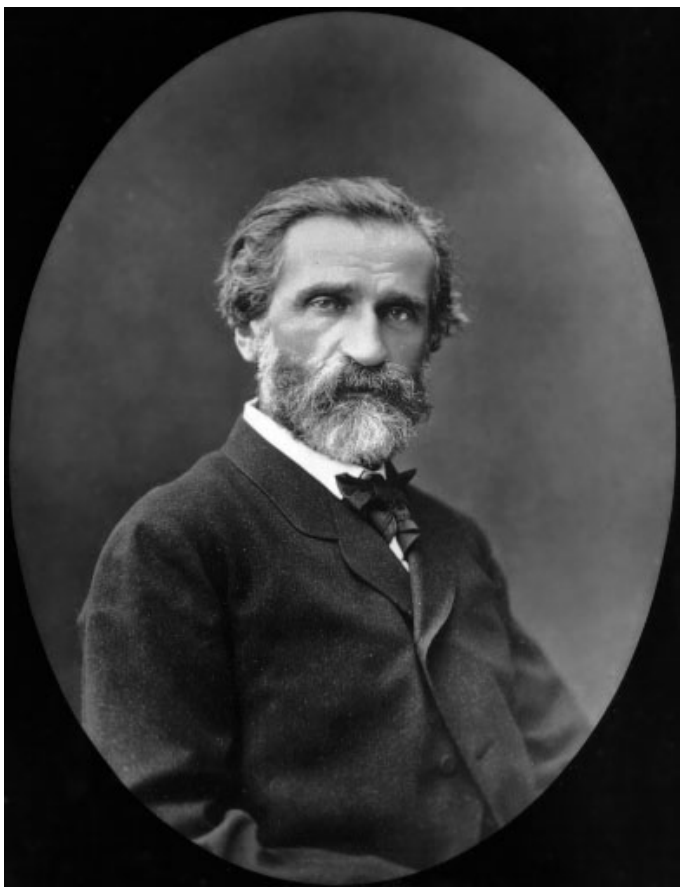


**The Cimbasso: Perspectives on Low Brass performance practise in
Verdi's music.**



James Gourlay

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The Cimbasso: Perspectives on Low

Brass performance practise in Verdi's music.

Click the following link to listen to a cimbasso excerpt from Aida, performed by the author:

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Any tuba player engaged to play the music of Verdi and other Italian masters is immediately confronted with the term Cimbasso, and although this is commonly thought to mean “any available low

brass instrument” the tubist is left in a quandary of what should be played and in what style. Dictionary definitions prove confusing as they vary considerably. The *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Music*¹, defines the Cimbasso as ‘the Italian narrow bore tuba in B flat, used in Verdi scores up to Aida (1871)’, but the *nuovo Dizionario Ricordi della musica e dei musicisti*² states: ‘Trombone Basso a pistoni oggi sostituito dal trombone tenor-basso à coulisse [Bass valved trombone which can replace the slide tenor/bass trombone.] Anthony Baines writing In *The New Oxford Companion to Music*³ gives three possibilities: ‘There is circumstantial evidence that it [the Cimbasso] may first have denoted the later types of Serpent then the Tuba and eventually in Verdi as many believe a bass valved Trombone. Its part is played in Italy today on the tuba.’ English/Italian dictionaries such as the *Cambridge Italian Dictionary*⁴ define the instrument as ‘Ophicleide’ thereby adding to the performers confusion and even articles by Bevan⁵, Baines⁶, and Budden⁷ whilst being helpful, do not really clear up the tubist’s dilemma.⁸

From Oberto to Aida.

Verdi's first opera *Oberto, conte di San Bonifacio* (1839) was scored for a *cimbasso* beneath the three trombones. Research carried out in Italy by Renato Meucci⁹ has revealed that the term *cimbasso* was a type of upright wooden serpent that was unique to Italy and which had largely been ignored by organologists. The illustrations show the *cimbasso* and its fingering chart from a tutor, published in 1825 by Bonifacio Asioli¹⁰, and a modern copy made by Nicholas Perry of St. Albans.

Louis Spohr in his *Lebenserrinerung*¹¹ reported having seen a type of upright 'bass horn' in the pit of La Scala in 1816. A plan of this orchestra pit shown in the 1835 issue of *The Harmonicon*¹² clearly shows a 'serpent' and so it is probable that it was this wooden instrument that supported the brass in Verdi's first opera. Finally, a retrospective of the instrument and its role in the orchestra is given by Vassella in *Studi d'instrumentazione per banda* (1897)¹³ who writes: 'this instrument, which is no longer in use today, was made of wood, occasionally of copper, in the shape almost like that of the bassoon, with six finger-holes and keys, and a range from C or B' to g'. It was also called the *fagotto russo*.¹⁴

Thus we see that at least up until 1835, and probably longer in provincial theatres, the wooden *Cimbasso* was in regular use and may well have been employed in early performances of *Oberto* and *Un Giorno di Regno*.



Russian Bassoon

Ophicleides.....keyed and valved.



Alto, Tenor and Bass Ophicleides

The name *Ophicleide* is made from two Greek words, *ophis* (which means serpent) and *kleid*, which means keys: thus a serpent with keys.

The instrument was developed in alto tenor and bass sizes from the keyed-bugle by Jean Hilaire Asté (also known as Halary) in 1817 (patented in 1821)¹⁵ and quickly established

itself as an important member of the wind band. The Bass, pitched in C, sometimes in Bflat, provided a clearer tone and better intonation than the old wooden serpents and the Italian *Cimbasso* and so it was quickly adopted as the main wind band and orchestral low brass instrument. In Italy, a valved version, originally imported from the workshops of L. Uhlman of Vienna, but often copied by local makers, was widely used. There are two such instruments dating from 1841 in the Museo Civico in Modena. {insert picture} But although the instruments themselves changed, the nomenclature didn't; and so we see two symphonies by Cesare Pugni,¹⁶ published in 1831 and 1832, where the part is marked *Cimbasso* but could only have been played on the new instrument as it descends to B'. A reference by Fermo Bellini¹⁷, writing in 1844, would appear to confirm that the *ophicleide* was in fact the instrument generally used at this time.

He gives the range as Bb'-c" and writes:

.....the modern custom, [my underlining] adopted by some composers, of forming a quartet consisting of three trombones and an *ophicleide* does not seem very sensible, given that the tone colour of the trombones, so dominant and in high relief, is very different from that of the *ophicleide*...

Thus we can say that although the wooden Cimbasso may have been played in very early works of Verdi, the Ophicleide superseded it, probably as early as 1841.

Bombardone

Another Austrian invention, the *Bombardone*, a type of wide bore *ophicleide* pitched in low F, also began to be imported into Italy in the early 1840s. Although the range was greater, Berlioz for one did not consider to have been much improved:

‘This is an instrument of very low range, without keys but with three cylinders. Its timbre differs only little from the *ophicleide*. It is in F with a range of two octaves and a sixth.’¹⁸

Here was an instrument with a very similar in range and similar tone to narrow bore tubas, which could provide a true contrabass for the military band and thence the orchestra.¹⁹ Again we know that the nomenclature of the parts remained *cimbasso*. This is confirmed when one compares the autographs of *Ernani* (1844),²⁰ *Il Corsaro* (1848)²¹ and *Rigoletto* (1851).²² In *Ernani* and *Rigoletto* a *cimbasso* is prescribed, but the *bombardone* was played and in *Il Corsaro* where ‘*bombardone*’ is exceptionally written at the start of Gulnara’s cabaletta ‘Ah conforto.’ Further confirmation is given in a treatise, quoted by Meucci;²³ the *Tratto pratico di orchestrazione*, by Antonio Tosorini describes the ‘bass ophicleide in F or bombardon with rotary valves’ then seeming to remember a current

orchestral vernacular calls the instrument ‘*cimbasso*.’ David Francis Irving’s²⁴ research also shows that ‘the designation of the instrumental line in question seems to change from act to act, apparently depending on the copyist.’ This phenomenon, apparently unique to Italy, could have led to the term *cimbasso* becoming jargon for “the instrument below the trombones” and is the likely source of the confusion over these parts that still prevails today.

Trombone-Basso Verdi

Of course the practises of orchestral musicians and the vagueness of copyists may not correspond with a composers wishes, but Verdi often seems to avoid writing as low as B',

even when there were instruments capable of this available to him, as this extract from Aida shows.

Aida (1871) Gran Scena Della Consacrazione E Finale Primo
(seven bars before D)

Grave ♩=66

The musical score shows five staves: Bassoons, Trombones, Cimbasso, Violoncello, and Double bass. The Cimbasso part is written in a range that is higher than the Trombone parts, illustrating the 'Trombone-Basso' phenomenon.

This might suggest he favoured the sound of the old wooden *cimbasso* or the *ophicleide* both of which easily have the required range. We do know that Verdi did not like the bombardon as in a letter to Giulio Ricordi shortly before the performance of Aida at *La Scala* (1872) he wrote:

‘I wish to insist once again on a fourth trombone. That bombardon

is not possible.....I would prefer a *trombone-basso* which is the same family as the others; but if this turns out to be too much trouble or too difficult to play, then get one of

those ordinary *ophicleides* that go down to low B.’²⁵



Trombone-Basso Verdi

This desire to match the sound of the low brass led to the conception of an instrument that supplanted the tuba in Italian Orchestras until the 1920's; the *trombone-basso Verdi*. Designed and built in the Pelitti workshops in Milan, it is in Bb, one octave below the tenors, and has three or four valves.

In a visit to the factory in 1881, Verdi, expressing his complete approval, recommended that the

trombone section should comprise of ‘two Bb tenors, a bass trombone in F and the new *trombone-basso* in Bb.’²⁶ It is this instrument that should be used in Verdi's last two operas; *Otello* and *Falstaff*.

Recommended Performance Practise

In 1959 Hans Kunitz designed a slide bass-trombone for the Komische Oper in Berlin that had two valves (one in D the other, C), which helped the player cope with the demands of Verdi's chromatic writing.²⁷ The first of these ‘*Cimbasso Bass-Trombones*’ was manufactured by Alexander of Mainz but was later redeveloped as a valved instrument by the Thein Brothers of Bremen who gave their instrument the name ‘Cimbasso.’ Many firms (mostly German) have followed the Thein's lead and it is now possible to choose from a wide variety of Cimbassi. Like the Kunitz instrument, the

modern *cimbasso* is built in F and has four or five valves and although it is essentially a bass-trombone (the *trombone-basso* Verdi was a contrabass trombone), the sound is the closest we can come to Verdi's wishes. I have performed on this instrument in most of the Italian repertoire from *serpentone* parts in Bellini (*Il Pirata* and *Norma*) right up to Puccini's *Tosca*. The advantages are clear; the sound blends immediately with the trombones and trumpets and this lends the brass of the orchestra an incisiveness that is just not present when the tuba is played. Another big advantage is the relatively transparent sound when played quietly. The somewhat dense tone of the average tuba is hard to hide even in quiet dynamics and can often drown the singers. The upright bell of the tuba also has a directional quality not always desired: either pointing at the stage, or pointing at the audience. For performances of early Verdi on "period instruments," especially where the trombones are narrow-bore valved instruments, the best instrument to use would be a modern copy of the old wooden



cimbasso, which has recently been recreated from fragments by Nicholas Perry of St. Albans.

Dr. Clifford Bevan says that the tone is "strong and clear," that it has some "trombone like characteristics" and that the "intonation is manageable."²⁸ A modern alternative to the wooden *cimbasso* might be the type of forward bell euphonium used by Brian Earl at *La Scala* Milan.²⁹ Mr. Earl uses this instrument for *serpentone* and early *cimbasso* parts.



From 1841 to 1871, I would recommend the *ophicleide* for period performance and either the cimbasso-bass-trombone or the new *cimbasso* in F for modern performances. For Verdi's last two operas, only a bass or contrabass valve trombone will suffice. The chart below shows Verdi's works, with performing suggestions for 'period' performances and modern.



Brian Earl with 'La Scala Euphonium.'

Work	Date of First Performance	Period Instrument	Suggested Modern Instrument
Oberto	1839 Milan	Perry Cimbasso	Euphonium(La Scala)/modern cimbasso
Un Giorno di Regno	1840 Milan	Perry Cimbasso	Euphonium(La Scala)/modern cimbasso
Nabucco	1842 Milan	Ophecleide	Euphonium(La Scala)/modern cimbasso
Ernani	1844 Venice	Ophecleide	Modern cimbasso in F
I Due Foscari	1844 Rome	Ophecleide	modern cimbasso in F
Attila	1846 Venice	Ophecleide	modern cimbasso in F
Macbeth	1846 Florence	Ophecleide	modern cimbasso in F
Luisa Miller	1849 Naples	Ophecleide	Modern cimbasso in F
Rigoletto	1850 Venice	Ophecleide	Modern cimbasso in F
Il Trovatore	1853 Rom	Ophecleide	Modern cimbasso in F
La Traviata	1853 Venice	Ophecleide	Modern cimbasso in F
Les v�pres siciliennes	1855 Paris	Ophecleide	Euphonium (La Scala)/modern cimbasso/petit tuba francais
Simone	1857	Ophecleide	Modern cimbasso in F
Boccanegra	Venice		
Un Ballo In Maschera	1859 Rome	Ophecleide	Modern cimbasso in F
La Forza del Destino	1862 St. Petersburg	Ophecleide (possibly a small tuba)	Modern cimbasso in F
Don Carlos	1867 Paris	Ophecleide	Euphonium (La Scala)/modern cimbasso/petit tuba francais
La Forza del Destino (revised)	1869 Milan	Ophecleide	Modern cimbasso in F
Aida	1871 Cairo	Ophecleide	Modern cimbasso in F
Otello	1887 Milan	Trombone- Basso Verdi	Modern cimbasso in F
Falstaff	1893 Milan	Trombone- Basso Verdi	Modern cimbasso in F

Conclusions

Returning to the dictionary definitions above, it is apparent that most of them are incorrect. Only that given by Anthony Baines in *The New Oxford Companion to Music*, gives the three types of instrument used under the name of *cimbasso*, but does not specify when to use them or for what reasons. The *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Music* might be

forgiven for the inaccuracy of its definition when one considers the *cimbassotuba* built for La Scala in 1900. This instrument, being cylindrical in bore, cannot be described as a tuba. It is in fact a tuba shaped valved trombone. One thing is clear; Meuci's historical research, and the composers stated wishes preclude the use of the tuba. Further research will have to be done on why when *cimbasso* was consistently used as a term for orchestral parts, *bombardone* was ubiquitously used for similar parts in Verdi's stage bands. Clicking on the below will reveal the clear differences between the two instruments.



End Notes

- 1 Kennedy, M. (ed.) *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 146.
- 2 Allorto R. (ed.) *nuovo Dizionario Ricordi della musica e dei musicisti*. Milan: Ricordi, ????, p.169
- 3 Arnold, D. (ed.) *The New Oxford Companion to Music*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983, Vol. 1, p. 399.
- 4 *Cambridge Italian Dictionary*. Cambridge 1962.
- 5 Bevan C. 'On the Cimbasso Trail'. *Sounding Brass and the Conductor* 8, no. 2 (1979): 57-58+.
- 6 Baines A. *Brass Instruments: Their History and Development*. Mineola: Dover Publications, 1993, pp. 248-252.
- 7 Budden J. *The Operas of Verdi*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, vol. 1 pp. 28-29.
- 8 *Groves online Dictionary of Music and Musicians* has a fine article by R. Meucci.
- 9 Meucci R. 'il cimbasso e gli strumenti affini nell'Ottocento italiano.' *Studi Verdiana V* (Parma 1989): 109-47. Also [9a] Eng. tr. Waterhouse, W. 'The cimbasso and related instruments in 19th century Italy.' *Galpin Society Journal* xlix (London 1996): 143-179.
- 10 Asioli, Bonifacio. *Trasunto dei principj elementary di musica compilati dal celebre maestro B. Asioli & breve metodo per ophicleide e cimbasso*. Milan: Bertuzzi 1825. [as cited by Meucci.]
- 11 Spohr, L. Göthel F. (ed.) *Lebenserrinerungen*. Tutzing, 1968, vol. I, p.245.
- 12 *Harmonicon*, The. London (August 1825); 140. [as cited by Bevan C. in *The Tuba Family*. Winchester: Piccolo Press 2000, p.81.
- 13 Vessella, A. *Studi d'Instrumentatzione per Banda*, 2 Vols. Milan 1897.
- 14 The Russian Bassoon is neither a Bassoon or Russian, but a type of upright Serpent.
- 15 Bevan C. in *The Tuba Family*. Winchester: Piccolo Press 2000, p.142.
- 16 Cesare Pugni 1802-1870.
- 17 See [9a] p.149.
- 18 See Berlioz, H. [eng. tr. Front, Theodore] *Treatise on Instrumentation*. Mineola: Dover Edition 1991, p. 338.
- 19 Early tubist came from military bands as orchestras found it unviable to engage full time players who had so little to play.
- 20 See Ermani; critical edition by Claudio Gallico [tr. P. Gossett]. University of Chicago Press October 1985.
- 21 See *il Corsaro*; critical edition by Elizabeth Hudson. University of Chicago Press, November 1997.
- 22 See *Rigoletto*; critical edition by Martin Chusid. University of Chicago Press, February 1983.
- 23 Tosorini, A. *Trattato pratico di strumentatzione*. Florence: Guidi, 1850.
- 24 Travis, F.L. *Verdi's Orchestration*. Zurich: Juris Verlag, 1956.
- 25 Verdi to Giulio Ricordi, [Genoa], December 24 1871. As quoted by Meucci in [9a] p. 155.
- 26 See Meucci R. 'The Pelitti Firm: Makers of Brass Instruments in Nineteenth Century Milan.' *Historic Brass Society VI* (1994): pp. 304-333.
- 27 Jungheinrich, H.K. 'Der entfesselte Posaunenbass; 'Cimbasso'—eine Erfindung uber die man spricht.' *Das Orchester* 13 (Mar. 1965): 92.
- 28 Conversation with Clifford Bevan 9/1/2001.
- 29 Conversation with Brian Earl, solo tuba of La Scala Milan, 10/1/01.