

# The Buccin: A Trombone With a Serious Bite

By Douglas Yeo, Bass trombonist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra

The New Grove II Dictionary of Music devotes but two sentences to the buccin: "A form of trombone with a bell terminating in a stylized serpent's or dragon's head, often with a metal tongue, free to flap, protruding. Berlioz scored for buccin in the *Kyrie and Resurrexit* of his *Messe solennelle* of 1824." That's it. Not much information for an instrument that seems to hang in every museum's collection of musical instruments and usually with pride of place. But there is more to the tale, as we shall see.

While no one has been able to point to an exact date of the appearance of the trombone, instruments in its familiar shape have existed since the late fifteenth century, evolving from the small bored and belled sackbut to the monstrous double slided BBflat contrabass trombone of Wagner. Apart from valved variants that were popular for a time mostly in Italy, the trombone has survived for five centuries in its basic form: an "s" shaped tube beginning with a cup shaped mouthpiece, ending with a bell and with a moveable cylindrical slide in between.

Anyone who has been to a parade knows how impressive the sight of a rank of trombones can be. And it is perhaps this visual appeal that led to the development, in France, of a unique kind of trombone that would prove to be the most visually impressive instrument ever to sport a slide and a bell. The exact date of the invention of the buccin (which should not be confused by another instrument of the same name, invented in France in 1791, which was modeled after ancient Roman instruments which could deliver only three distinct notes) has not been documented and apart from Berlioz's *Messe*, there is little in the way of surviving music for it. Yet we do know that the buccin was popularized in

military bands in France between 1810-1845. Parades, outdoor festivals and civic celebrations were an important part of French cultural life from the time of the Revolution (1789) through most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The visual appeal of band members in uniform playing instruments with zoomorphic heads (in addition to the buccin, serpents, bass horns, bassoons and Russian bassoons – a form of upright serpent – all were made with such fanciful bells) was indisputable and manufacturers were quick to supply more and more exotic designs. The buccin bell was often vividly painted red, green and gold and the protruding metal tongue included by many makers would flap while marching and playing.



Douglas Yeo with buccin by Sautermeister/Becker.



Italian, Belgian and French buccins at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Photo: Lilly Stunzi.

The sound of the buccin is something of a cross between a trombone and a French horn. At soft volumes it has a very warm, delicate sound because the bell is made of hammered tin or very thin brass. But when played loudly, it makes a sound that could wake the dead! While the sound is a rare one, the name is even more perplexing, with little agreement on how to pronounce it. Variants include "boo-san", "bue-san", "boo-seen" and "buck-sin."

When the International Trombone Association (www.trombone.net) was founded in 1972, it chose the buccin for its logo, after an instrument owned by New England Conservatory of Music in Boston. Lyon (France) seems to have been



Berlioz Historical Brass recording Clifford Bevan's *Les Mots de Berlioz*. Ben Peck, buccin; Phil Humphries, ophicleide; Douglas Yeo, serpent; Ronald Haroutunian, bassoon.

a centre of buccin manufacturing, with buccins made there currently on display in Paris (Dubois & Couturier) and Boston (Tabard). I own a buccin made by another Lyon maker, François Sautermeister that was recently restored (and a new slide made after historical models) by James Becker of Osmun Music (www.osmun.com). Beautiful buccins by Guichard (Paris) are on display in Edinburgh and Brussels and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York has an extensive collection of buccins made in France, Italy and Belgium. John Webb, an English maker, has made modern reproduction buccins, one of which may be heard played beautifully by Ben Peck of Berlioz Historical Brass on the CD *Le Monde du Serpent*. Stephen Wick played buccin on the premier recording of Berlioz's *Messe* under John Eliot Gardiner.

However it is pronounced and while it is certainly a 'speciality' instrument (as John Webb has so whimsically portrayed in his cartoon), there is no doubt the buccin, like the serpent and ophicleide, is in revival and its unique sound is being encountered by ears that have not heard it in over 150 years. It is yet another delight awaiting the curious trombonist who has seen a dragon-belled trombone on a museum wall and thought to himself: "I wonder what THAT thing sounds like?"

Douglas Yeo is bass trombonist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and has been playing serpent, ophicleide and buccin since 1994. He may be contacted through his website, [www.yeodoug.com](http://www.yeodoug.com).

Photo of three buccin from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, 1889. Photo by Lilly Stunzi, Zurich/New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Used with permission.

Cartoon courtesy, John Webb, Editions Bim (Trombamania 2).



John Webb's view of the "specialty instrument" buccin player.



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