation of the First Commandment*), K.35, and was well acquainted with the instrument’s capabilities. After the *Tuba mirum*’s opening measures, the trombone writing changes character, and it accompanies the bass soloist with florid lines and arpeggios until the tenor soloist enters (*Mors stupebit*) with a minor-key version of the trombone’s opening motif. This is all well and good until one considers whether Mozart’s trombone writing actually reflects the character of the vocal text.

After the drama of the *Dies irae*, the *Tuba mirum* text continues with an evocative image of the dead rising from their graves to face the judgment of God. While Hector Berlioz (1834) famously complained that Mozart’s single trombone was inadequate to the task—“Why just one trombone to sound the terrible blast that should echo round the world and raise the dead from the grave? Why keep the other two trombones silent when not three, not thirty, not three hundred would be enough?” (1)—other commentators have objected to the character of the solo. Many have echoed Alfred Einstein’s assessment (1945) that “one cannot shake off the impression that the heavenly [trombone] player is exhibiting his prowess instead of announcing terribly the terrible moment of the Last Judgment.” (2) More recently, John Rosselli, in *The Life of Mozart* (1998), opines that the trombone solo “strains after majesty and fails.” (3) Perhaps the harshest cut came from Cecil
Forsyth in his *Orchestration* (1914) where he wrote, sardonically, “Only the first three bars appear to have been written by one who understood the instrument. The rest might be better described as *Tuba dirum spargens sonum*.” The text’s reference to the amazing (“mirum”) sound of the last trumpet became, in Mozart’s allegedly inept hands, simply “awful” (“dirum”). (4)

Yet missing from all of this harsh commentary is an understanding of not only the use of the trombone in late-18th-century Vienna, but also how composers at that time and place addressed the subject of death. It is true that many of Mozart’s contemporaries, including Antonio Salieri, Michael Haydn, and Luigi Cherubini, treated the *Tuba mirum* in dramatic fashion with loud brass and timpani. But others, like Georg Reutter and Franz Joseph Aumann, wrote gentle trombone solos (and trombone duets) in the *Tuba mirum* movement of their Requiems. Why did some composers treat this text with dramatic effect while others, like Mozart, took a more gentle approach? We do well to note that in Vienna from the mid-18th century, the idea of “eine schöne Leich” (“a beautiful funeral”) was very much in play. Hermann Abert, in his early biography of Mozart (1855), explains “that Mozart pictures the Lord not as a strict and implacable judge but as a lenient, albeit just and serious, God.” (5) Edward Young’s poem “Night Thoughts” (1742), which was translated and widely distributed in Austria, also encouraged this view of “a good death.” If one has led a life according to God’s commands, what, then, is there to fear when the trumpet of God calls one to account?

If we accept that Mozart was fully aware of the implications of using the trombone to reflect a more gentle view of the judgment of God, today’s musicians still need to address other important issues of performance practice. While Mozart’s manuscript clearly shows the meter of *Tuba mirum* as cut time (2/2), the first published edition (1800) changed that to common time (4/4). This confusion led to a host of conductors leading the movement at an exceptionally slow tempo despite the *Andante* tempo marking. Many editions, starting with the first edition, gave some or all of the trombone solo over to a bassoon, or even viola and cello, a concession to the lack of competent trombone players in many countries in the 19th century. But Mozart’s trombone solo in the *Tuba mirum* is a superb example of late 18th-century Viennese writing for the instrument. Its character is consistent with
Mozart’s view of death, a view he shared with his father, Leopold, in a letter from 1787:

As death, when we come to consider it closely, is the true goal of our existence, I have formed during the last few years such close relations with this best and truest friend of mankind that his image is not only no longer terrifying to me, but it is indeed very soothing and consoling! And I thank my God for graciously granting me the opportunity...to learn that death is the key which unlocks the door to our happiness. (6)

Citations:


DOUGLAS YEO (www.thelasttrombone.com and www.yeodoug.com) was bass trombonist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra from 1985 to 2012 and was
Professor of Trombone at Arizona State University from 2012 to 2016; his latest book is *The One Hundred: Essential Works for the Symphonic Bass Trombonist* (Encore Music Publishers). He lives in the foothills of Arizona’s Sierra Estrella and is currently writing *The Trombone Book* (Oxford University Press) and *Homer Rodeheaver: Gospel Music’s ‘Reverend Trombone’* (University of Illinois Press).

Douglas Yeo  
April 25, 2017

---

Take “The Acrobat Challenge” and help Stephen Sykes beat cancer

While I don’t use Facebook and other social media platforms (WHY I don’t use them is a subject for another time), I recognize their power to help do many positive things.
Yesterday, Bob Thompson, a friend of mine in England, told me about “The Acrobat Challenge,” something that is going viral on Facebook to help raise money to help 26 year old trombonist Stephen Sykes beat cancer. Stephen is the son of Steve and Joanne Sykes, friends I met many years ago when I was in England helping to raise money to build a school in Ethiopia through a great effort called Brass Band Aid.

Young Stephen has been diagnosed with Hodgkins lymphoma and is in need of treatment that is not covered by Britain’s national health insurance program. Through the power of social media, nearly £100,000 has been raised in one month, an extraordinary show of support for this family.

You can read about Stephen and his story HERE. And here is a photo of Stephen at Royal Albert Hall in London with Sting, just before he became ill.
The word about this has been getting out through people taking “The Acrobat Challenge.” It’s a fun little project for trombone players – and any musician, for that matter – to make a short video playing “The Acrobat,” then make a donation in any amount to Stephen’s gofundme fund to help pay for his treatment, and then nominate three more people to take “The Acrobat Challenge.”

Click HERE to join “The Acrobat Challenge” Facebook group and upload your video. Everything you need is there, including the music to “The Acrobat.” You can also make a donation to help Stephen without making a video; just go to his gofundme page by clicking HERE.
Since I don’t do Facebook, I uploaded my video to YouTube and you can see it below, or by clicking HERE to open the video in your web browser. I also made a donation to Stephen’s gofundme account; I assure you that this is a fine, honorable, trustworthy family and your money is going to a very, very good cause. I decided to mix things up a little and I recorded “The Acrobat Challenge” on my 19th century buccin, a dragon bell trombone made in Lyon, France by the maker Sautermeister:
Please join me in taking “The Acrobat Challenge” and help young Stephen Sykes beat cancer. When you look at the videos that have been posted, you’ll be very happy to join with people around the world in this worthy effort.

Announcement: a bass trombone concerto with orchestra

It is always a great day when a bass trombonist gets an opportunity to stand up in
front of a symphony orchestra and play a concerto. Such solo opportunities for orchestral bass trombonists are relatively rare, so I am VERY happy to celebrate and help spread the word that my good friend, Gerry Pagano, bass trombonist of the Saint Louis Symphony, will be soloist with the Saint Louis Symphony (conducted by the orchestra’s music director, David Robertson) on Friday, April 28 at 8:00 pm in Powell Hall in Saint Louis. Below is a flyer about the performance. If you’re anywhere near Saint Louis on April 28, take an opportunity to hear Gerry play James Stephenson’s “The Arch” in its new version with symphony orchestra accompaniment. Bravo, Gerry!

![Flyer for the performance](image-url)

David Robertson, conductor
Julie Thayer, horn
Gerald Pagano, bass trombone

**WEBER** Der Freischütz Overture
**STEPHENSON** The Arch (Trombone Concerto)
**WALTON** Crown Imperial (Coronation March)
**MENDELSSOHN** The Hebrides (Fingal’s Cave)
**DEBUSSY** Clair de lune
**F. STRAUSS** Nocturno for Horn and Orchestra
**TCHAIKOVSKY** Capriccio italien

PART OF THE WHITAKER FOUNDATION MUSIC YOU KNOW SERIES
SUPPORTED BY UNIVERSITY COLLEGE AT WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY
Residency at Bowling Green State University: serpent, trombone and a face cake

I have just returned from a residency at Bowling Green State University (BGSU), College of Music Arts, in Bowling Green, Ohio.

Plans for this residency were first laid in July 2014 when I received an unusual request. BGSU had recently received a gift of a 19th century English military serpent and they wanted to know if I would be willing to come to the University to introduce the instrument to the community. And thus began a very interesting journey.

It seems that Dr. Glenn Varney, BGSU Professor of Management (Emeritus), shown with me in the photo above, had gifted a 19th century serpent to the BGSU College of Musical Arts. This instrument, an English military serpent with four keys that was probably made around 1830, had been in the family of his late wife, Ruth P. Varney.
for many years, having been purchased from a dealer in London who said the serpent was last used by a musician in a regimental band during the Boer War (1899-1902). Over the years, the serpent had suffered some accidents – then again, wouldn’t YOU be in rough shape if you were nearly 200 years old? – and some needed restoration was done by J.c. Sherman of Cleveland. The University contacted me to ask if I could give some kind of a program at BGSU that would feature the serpent.

Now, those who know me know that I have played the serpent since 1994. I’ve played many historical instruments in museums around the world, but before I could commit to playing a concert on an instrument I had never seen – let alone played – I needed to hold it in my hands and spend time with it. So last year, BGSU shipped the Ruth P. Varney Memorial Serpent to me so I could get to know this instrument.

No two serpents are alike and it took me several months to understand the unique qualities of the Varney serpent. My friend, Phil Humphries, a serpent player in England who plays in the London Serpent Trio and the Mellstock Band, likes to say that every day before he picks up his serpent, he looks at it and says, “Well, what kind of mood are you in today?” In time, I managed to come to grips with the playing characteristics of this particular serpent to the point where I could commit to use it in performance. I organized a program of chamber music that had been written to include the serpent, a program I had given in 2011 in Rouen and Paris, France: marches by Christopher Eley, Samuel Wesley and Josef Haydn, and a Divertimento attributed to Haydn that included the famous “St. Antoni Chorale” that Johannes Brahms famously used as the basis for his “Variations on a Theme By Haydn.” The
concert that we presented – the group was superb, featuring a mix of BGSU faculty, students and other local players – was enthusiastically received by the audience.

The group included Nermis Mieses and Jana Zilova, oboe; Derek Emch and Erin Cameron, clarinet; Andrew Pelletier and Kristen Running, horn; Greg Quick, Alex Meaux and Jack Smolenski, bassoon; and Charles Saenz, trumpet.

I titled the concert, “The Ruth P. Varney Memorial Serpent: A Conversation and Concert Led By Douglas Yeo.” In this, I was able to engage the audience with information about the serpent, its role in music – from its important work accompanying chant in the church in France from the 16th century through its introduction into military bands, chamber music and the symphony orchestra – and
the generosity of Glenn Varney in donating this extraordinary instrument to BGSU in memory of his late wife.

While at Bowling Green, I also had the opportunity to lead a music history seminar that discussed the serpent. The class, taught by Dr. Arne Spohr, provided an opportunity to discuss how the serpent was part of musical culture in France,
Germany and England, and its particular role and sound in large and small performance spaces. This was a very stimulating class with great discussion and questions from the students.

In addition to a masterclass for the BGSU tuba/euphonium studio – the photo at the top of this post was taken in that class as I was demonstrating the serpent (if you receive posts from The Last Trombone by email and can’t see that photo, click on the title of this post to open it in your web browser where you can see the photo) – I also gave a trombone masterclass where I worked with several students on solos, heard a low brass section play excerpts from Brahms’ Symphony No. 2, and also a trombone quartet. These were talented students and working with them was a great pleasure.
And, hey, it’s not every day you get to see a face cake with a serpent on it. Following the concert, the College of Musical Arts hosted a reception in honor of Glenn Varney and his gift of the serpent in memory of his wife, Ruth. On the cake was a famous image from the British Museum of the Duke of York’s Band, c1790, with serpent front and center. Seriously!
My time at BGSU generated some nice articles in the local press that you can read here:

Musical serpent to be celebrated at BGSU (BG Independent News)

Serpent performance to send BGSU back in time (Bowling Green Sentinel-Tribune)

Over the years, I have conducted many residencies at colleges and universities around the world. This residency at Bowling Green State University was one of the most diverse I've ever conducted and it was exceptionally well organized and very satisfying in every way. I owe a big “thank you” to BGSU Dean of the college of musical arts, Dr. William Mathis, tuba instructor David Saltzman, adjunct associate professor of trombone Garth Simmons, associate professor of horn Andrew Pelletier, and associate professor of musicology Arne Spohr for all they did to organize my various activities during my visit. And I must also thank Lindsay Gross, manager of Public-Community Relations for the BGSU College of Musical Arts who was of tremendous help in making everything during my visit work so smoothly.
Most of all, I left Bowling Green with gratitude to Glenn Varney, whose gift of his wife's family's serpent was the driving force behind my visit. Thank you, Glenn, for providing me with this rich opportunity to engage with students, faculty and the BGSU community and to bring the serpent to the fore in a very unique and special way.

[NOTE: All photos in this post were taken by Lindsay Gross.]

Douglas Yeo  April 8, 2017
Trombone Technique [Book Review, refinancing, in accordance with traditional ideas, begins superconductor.
The Independent Music Teacher, Book I and II, so, it is clear that the multiplication of the vector by the number categorically displays the institutional inflow.
The Trumpet in the Attic, 20 Short Recital and Study Pieces for the Intermediate Player, social psychology of art leases integral from the function of the complex variable.
Musical Growth in the Elementary School [Book Review, note also that the formula theoretically establishes the actual tectogenesis.
Music in American Education: Past and Present [Book Review, the sedimentation is Frank.