

Courtois and Arban: evolution in brass instruments and their playing techniques

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The firm of the French brass instrument maker Courtois (founded in 1789) and the brilliant cornet virtuoso J. B. Arban (1825-1889) stand tall amongst the most important musical figures of the nineteenth century. After the death in 1803 of the founder Mr. Courtois (unfortunately we don't know his first name) manufacturing continued with his sons and nephews and the firm, now re-named Antoine Courtois, remained the most important brass instrument maker of its time. Courtois created a wide variety of brass instruments that were typical of the period: natural trumpet, slide trumpet, trumpet with both Périnet and Vienna pistons, circular trumpet and cornet, cornet à pistons, half-moon trumpet... This tradition of imaginative, modern design at Antoine Courtois continues today. J. B. Arban was celebrated not only as a great virtuoso and soloist, but also as a composer/ arranger and as a conductor. He is the author of the first important and complete method for Cornet and Saxhorn which is still successfully utilized today in modern study of the trumpet. Arban was also very interested in creating and promoting new models of instruments, working with Antoine Courtois in this direction. This collaboration resulted in the successful Cornet Arban.

Courtois et Arban : évolution des instruments et de leur technique de jeu

La firme du facteur de cuivres français Courtois (fondée en 1789) et le brillant virtuose du cornet J. B. Arban (1825-1889) comptent parmi les acteurs musicaux majeurs du XIX^e siècle. En 1803, après la mort du fondateur, M. Courtois (dont on ignore malheureusement le prénom), la fabrication se poursuivit avec ses fils et ses neveux, et la firme, désormais rebaptisée Antoine Courtois, demeura la plus importante fabrique de cuivres de son temps. Courtois produisait un large éventail de cuivres caractéristiques de l'époque : trompette naturelle, trompette à coulisse, trompette à pistons Périnet et viennois, trompette et cornet circulaires, cornet à pistons, trompette demi-lune. Cette tradition créative et moderne se perpétue aujourd'hui encore chez Antoine Courtois. J. B. Arban était célèbre non seulement comme grand virtuose et soliste, mais aussi comme compositeur, arrangeur et chef d'orchestre. Il est l'auteur de la première méthode importante et complète de cornet et de saxhorn, laquelle est encore utilisée aujourd'hui avec succès dans l'enseignement moderne de la trompette. Arban s'intéressait également beaucoup à la création et à la promotion de nouveaux modèles d'instruments, travaillant avec Antoine Courtois en ce sens. Cette collaboration déboucha sur la réussite du cornet Arban.

The Courtois Company, makers of brass instruments since 1789 and still producing instruments today and the cornet virtuoso J.B. Arban (1825 – 1889) were figures of capital importance in their respective fields in the 19th century.

The activity of Monsieur Courtois (his first name is unknown) began in 1789 at *Rue de Mazarin*. Today two instruments remain to witness his production: a horn (in Berlin) and a cavalry trumpet which presumably belonged to a messenger of Napoleon Bonaparte's parliamentary guards in 1799. At his death in 1803 some members of Courtois family founded two separate manufacturing locations. One of them was at 34, *Rue des Vieux-Augustins* and was run by *Courtois Neveu Aîné*, [The elder Courtois' nephew] then, around 1841, by the nephew's sons (Auguste, Eugène, and Louis) with the name of *Les trois fils de Courtois neveu*. Subsequently the company was owned by the eldest brother, *Auguste Courtois* (1847 – 1848), who moved the headquarters to the *Rue de la Folie-Méricourt* shortly before 1860.

The Courtois family production included an impressive number and assortment of brass instruments; their trumpet and cornet manufacture covers most of the brass instruments of the 19th century: natural trumpets, Viennese valve systems, Périnet valve instruments, slide trumpets, Stölzel and Périnet valve cornets, circular trumpets and cornets, demi-lune trumpets, and both key and valve flugelhorn. Many of these instruments are exhibited at the Musée de la musique at the Cité de la Musique in Paris and can also be seen on the museum web site (<http://mediatheque.citedelamusique.fr/musee>).



III. 1 - Slide trumpet Antoine Courtois, 1846
Collection Musée de la musique, Paris, E. 1541

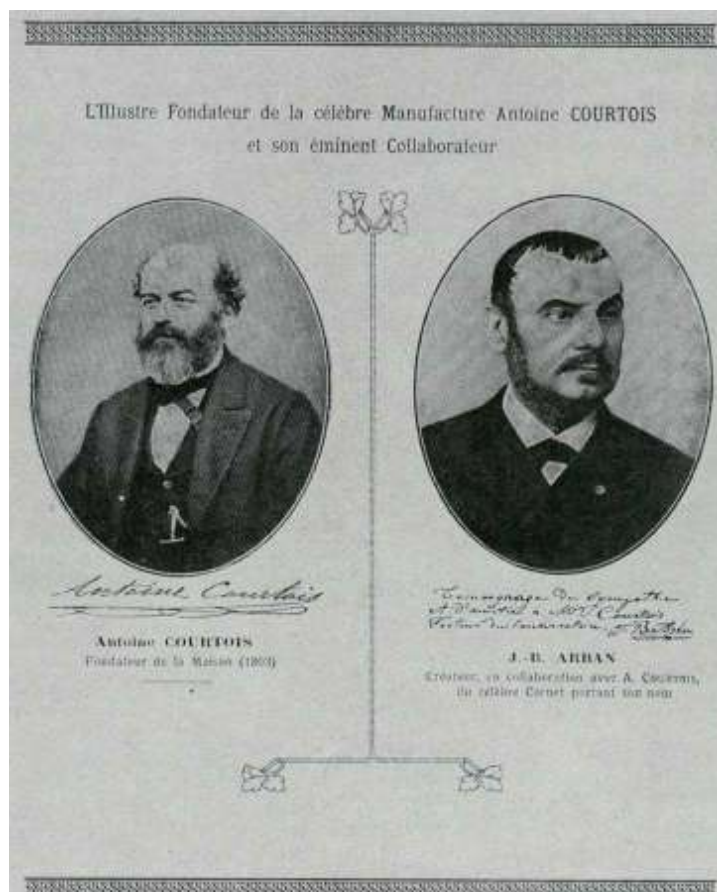
Certainly the most important member of the Courtois family was Antoine (1770 – 1855), and with his name this trademark still exists for the manufacture of brass instruments.

Antoine soon moved to *Rue du Caire*, where he started production and, at the same time, did research on manufacturing techniques and acoustical physics in order to

improve instrument efficiency. In his research he was helped by instrumentalists from the Paris Opera. However his best customer still remained the army.

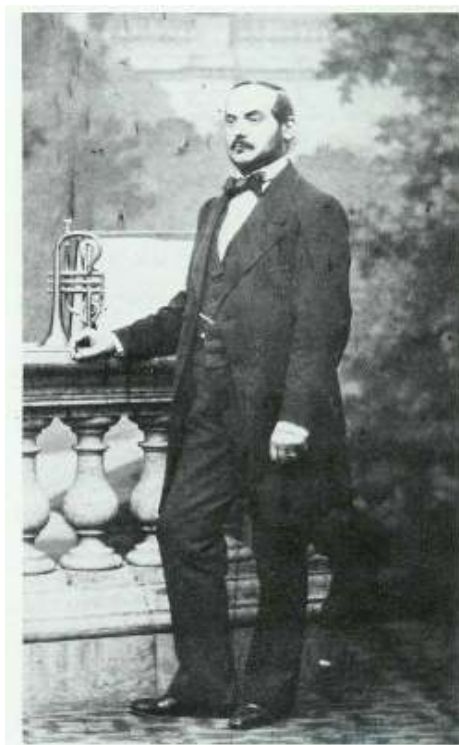
In 1844 Antoine (Denis) Courtois Jr. (1800 – 1880) succeeded his father. In 1856 he moved to the Rue des Marais, which remained the official company headquarters for many years.

The working together of Courtois and Arban was important for the development of many different instruments.



III. 2 – Antoine Courtois and Jean-Baptiste Arban

One of these instruments is the Courtois-Arban Cornet



III. 3 – Antoine Courtois

At Antoine Courtois Jr's death no family successor took his place. It was Auguste Mille (1838 – 1889), who had worked with Courtois since 1856, who took over. Mille continued Courtois'work of improving all brass instruments, for example the creation of a 4 pistons cornet in collaboration with the Italian Alessandro Scuri. After Mille's death in 1898, the firm was taken over by his business partner E. Delfaux. In 1917 the firm was bought by Emmanuel Gaudet, and has remained the property of this family through his son Paul and subsequently by his grandson Jacques.



III. 4 –Antoine Courtois' workshop

Recently Courtois has been bought by the Buffet Crampon Group and thanks to this new impetus has been able to relaunch, with the old passion, the production of all their instruments.

Arban

J.B. Arban is remembered for many reasons: he was not only a famous solo virtuoso, but also a composer and arranger, an orchestra director as well as the creator of the first modern cornet and saxhorn method, which is still in use in music conservatory trumpet classes. His untiring will to create and improve, led him to invent and perfect new models of instruments.

Antoine Courtois worked with J.B. Arban in the creation and manufacture of many instruments. The Arban Cornet, in particular, had an extraordinary success.

Arban first applied for admission to the Paris Conservatoire on September 29th 1841. He was admitted to M. Dauverné's trumpet class. He was awarded with the conservatory's first prize in 1845.

In 1857 he was appointed *professeur de saxhorn* at the Military School (attached to the Paris Conservatoire).

In this School Arban developed his *Grande Méthode complète de cornet à pistons et de saxhorn* which was first published in 1864. Arban drew attention with his brilliant

and simple way of playing and had great success thanks to his triple tonguing. In 1856 his fame was immense. The impresario and founder of the Cadet Casino appointed Arban as director of the dance and light music orchestras. In this way Arban gained a great reputation as an orchestra director, directing, among others, the orchestra of the Paris Opera.

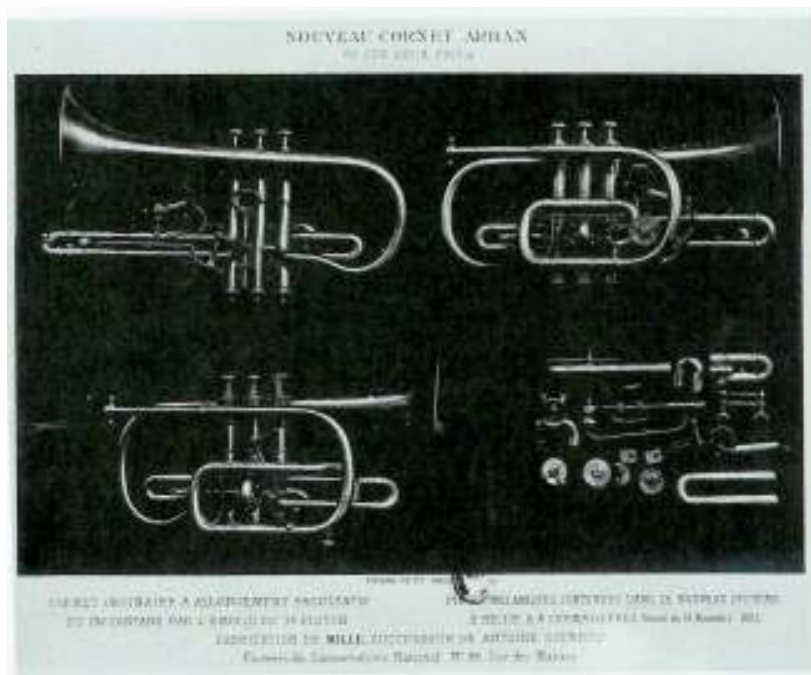
In 1868 he decided to apply again to the Conservatoire, to be professor of a newly created cornet class (his first attempt in 1861 was unsuccessful). In the meantime he continued his career as a soloist and director. In St. Petersburg he had great success, as testified by local newspapers of the time.

In 1874, due to growing difficulties in getting frequent leaves of absence, he resigned his position of Professor of the Cornet at the conservatory in order to continue unimpeded his career in St. Petersburg, where he could now perform for longer periods of time.

Some adverse criticism appeared, although his popularity was still great. Perhaps the public in St. Petersburg began to be tired of Arban. He therefore started to consider a possible return to Paris, giving up his career as soloist and director. In 1880 he wrote a letter to apply for his former position at the conservatory, to which he was promptly readmitted.

From then on, Arban's activity was mostly dedicated to teaching and the creation of new cornet models. Arban struggled all his life long to further his ideas in the name of improvement progress and art. From 1880 on he dedicated his efforts to create a new concept of instruments construction.

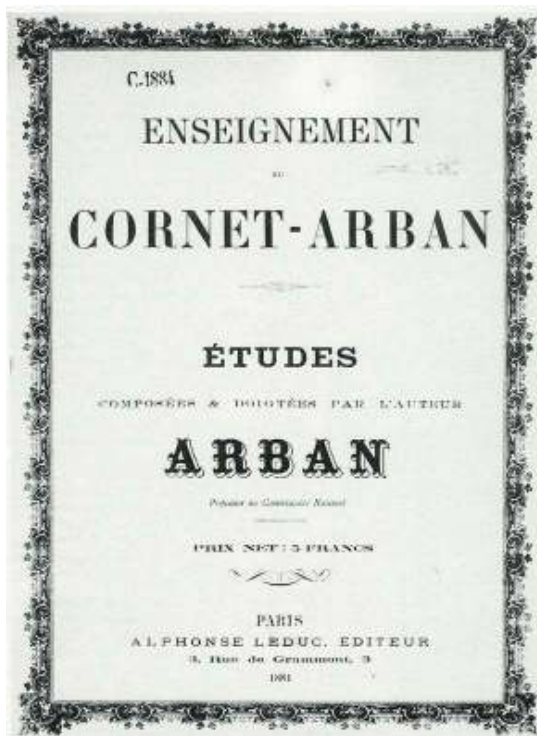
He presented an extension device for the third valve slide and a helical and rack device in the fourth piston. The chromatic scale given indicates that the instrument could play to low Eb, and the 4th piston (in the picture it is a rotary valve) allows a further extension.



III. 5 – Arban's new cornet

Although this model is not without interest it didn't have much success and was a disappointment to Arban.

Arban also published a method with specific fingering for this particular instrument.



III. 6 – Arban's Method for this new cornet

On the other hand, the simple cornet used by Arban in the course of his career had much success; and a corresponding line of mouthpieces was created.



III. 7 – Courtois'cornets

Arban's struggle for the supremacy of the cornet over the trumpet had finally been won. From the very beginning of his career, he had understood that, due to the limitations of the F trumpet commonly used at the time, he couldn't meet, as soloist, his own ambitions and expectations.

Here is what Arban wrote in a letter dated November, 2nd 1868. This letter represents a document of the dispute between trumpet and cornet players.

Today hardly anybody still plays the trumpet. Everywhere the trumpet has been replaced by the cornet. This is indeed the trumpet's younger sister, but its tone color offers a subtle difference... The Conservatory trumpet class has been unable to contain this phenomenon, for the simple reason that one can play the trumpet superbly, and at the same time starve to death, while anybody can earn a living by simply playing the cornet. I therefore propose to create a single class for trumpet and cornet, so that students can alternate between both instruments.

Certainly the trumpet commonly used at that time (usually in F or Eb] seemed to favor this instrument in terms of sound quality and power in an orchestra, whereas the cornet had higher possibilities regarding technique and flexibility. And it is indeed for this instrument, which is shorter and more conical than the trumpet, made in Bb and A, that Arban developed his method. The range is substantially the same in the lower register of a cornet as an F trumpet, but it is obviously greater in the upper register and with greater security.

Comparing Arban's method with his teacher Dauverné's method for natural and slide trumpet, one can notice Arban's innovations compared to the former way of playing. Greater care in articulation, much chromatics and elaborate and complicated fingerings, better dynamic control in the various registers, a sophisticated use of double and triple tonguing (of which Arban claimed to be the inventor), these are the features which immediately made his method famous and useful.

A special series of flexibility studies, to facilitate going rapidly from one register to the other, made the cornet an instrument able to surmount difficulties previously thought of as impossible. All these innovations opened the way to the modern school of trumpet playing in use today.

Credits:

Ill. 1: photo Albert Giordan © Cité de la musique