By Denis Wick

- 20th Century Orchestral Trombone Styles in UK

  Until the 1940s, the small bore (0.450") trombones that Elgar and Holst had known and played were in universal use in symphony orchestras. They continued to be standard equipment in the many thousands of brass and military bands that existed after WW2 until the 1960s. . When one realises that these early 20th century orchestral trombone here in Britain had a completely different sound from what has now become a world standard; the question of how we arrived at what we have today is now a matter of history.
  The older generation of orchestral trombonists, John (Jock) Ashby in the LSO, Sidney Langston at the BBC, Sam Holt in the Halle, were all very good players who made rich, full and telling sounds on their small-bore instruments. The instruments they used – now long lost museum–pieces, were the British Hawkes Artist's Perfected, Boosey Perfecta, Higham, and occasionally a French Courtois Conservatoire Model. There were subtle distinctions in bore sizes and the orchestral models were very slightly larger in bore and bell diameter than those used in brass and military bands. German trombones, with completely different design, which so much influenced American makers during the 20th century were completely unknown in Britain, as was the alto trombone. Curiously, one of my oldest trombonist friends, Arthur Wilson, had a treasured photograph, now sadly lost, taken in the 1860's of his great-great-grandfather, then in the Scots Guards band, in his full military regalia, holding what is obviously a German trombone, complete with the traditional tuning-slide snakes-and-acorns decoration.
  The slides of these British and French "pea-shooter" trombones were heavy and their action cumbersome by modern standards, but they had no bad notes and very even intonation. The one absolutely unique aspect of British trombone playing was, of course, the G bass trombone, which needed a handle on the slide to reach 5th, 6th, and 7th positions. This was to be found in every kind of band and orchestra. By the late 1920's Boosey had, in consultation with one William Betty, produced a slightly larger (0.523") orchestral model G bass trombone, with a tightly wrapped rotary valve system to D. This could play the missing low C and B required in the symphonic repertoire that had been written for the continental F bass trombone. The mystery of a G rather than an F bass trombone in Britain has never been satisfactorily explained, except possibly guessed at by me in my Trombone Technique (OUP 1971). My theory was and is that playing in the front rank of a marching band, the

spectacular effect of tonic-and-dominant “oompah” notes was really effective in the traditional keys of Ab and Db, where a six foot length of trombone slide was waving about. A sight to behold! I have always described the G trombone as the musical equivalent of coarse fishing. On the positive side, I have to say that the low C in the loud chorale in the last movement of Brahms’ 1st symphony seemed to me bigger and nobler than anything since. The low E in “Uranus” from Gustav Holst’s “The Planets” had a similar feeling - it seemed to support the entire orchestra. The best symphonic exponents, Bill Coleman, Gerry McElhone, and Frank Mathison, were good players, but primarily good musicians. .

The many excellent jazz and dance band players had moved on from these small bore trombones on which they had made their earliest beginnings, a few bigger American instruments – mainly from pre-war days, were still to be found by 1950 – King 2B, Conn 6H and “Super” Olds. The orchestral purists looked down their noses at such exotic imports, but had to concede that both in sound and playability they were much better for that kind of music.

In July 1950 my career as a professional orchestral player began when I took the job as 2nd trombone of the orchestra at Bournemouth, then known as the Bournemouth Municipal Orchestra, working in a very pleasant seaside town in the south of England.

There were relative few orchestral musicians around in those far-off days and their career paths were very different from those of today. Most brass and many woodwind players had been military musicians early in their lives and had acquired infallible reading skills and general resourcefulness that made them superb at professional work. The average age would have been about 45, so that as a 19-year-old I felt very junior. My natural cockiness was just about tolerated but I found that my more experienced colleagues were very powerful influences. I improved my orchestral playing skills fast – I had to!

In the Bournemouth Municipal Orchestra we used the more easily available Boosey and Hawkes Imperial trombones, with a bore size of just under .500”. They were regarded at the time as big instruments – they were much darker in sound, smoother in legato and had a better slide action than the small-bores. It seemed to us like a quantum leap. Those pre-war American instruments were so rare that we did not realise that the Imperials were generally inferior to them.

Post-WW2 there were 5 symphony orchestras in London, as there are today. The most distinguished was the newly (1945) formed Philharmonia Orchestra. Sir Thomas Beecham, the legendary greatest

conductor ever, had his Royal Philharmonic, also newly founded, vying with the Philharmonia for star players, in addition there were the longer-established BBC Symphony (1930), London Symphony (1904) and London Philharmonic (1929); all good but perhaps not quite as brilliant as their newer rivals.

In 1953, Alfred Flaszynski arrived on the London scene, as the new 1st trombonist of the Philharmonia Orchestra . Alfred was a larger-than-life character who had been a violin student in Cracow, Poland, at the beginning of WW2, with trombone as 2nd study. When the German SS Opera Company arrived in Cracow (yes-they had a complete touring opera company, on a special train, which toured to entertain members of the SS) they needed a trombonist and took Alfred. As he told me – "I had a choice - play the trombone or be shot, so I played the trombone". Towards the end of the war, when the Allies had reached Antwerp, Belgium in 1944, the SS Opera members were sheltering in a bunker in what had become the front line. Alfred told me that he promptly put on his civilian suit, changed sides and offered his services to the allies as an interpreter. He eventually found his way to Scotland when the war concluded, where he did forestry work, then played the violin professionally in a summer season orchestra, married a Scottish girl and became 1st trombone of the Scottish National Orchestra. This sounds too far-fetched even for fiction, but it happened!.

Walter Legge, who then owned the Philharmonia, welcomed Alfred, who with his background was just what conductors like von Karajan, then often on the Philharmonia rostrum, needed. Alfred, naturally, played a German trombone; a Gronitz which apparently had no high register whatever. To play Bolero, he had to borrow a Boosey and Hawkes "Imperial" - not the greatest, but it at least it had enough notes.

The visit of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra to the Edinburgh Festival in 1951 had been the stuff of legend so far as the British orchestral trombone world was concerned. Word had gone around that Pulis, Van Haney and Ostrander made the most fantastic sound with enormous trombones and mouthpieces that beggared belief. Very few people had actually heard them but there was very much pub-talk .over the ensuing years. Nobody had much idea about these instruments. In any case, because, (it was said) of the presence of a certain Mr. Geoffrey Hawkes, MD of Boosey and Hawkes, the British musical instrument makers on the British Board of Trade, it was illegal commercially to import foreign-made musical instruments. Of course, the same was true of or any other foreign manufactured goods, but it affected us particularly as the home produced instruments were so inferior. Unless a British orchestra made a US tour, we could only dream!

By 1954, Arthur Wilson, the Philharmonia 2nd trombonist, had managed to find an elderly Conn 88H with the help of a friendly American serviceman and in 1955,The Philharmonia .Orchestra made a tour of USA, conducted by Herbert von Karajan. Our friend Alfred had managed to find an 88H so that there were now two in the same team. This excited some curiosity, but with a rather poorly played G bass trombone in the section the effect was not very spectacular and most trombonists seemed not to be convinced.

I joined the London Symphony in April 1957, having also played 1st since 1952 in the City of Birmingham Symphony. By now I was using a Besson trombone slightly smaller than a Conn 6H. The LSO of those days was very much an "also ran" orchestra, but at last, I was working in London! We broke some new ground in that my bass trombone colleague, Tony Thorpe used an ancient German Fischer Bb bass trombone. He actually had a small handle made to make it look like a "G" in case conductors objected!
Tony was probably the prototype of Walter Mitty, but more imaginative. One of those incredible characters that simply could not exist in the music profession of today.
By 1958, when WW2 had been over for 13 years, we all felt that the reasons for the embargo on imported instruments no longer existed, so most musicians signed a successful petition to parliament to reverse this law. I jumped the gun on this, having privately - thus legally – bought my first Conn 8H from the Persy shop in Brussels when the LSO played to a near-empty hall at the Brussels International Exhibition in May 1958. Between rehearsal and concert, bassist Stuart Knussen and Barry Tuckwell, our 1st horn, came with me to the shop to make sure that this gigantic trombone would be suitable for the orchestra (that's the way it seemed then!) "It just sounds like you, but more so" Barry said. For us the London trombone revolution had now begun in earnest. The first problem was, of course, balance.. I could so easily simply swamp my colleagues, so I had to be very careful. Fortunately, by September 1958, when the import embargo had been lifted, Chris Devenport, my other colleague, had also managed to acquire an 88H.
I have to say this was not an easy transition. We all knew perfectly well and had in our minds the unmistakable directness and clarity of the old small-bore trombones. The new instruments needed bigger mouthpieces and so many different approaches. The problem was made worse because of the appalling acoustics of our then main concert venue, the Royal Festival Hall; even worse than today – completely

dead, with no resonance whatever. So to get the maximum result we eventually settled on what were then regarded as smallish bass trombone mouthpieces, Bach 3G for Chris and 4G for me. Tony found a disreputable-looking very old small tuba mouthpiece which enabled a shattering (if short-lived) ff.
Eventually, when the LSO, having improved beyond belief, began to spend most of its life in the recording studios, recording producers demanded a better level of trombone playing, so Chris and Tony had to be replaced. In some ways this was a great relief, but I missed the characters.
By the mid-60's , with Paul Lawrence and Frank Mathison (now playing a Bach 50B) in the team we, like many other British trombone sections were making darker sounds than most American sections at the time. We then began to re-think the kinds of sound that our section was making, in the now (slightly) improved Royal Festival Hall, and also in the various halls that we used for recording. I felt that more definition and colour were needed. Loud playing was never a problem, but a real trombone sound in soft playing could be so much more telling than the soft anonymous, homogenous, horn/trombone/harmonium effects that our Bach "G" mouthpieces made. Paul Lawrence, who made probably the darkest 2nd trombone sound ever, became a tuba player and re-joined his former orchestra, the London Philharmonic in 1968, when Peter Gane and John Fletcher came to the LSO. In 1973 Peter left and Eric Crees joined.
By 1969, I was deeply into mouthpiece design, using experience, instinct, endless trial-and-error, listening to every "take" in the recordings, finally, with help from so many enthusiastic colleagues – and Bob Giardinelli in NYC – eventually getting the first trombone mouthpieces that seemed to do everything. I had no idea at this point that this was the beginning of what became such a big enterprise, but that is another (rather long) story..
I was also able to influence Boosey and Hawkes who eventually managed to make a reasonably good large bore symphonic trombone which was adopted by some professionals but mainly by brass band players. Slightly lighter in sound than American instruments, I found it worked well for solo playing and small ensembles such as Philip Jones' brass ensemble.
There were some very fine players of my generation – Evan Watkin, (RPO) Derek James,(LPO) Harold Nash (Covent Garden Opera) - all coincidentally from South Wales - who all eventually used the same kinds of large-bore trombones and found their own ways of coping with change, so that by the early 1960s large-bore trombones were the norm

in all the orchestras in UK. Conns were the only large bore instruments that seemed to work for us. Occasionally other makes – Olds and King were tried, but could not match the Elkhart Conn sound quality. The main reason for the use of this size of trombone was primarily because the instruments were so much better than anything before. Their bore-size was, I think, a secondary issue. My old friend Jay Friedman had always said "You gotta try a Bach". For reasons which I never understood, Vincent Bach trombones from these times were hardly ever seen in London. I remember George Maxted describing a 42B that he had tried as "like trying to play a bicycle frame" Whenever the LSO played in New York, we visited Bob Giardinelli's shop. Bob had been very helpful when I was working on my first mouthpiece and we were good friends..
For some reason, my colleagues Eric Crees and Roger Groves managed to see Bob before me, and came to a rehearsal with some new Bach trombones. Eric had asked Bob to put aside a particular Bach 42 for me, thinking – correctly, as it turned out - that I should like it. It was a combination of lightweight slide, open leadpipe and red-brass bell that worked perfectly for me. I later designed a mouthpiece that made it work even better (5ABL) and used it for many years with the LSO, although I always kept my trusty Elkhart 8H. This was the second example of the 6H as the original 1958 model wore out completely and was replaced in 1968.

Since I retired from playing in 1988, Ian Bousfield and, since 2001, Dudley Bright have occupied my former LSO seat; the ideas that we pioneered 40 years ago have evolved with perhaps a gentler, less aggressive approach. It is flattering that so many of my former students have based their orchestral playing styles on the pioneering work that we did so long ago and have evolved their own refinements.. Every British orchestral trombone section is now at a higher level than I had ever thought possible, with even better instruments from so many fine makers.
All 1st trombonists now play the alto trombone – it is now a standard requirement at music colleges. I bought my first Latzsch in 1964 and at the time was the only 1st trombonist to use the alto. I tried to persuade all my friends in the other orchestras to use it and in time most of them did so.
By 2006, much of my tale is history, some of it fairly ancient. Most of the early participants are long gone. I still feel the same way about orchestral trombone sound quality; that it should have something of the small-bore character, be absolutely massive in loud playing but have

that very special clarity and real beauty in p and pp.
Bass trombones and bass trombonists have developed so much since the old days. Ray Premru when a member of the Philharmonia (from 1958) set standards of playing which are now absolutely normal but which then 48 years ago were revolutionary. Sheer musicianship, of course, as well as being a former Remington student.
In UK we seem to have escaped the “bigger is better” - tuba mouthpiece–no leadpipe - malaise that infected so many US bass trombonists, and the bass trombone retains its clarity and beauty of sound whether loud or soft.

The British tuba scene when there was such a miscellany of mainly indifferent players, was completely transformed by John Fletcher, with the big CC tuba in the LSO. The velvet cushion (his words), the crackle and brilliance, warmth and sheer quality of his sound have never, to my mind, been surpassed. The omnipresent Besson EEb tuba in British orchestras has its virtues, of course. It is a fantastic compromise and does most jobs very well indeed. But Prokofiev 5 or Mahler symphonies on John's York-Holton CC were something very special. Mainly John, of course. Curiously, the Besson company eventually followed my advice of 35 years ago and for a short time, working with Walter Nirschl, the specialist German tuba designer, produced possibly the best CC tuba ever made. How I wish that John Fletcher, who lobbied at least as much as I did, was still with us to enjoy it.

It is strange that 50 years on, none of my students has ever seen, much less played, an original small-bore British trombone. There has recently been a freelance orchestra in London, the New Queens Hall Orchestra, which attempts to re-create some or all of these sounds from the past. A step back? I think so, although an interesting curiosity, in line with the idea of using period instruments for old music. My feeling is that because of the poor acoustic qualities of London concert halls, the fact that modern instruments are better in every way and most importantly, that the quality of today’s trombonists in UK is so incomparably better than 50 years ago, it must be. The downside of modern orchestral brass is that really loud playing is boring and unnecessary, apart from just a few seconds in any piece. Large bores in every sense!