

# A Good Old Note: The Serpent in Thomas Hardy's World and Works

DOUGLAS YEO

*New England Conservatory of Music, USA*

Hardy's works reference many musical instruments used in both church (west gallery) bands and his paternal family's leadership of the Stinsford Church gallery band: while the Hardy family band consisted entirely of string instruments (violins and cello), Hardy makes frequent reference to the clarinet (rendered as clarionet and clar'net), barrel organ, oboe (hautboy), drum, tambourine and serpent — the last of these is the subject of this article. Possibly the least known instrument found in Hardy's bands — if the most exotic — the serpent, its development and use in England in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, is of considerable interest to organologists and students of the west gallery musical tradition. Hardy's works that speak of the serpent shed light on a colourful corner of his writing and provide an opportunity to gain a better understanding of the instrument's role and sound in nineteenth century England.

**KEYWORDS** Hardy, serpent, music, church, gallery, band, England, "Under the Greenwood Tree"

## The serpent in England

The serpent is a conical shaped tube of wood made of sections glued together, usually in serpentine shape. From its smallest opening upon which is placed a cup-shaped mouthpiece that, generally, resembles that of a trombone, it gradually increases in size to an opening at the bell end of nearly five inches. Usually covered in leather, it has six holes that are covered by three fingers of each hand, to which later were added up to 14 keys. Ostensibly invented in France in 1590 to accompany the singing of plainchant in the Roman Catholic church,<sup>1</sup> the serpent found its way

<sup>1</sup> Jean Lebeœuf, *Mémoires Concernant l'Histoire Ecclésiastique et Civile d'Auxerre* (Paris, 1743), volume 1, 643: "A Canon named Edmé Guillaume discovered the secret of turning a cornett into the form of a serpent around 1590. It was used in concerts given at his house, and having been perfected, this instrument has become common in large churches." However, others dispute the French origin of the serpent, pointing to possible Italian origins. See: Heyde, Herbert. "Zoomorphic and theatrical musical instruments in the late Italian Renaissance and Baroque eras." In *Marvels of Sound and Beauty: Italian Baroque Musical Instruments* (Florence: Giunti Editore S.p.A., 2007), 86–87.



FIGURE 1 Johann Zoffany, *The Sharp Family*, 1779–1781, by permission of the National Portrait Gallery and the Lloyd-Baker Trustees, catalogue NPG L169.

into orchestras and military bands in France and Germany before coming to England where it was used in many types of musical ensembles throughout the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup>

In its original serpentine form as developed in France, the serpent was held vertically between a player's legs, a posture devised for playing while seated or leaning against a misericord in a choir stall. Johann Zoffany's celebrated painting from 1781 (Figure 1), *The Sharp Family*, shows James Sharp with his French serpent d'eglise, held in the traditional manner.<sup>3</sup> But this position was ill-suited for holding the serpent while on the march and subsequently serpents began to be held horizontally.

The earliest documented view of this new way of holding the serpent (which required the fingering of the right hand to be reversed when the instrument was held

<sup>2</sup> The serpent appeared in England as early as 1695 but was not employed widely until after 1785. An extensive history of the serpent may be found in Clifford Bevan, *The Tuba Family* (Winchester: Piccolo Press, 2000 second edition), 63–126.

<sup>3</sup> See: Brian Crosby, "Private Concerts on Land and Water: The Musical Activities of the Sharp Family, c. 1750–c. 1790," *Royal Musical Association Research Chronicle*, No. 34 (2001), 1–118.



FIGURE 2 Artist unknown, detail, *The Courtyard at St James's Palace c. 1790*, by permission of The Trustees of the British Museum, catalogue 1880, 1113.2137.

with the right hand “palm up”) is found in an anonymous print of a band at St James’ Palace c. 1790 (Figure 2). It is possible this is a representation of the first official military band in England that employed the serpent. This band, attested on May 16, 1785, was brought to England from Hanover by the Duke of York to serve as the band of the Coldstream Guards.<sup>4</sup> The player in the print is utilizing the horizontal playing position that became standard in England from that time forward.

While the serpent was known in England before 1785 — most notably being used in John Eccles’ opera *Rinaldo and Armida* (1698) and music for *Macbeth* (1700), its appearance in the original score of Handel’s *Music for the Royal Fireworks* (1749), and in Samuel Wesley’s *March* (1777) — it is likely that instruments used at that time were French in origin, as is the case in James Sharp’s specimen. Yet with the introduction of German serpents and the horizontal playing position by the Duke of York’s band from Hanover, the serpent began to undergo an evolution in form that led to what we call today the “English military serpent.” It was this instrument that found

<sup>4</sup> For a full treatment of this important development in English military bands, see David B. Diggs, *Original Members of the Duke of York’s Band* (paper presented to the Lawrence Henry Gipson Institute for Eighteenth Century Studies, Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, April 2009). Also, W.T. Parke, *Musical Memoirs: Comprising an Account of the General State of Music in England, from the First Commemoration of Handel, in 1784, to the Year 1830* (London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley, 1830; reprint, New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 239–241. Also, Henry George Farmer, *The Rise & Development of Military Music* (London: William Reeves, 1912), 69–70.

its place in the west gallery church bands of the early nineteenth century and was known by Thomas Hardy.

### The development of the English military serpent

Taking as their model the traditional French serpent d'église and the horizontal playing orientation introduced to Britain by the German band from Hanover, English makers undertook the task of making serpents for an ever-increasing number of military bands. The London maker Longman and Broderip was advertising (Figure 3), as early as 1796 (and possibly much earlier), serpents supplied to commanders of Regiments, "on reasonable terms, and at the shortest notice."

What these serpents looked like is not definitely known since few serpent makers signed or stamped their instruments. An unsigned serpent in Colchester and Ipswich Museums (Figure 4) — most likely English in origin given its similarity to some early English serpents that are covered with paper mâché, newspaper or cloth before being clumsily wrapped in leather — is an early "transitional" instrument that, while

**MILITARY MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS,**  
OF EVERY DESCRIPTION,  
**M**ANUFACTURED and SOLD in the  
greatest perfection,  
BY  
**LONGMAN AND BRODERIP,**  
*Musical Instrument Makers and Music-Sellers to Their  
Majesties, and all the Royal Family,*  
*At No. 26, Cheapside, and No. 13, Haymarket.*

**FIFES, REGIMENTAL FLUTES, CLARINETS,  
BASSOONS, CONCERT HORNS, BUGLE HORNS,  
TRUMPETS, SERPENTS, BASS DRUMS, TRIAN-  
GLES, CYMBALS, and TAMBOURS DE BAS-  
QUES, where COMMANDERS of REGIMENTS or  
their AGENTS may be supplied with them on reason-  
able terms, and at the shortest notice.**

**ALSO**

**A great Variety of MILITARY MUSIC and  
RULED BOOKS for the Use of a Band.**

**N. B. GOOD MASTERS recommended.  
MUSICIANS out of Employ, apply as above.**

FIGURE 3 Detail, *London Oracle*, Friday, October 14, 1796.



FIGURE 4 Serpent (unsigned, probably English), late 18<sup>th</sup> century?, by permission of Colchester and Ipswich Museum Service, catalogue COLEM 1935.408.

clearly a close ancestor of the French church serpent, exhibits distinctive features that would later be incorporated into the classic English military serpent.

The fifth finger hole has been drilled slightly closer to the outer edge of the last bend to allow for the length of a player's middle finger on his right hand when playing in the palm up position. Further, the first tube has been turned inward toward the second bend, thereby making the instrument a bit more compact. The brace (or, "stay") between the first and second tubes is a recent replacement.

The symbiotic relationship between military bands — many of which were local and not Regimental — and church bands resulted in individual players being members of both kinds of ensembles.<sup>5</sup> The churchyard of the Parish Church of All Saints in Minstead (Winchester) boasts the grave of Thomas Maynard, serpent player with the Band of Musicians of the 8<sup>th</sup> Hants (Hampshire) Yeomanry who died in 1807 and very likely played in the church's band.<sup>6</sup>

The exquisite carved image of a serpent on Maynard's grave stone (Figure 5) is highly detailed, and shows further developments in serpent construction including two metal stays between bends — to add greater strength — and a metal mount on the bell that served to protect the instrument from the rigours of outdoor and tight, indoor space (such as church galleries) play. The serpent shows its continued evolution toward a more compact shape.

Regrettably stolen and thereby unavailable for inspection, a serpent formerly played in Upper Beeding Church (Figure 6) is known by a photograph in Canon MacDermott's book and also shows a variety of transitional characteristics including the compact form and two stays. While it did not have a bell mount, the holes were

<sup>5</sup> K. H. MacDermott, *The Old Church Gallery Minstrels: An Account of the Church Bands and Singers in England from about 1660 to 1860* (London: S.P.C.K., 1948), 29–30.

<sup>6</sup> If this modest church and its yard are known by the greater public, it is because its yard is the final resting place for Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859–1930) and his wife, Jean (d. 1940).



FIGURE 5 Grave of Thomas Maynard (1807), Parish Church of All Saints, Minstead, Diocese of Winchester. Photograph by the author.

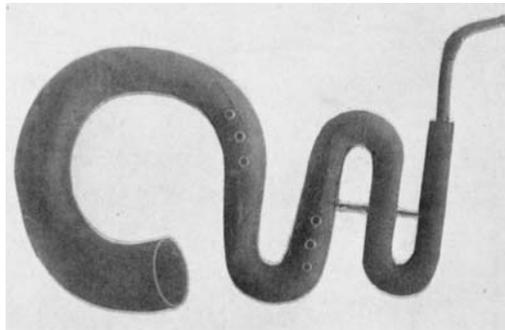


FIGURE 6 Serpent from Upper Beeding Church, West Sussex (unsigned, late 18<sup>th</sup> century?), by permission of S.P.C.K. Publishing; from K. H. MacDermott, *The Old Church Gallery Minstrels*, 1948. Photograph by W. Bax.

“bushed” with ivory inserts that allowed the player’s fingers to more conveniently find their proper position.

Of particular interest is an unsigned serpent (Figure 7) collected by Charles Wade (1883–1956) — on display in his former home, Snowhill Manor (Gloucestershire) — that has no stays but has a brass bell mount and three keys (two on the front and one on the back). The bottommost key — used for the note C sharp and to “vent”



FIGURE 7 Serpent (unsigned, late 18<sup>th</sup> century?), by permission of the Music Room, Snowshill Manor (National Trust), Gloucestershire, catalogue SNO/MC/38. Photograph by the author.

other notes to improve their tone — was originally on the front of the instrument before the hole and key saddle were filled in and relocated to the back. Positioning this key on the front may have meant the serpent was held vertically at one time. In this respect the Snowshill Manor serpent may be a long sought for “missing link”: a serpent that underwent a significant change during its playing lifetime to change from the vertical to the horizontal playing orientation. The compact shape is accompanied by a narrower bore and wooden walls that are thicker than the French church serpent and it has a combination of “U” and “V” shaped bends. These were among the final important modifications of the serpent as the English-made instrument continued its rapid march to its classic form.

While the English serpent underwent additional changes through the early 19<sup>th</sup> century — most notably the addition of more keys — its classic form is that of a signed serpent by William Millhouse (Figure 8) that dates from the first decade of the 1800s. Bell mount, three metal stays between sections, ivory finger hole bushings, three keys (including the C sharp key positioned on the back) and the by now familiar compact shape have, in this instrument, all become firmly established, and it is the serpent in this form that would have been known to Thomas Hardy’s ancestors and which made an appearance in so many of his works.

### Thomas Hardy and the serpent

In his pseudonymous biography, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, Hardy speaks in detail of the contributions of his grandfather, Thomas Hardy Senior (1778–1837)



FIGURE 8 Serpent by William Milhouse, London, c. 1800[?], by permission of the Bate Collection, Oxford, catalogue 519. Photograph by Andrew Lamb.

and his father, Thomas Hardy Junior (1811–1892), both of whom played in the gallery band at Stinsford Church.<sup>7</sup> Thomas Hardy Senior played cello in Puddletown Church before 1800 and in Stinsford from 1802 until his death in 1837. His son played tenor violin (that is, viola<sup>8</sup>) in the band from his youth (no date is cited) to 1841 or 1842. Hardy's uncle, James Hardy (1805–1880), also played violin at Stinsford Church.

Hardy writes about the differences between the band in Stinsford and that of churches in neighbouring towns,

Thus it was that the Hardy instrumentalists, though never more than four, maintained an easy superiority over the larger bodies in parishes near. For while Puddletown west-gallery, for instance, could boast of eight players, and Maiden Newton of nine, these included wood-wind and leather — that is to say, clarionets and serpents — which were apt to be a little too sonorous, even strident, when zealously blown.<sup>9</sup>

Here Hardy is making a distinction between the all-string band of Stinsford (Mellstock in his works) and the bands of Puddletown (Weatherbury) and Maiden

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Michael Millgate (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Elna Sherman, "Music in Thomas Hardy's Life and Work," *The Musical Quarterly*, 26.4 (October 1940), 420.

<sup>9</sup> *Life*, 14.

Newton (Chalk Newton) that had wind instruments in addition to strings. Hardy's reference to the serpent as being "a little too sonorous, even strident, when zealously blown," shows he was well aware of this characteristic of the instrument when in the hands of an over-enthusiastic or less-accomplished player. The military serpent, owing to its narrow bore and thick wooden walls, was particularly susceptible to producing a strident tone in less skilled hands.

Yet Hardy had an affection for the serpent, if principally because it was a reminder of times past. His most extensive comment on the serpent comes in *Under the Greenwood Tree*,

"They should have stuck to strings as we did, and keep out clar'nets, and done away with serpents. If you'd thrive in musical religion, stick to strings, says I."

"Strings are well enough, as far as that goes," said Mr Spinks.

"There's worse things than serpents," said Mr Penny. "Old things pass away, 'tis true; but a serpent was a good old note: a deep rich note was the serpent."<sup>10</sup>

This, to the glory of the serpent, is the highest compliment paid to the instrument in literature, even if it begins with backhanded praise.

In the preface to the 1896 edition of *Under the Greenwood Tree*, Hardy places the events of the novel as occurring "fifty years ago" or around 1845. While some church bands continued fitfully in England even into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>11</sup> most were disbanded with the introduction of the barrel organ in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. Mr Penny refers to the serpent in past tense aware that it had already been supplanted in many bands by other instruments, including the ophicleide and trombone. Yet Hardy, who was born in 1840 and would not have heard the Stinsford Church gallery band certainly knew the sound of the serpent and the rich, deep quality of its low notes that contrast the strident sound often emitted when played poorly.

While, in the *Life*, Hardy does not mention the band at Piddletrenthide (Longpudde in his works), it appears, from the following passage in *Absentmindedness in a Parish Choir*, that large bands with winds were not only common in Dorset and that playing standards were high but also that other bands had nearly equalled the level of expertise for which Stinsford (Mellstock) gallery band was known,

It is a Saturday afternoon of blue and yellow autumn-time, and the scene is the High Street of a well-known market-town. A large carrier's van . . . is timed to leave the town at four in the afternoon . . . [and] . . . As the hour strikes . . . the van with its human freight was got under way.<sup>12</sup>

As the journey proceeds, each one of the "human freight" (of "A Few Crusted Characters") has a tale to tell and, for Christopher Twink, the master-thatcher, it is a tale of the village choir,

<sup>10</sup> Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree*, (1872), Part I ("Winter"), Ch. 4 ("Going the Rounds"). Unless otherwise noted, all quotations from Hardy's works are taken from the First Edition.

<sup>11</sup> Harry Woodhouse, *Face the Music: Church and Chapel Bands in Cornwall* (St Austell: Cornish Hill Publications, 1997), 99–102.

<sup>12</sup> Hardy, "Absent-Mindedness in the Parish Choir," "A Few Crusted Characters," *Life's Little Ironies*, (1929), 185–6.

It happened on Sunday after Christmas — the last Sunday ever they played in Longpud-  
dle church gallery, as it turned out, though they didn't know it then. As you may know,  
sir, the players formed a very good band — almost as good as the Mellstock parish  
players that were led by the Dewys; and that's saying a great deal. There was Nicholas  
Puddingcome, the leader, with the first fiddle; there was Timothy Thomas, the bass-viol  
man; John Biles, the tenor fiddler; Dan'l Hornhead, with the serpent; Robert Dowdle,  
with the clarionet; and Mr Nicks, with the oboe — all sound and powerful musicians,  
and strong-winded men — they that blowed. For that reason they were very much in  
demand Christmas week for little reels and dancing parties; for they could turn a jig or  
a hornpipe out of hand as well as ever they could turn out a psalm, and perhaps better,  
not to speak irreverent. In short, one half-hour they could be playing a Christmas carol  
in the squire's hall to the ladies and gentlemen, and drinking tay and coffee with 'em as  
modest as saints; and the next, at The Tinker's Arms, blazing away like wild horses with  
the "Dashing White Sergeant" to nine couple of dancers and more, and swallowing  
rum-and-cider hot as flame.<sup>13</sup>

To keep themselves warm, the band enjoyed a gallon of hot brandy and beer in the  
church gallery during the afternoon service; the jar was emptied by the beginning of  
the sermon. Soon asleep, the band ignored the parson's admonition to begin the  
Evening Hymn after the sermon and, when prodded by young Levi Limpet — "Begin!  
begin!" — the band awoke with a start. In their confused stupor, they set about play-  
ing the neighborhood's favourite jig, "The Devil among the Tailors" that they had  
played at a party the night before. Oblivious to their surroundings the band continued  
playing over the mayhem that ensued in the pews below the gallery,

Then the unfortunate church band came to their senses, and remembered where they  
were; and 'twas a sight to see Nicholas Puddingcome and Timothy Thomas and John  
Biles creep down the gallery stairs with their fiddles under their arms, and poor Dan'l  
Hornhead with his serpent, and Robert Dowdle with his clarionet, all looking as little as  
ninepins; and out they went. The pa'son might have forgi'ed 'em when he learned the  
truth o't, but the squire would not. That very week he sent for a barrel-organ that would  
play two-and-twenty new psalm-tunes, so exact and particular that, however sinful  
inclined you was, you could play nothing but psalm-tunes whatsoever. He had a really  
respectable man to turn the winch, as I said, and the old players played no more.<sup>14</sup>

Here Hardy aptly names the serpent player of the Longpudde band "Daniel Horn-  
head." Of the three strings and three winds, the wind players are also characterized  
as, "sound and powerful musicians, and strong-winded men."

While the original gallery of Stinsford Church has long since been removed,<sup>15</sup> many  
churches retained them, as at All Saints in Minstead (Figure 9). This gallery dates  
from 1814. Usually situated at the west end of the church over the main entrance

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 241.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 244.

<sup>15</sup> The gallery in the Church of St Michael in Stinsford was rebuilt in 1996 with a large organ taking up much of the space previously occupied by musicians. St Mary's Church in neighbouring Puddletown retained its gallery although has also added a large organ. The gallery at All Saints, Minstead, is shown here because it is preserved its original design and represents a common type of gallery found in churches throughout Britain in the 18th and 19th centuries.

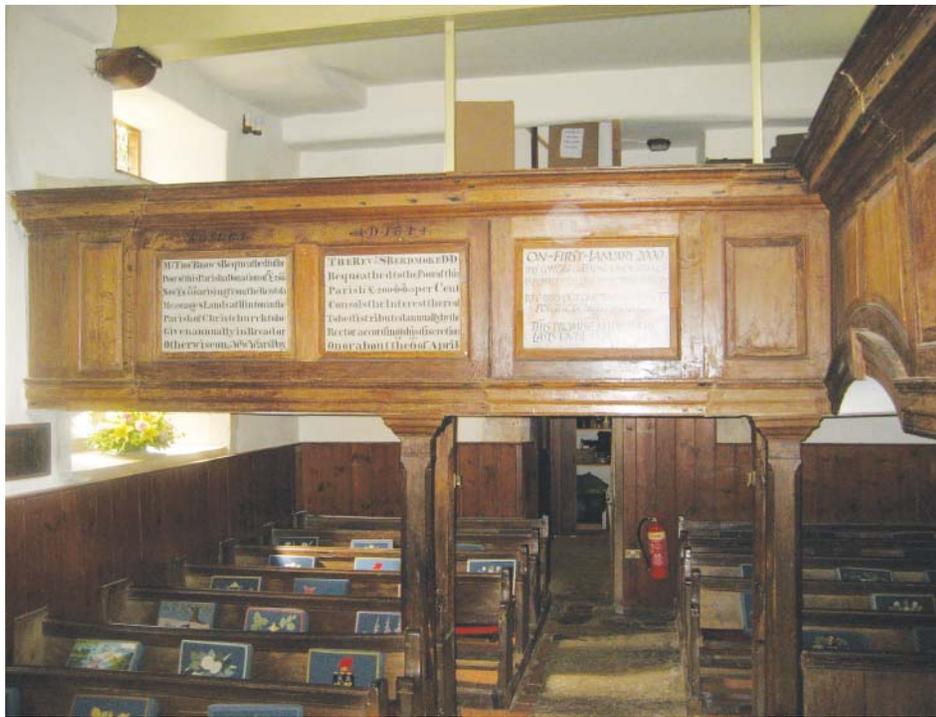


FIGURE 9 West Gallery of the Parish Church of All Saints, Minstead, Diocese of Winchester. Photograph by the author.

(although All Saints uses the north door as the primary entry way), the gallery perches above the congregation where, while seated, its members could engage in any number of activities (such as drinking). Done discreetly these activities were not noticed by the clergy or parishioners seated in the pews below.

In *The Three Strangers*, Hardy paints a richly evocative scene with but two musicians, a young fiddler and the parish clerk, Elijah New,

The fiddler was a boy of those parts, about twelve years of age, who had a wonderful dexterity in jigs and reels, though his fingers were so small and short as to necessitate a constant shifting for the high notes, from which he scrambled back to the first position with sounds not of unmixed purity of tone. At seven the shrill tweedle-dee of this youngster had begun, accompanied by a booming ground-bass from Elijah New, the parish-clerk, who had thoughtfully brought with him his favourite musical instrument, the serpent. Dancing was instantaneous, Mrs Fennel privately enjoining the players on no account to let the dance exceed the length of a quarter of an hour.

But Elijah and the boy, in the excitement of their position, quite forgot the injunction. Moreover, Oliver Giles, a man of seventeen, one of the dancers, who was enamoured of his partner, a fair girl of thirty-three rolling years, had recklessly handed a new crown-piece to the musicians, as a bribe to keep going as long as they had muscle and wind. Mrs Fennel, seeing the steam begin to generate on the countenances of her guests, crossed over and touched the fiddler's elbow and put her hand on the serpent's mouth. But they took

no notice, and fearing she might lose her character of genial hostess if she were to interfere too markedly she retired and sat down helpless. And so the dance whizzed on with cumulative fury, the performers moving in their planet-like courses, direct and retrograde, from apogee to perigee, till the hand of the well kicked clock at the bottom of the room had travelled over the circumference of an hour.<sup>16</sup>

Of note is the description of the serpent as being “booming” and the fact that the musicians were easily bribed into playing beyond the hour appointed by Mrs Fennell (today’s musicians would easily recognize, understand and appreciate the practice). Her gesture of putting her hand on the serpent’s “mouth” (bell) in an attempt to silence it would have been futile: as is the case with all wind blown instruments with holes, the sound emanates not from the bell but mainly from the holes themselves apart from those notes where all holes are covered. The meaning of the placement of her hand, however, would have been unmistakable.

While Hardy refers to the Maiden Newton band as having nine players in the *Life* the instruments are named (and the number increased to perhaps 10) in *The Grave By the Handpost*,

It was on a dark, yet mild and exceptionally dry evening at Christmas-time (according to the testimony of William Dewy of Mellstock, Michael Mail, and others), that the choir of Chalk-Newton — a large parish situate about half-way between the towns of Ivel and Casterbridge, and now a railway station — left their homes just before midnight to repeat their annual harmonies under the windows of the local population. The band of instrumentalists and singers was one of the largest in the county; and, unlike the smaller and finer Mellstock string-band, which eschewed all but the catgut, it included brass and reed performers at full Sunday services, and reached all across the west gallery.

On this night there were two or three violins, two ‘cellos, a tenor viol, double bass, hautboy, clarionets, serpent, and seven singers. It was, however, not the choir’s labours, but what its members chanced to witness, that particularly marked the occasion.<sup>17</sup>

Whereas Mellstock (Stinsford) has only strings, Chalk-Newton (Maiden Newton) includes a serpent among its three winds.

The importance of the serpent is alluded to in Hardy’s, *The Return of the Native*, in the scene that sets up the Mummer’s play,

As they drew nearer to the front of the house the mummers became aware that music and dancing were briskly flourishing within. Every now and then a long low note from the serpent, which was the chief wind instrument played at these times, advanced further into the heath than the thin treble part, and reached their ears alone; and next a more than usually loud tread from a dancer would come the same way.

At this moment the fiddles finished off with a screech, and the serpent emitted a last note that nearly lifted the roof. When, from the comparative quiet within, the mummers judged that the dancers had taken their seats, Father Christmas advanced, lifted the latch, and put his head inside the door.

“Ah, the mummers, the mummers!” cried several guests at once. “Clear a space for the mummers.”

<sup>16</sup> Hardy, “The Three Strangers,” *Wessex Tales* (1894), Chapter I.

<sup>17</sup> Hardy, “The Grave by the Handpost,” *A Changed Man and Other Tales* (1913), Chapter 4.

Hump-backed Father Christmas then made a complete entry, swinging his huge club, and in a general way clearing the stage for the actors proper, while he informed the company in smart verse that he was come, welcome or welcome not; concluding his speech with:

“Make room, make room, my gallant boys,  
And give us space to rhyme;  
We’ve come to show Saint George’s play,  
Upon this Christmas time.”

The guests were now arranging themselves at one end of the room, the fiddler was mending a string, the serpent-player was emptying his mouthpiece, and the play began.<sup>18</sup>

That Hardy considered the serpent to be more common than the clarinet or oboe (“the chief wind instrument played at these times”) may seem surprising given the relative paucity of serpents that have survived. There was, necessarily, a ubiquitous need for a strong bass upon which other parts were supported. Possibly the damage to the instrument that Hardy observes as the serpentist empties his mouthpiece of moisture, explains the absence of serpents in church collections and local museums or, alternatively, theft (see commentary on Figure 6, above).

That the serpent played the bass line rather than the melody is highlighted by Hardy in *The Trumpet Major*. Anne Garland asks of John Loveday,

“How came you to be a trumpeter, Mr Loveday?”

“Well, I took to it naturally when I was a little boy,” said he, betrayed into quite a gushing state by her delightful interest. “I used to make trumpets of paper, elder-sticks, elrot stems, and even stinging-nettle stalks, you know. Then father set me to keep the birds off that little barley-ground of his, and gave me an old horn to frighten ‘em with. I learnt to blow that horn so that you could hear me for miles and miles. Then he bought me a clarionet, and when I could play that I borrowed a serpent, and I learned to play a tolerable bass. So when I ‘listed I was picked out for training as trumpeter at once.”<sup>19</sup>

Significantly, John Loveday plays both woodwind (clarinet) and brasswind (trumpet and serpent) instruments. The skills needed to play these instruments is considerable and require wholly different techniques— more so with the serpent, which demands that the player can cope with the inherent instability caused by the serpent’s holes being drilled where they can be reached by the fingers of each hand rather than where they make best acoustical sense.

Among Hardy’s wedding scenes is the following touching — but ultimately heart-breaking — account from the poem, “The Country Wedding (A Fiddler’s Story),”

I bowed the treble before her father,  
Michael the tenor in front of the lady,  
The bass-viol Reub — and right well played he! —  
The serpent Jim; ay, to church and back.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Hardy, *The Return of the Native* (1878), II, Chapter V (“Through the Moonlight”).

<sup>19</sup> Hardy, *The Trumpet-Major* (1880), Chapter 9.

<sup>20</sup> *Thomas Hardy: The Complete Poems*, ed. James Gibson, (London: Macmillan, 2001), 650–1.

Here the four player band — three strings and serpent — leads a wedding procession and, later, a double funeral of the bride and groom. The balance of this little band would seem to be rather bottom heavy, although one wonders how effective the string bass (or cello) would have been in procession, despite the compliment to Reub's playing.

The colourful wedding band in *Far From the Madding Crowd* identifies some of the instruments in the Weatherbury (Puddletown) gallery band, even if they were used by a later generation of players whose expertise was wanting,

Just as Bathsheba was pouring out a cup of tea, their ears were greeted by the firing of a cannon, followed by what seemed like a tremendous blowing of trumpets, in the front of the house.

"There!" said Oak, laughing, "I knew those fellows were up to something, by the look on their faces."

Oak took up the light and went into the porch, followed by Bathsheba with a shawl over her head. The rays fell upon a group of male figures gathered upon the gravel in front, who, when they saw the newly married couple in the porch, set up a loud Hurrah, and at the same moment bang again went the cannon in the background, followed by a hideous clang of music from a drum, tambourine, clarionet, serpent, hautboy, tenor-viol, and double-bass — the only remaining relics of the true and original Weatherbury band — venerable worm-eaten instruments, which had celebrated in their own persons the victories of Marlborough, under the fingers of the forefathers of those who played them now.<sup>21</sup>

The seven instruments named seemed to be a shadow of the Weatherbury (Puddletown) band of days past. Missing are violins which certainly would have been among the original number of eight players. Wind instruments, in particular, were susceptible to infestations of insects, mold and rot that were natural and common by-products in instruments that filled with warm breath when played. The ad hoc band that assembled for the wedding was described as making a "hideous clang": this would have been expected given that while the instruments were once played well, their current masters clearly lacked both the training and experience required to bring out melodious tones, and the instruments themselves had suffered from rot and perhaps other ravages of time.

Likewise, it is probable that the "din" created by the variety of instruments Hardy speaks of in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (later referred to as, "a motley crowd making a disturbance") may have been due to less accomplished players or old, now inferior instruments,

Meanwhile Mr Benjamin Grower, that prominent burgess, of whom mention has been already made, hearing the din of cleavers, kits, crouds, humstrums, serpents, rams'-horns, and other historical kinds of music as he sat indoors in the High Street, had put on his hat and gone out to learn the cause.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Hardy, *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874), Chapter 57.

<sup>22</sup> Hardy, *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), Chapter 39. N.B., "kits," "crouds" and "humstrums" are colloquial names for a variety of old string instruments, and often used as slang for violins and fiddles.

After the serpent was laid to rest by the end of the nineteenth century, its reputation deteriorated through no particular fault of its own. Adam Carse, writing in 1939 when the sound of the serpent in Britain had not been heard in several generations, summed up the problem succinctly,

It is hardly possible now to describe the tone of the serpent, partly because the instrument, adequately played, is no longer to be heard, and partly because there is no wind instrument now in use with which it may in fairness be compared. When anyone now picks up an old serpent, which has been out of use for perhaps a hundred years or more, which is dried up, brittle, and quite possibly in a leaky condition, and blows into its dusty interior, the sounds issuing from it will most likely provoke either laughter or else amazement that such a contrivance could ever have been used for musical purposes; when the player is not used to the instrument, does not understand the necessary lip-technique, knows nothing about its tone-character, and perhaps expects it to sound like a tuba or a trombone, the serpent is all the less likely to do itself justice. A test under such conditions is quite useless and very unfair; any modern instrument, after being neglected and out of use for a long period, if tried under the same conditions, would probably fare no better! In order to get a fair idea of the tone and the possibilities of the serpent, the instrument would have to be reconditioned and restored to its original condition, and the player would have to take as much trouble, and devote as much time to learning how to play it, as he would require to master any wind-instrument of the present day. A different lip-technique and a strange finger-technique would have to be acquired, and the ear would have to be readjusted to appreciate a shade of tone-colour which is neither that of any brass instrument nor of any wood-wind instrument now in use.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, while most serpents were made of wood, it is possible that Hardy is referring to a rare metal serpent in this passage from *The Fiddler of the Reels*. The instrumentalist in this instance is the seductive Wat Ollamoor (nicknamed “Mop” for his abundant curls that are “not altogether of Nature’s making”),

While playing he invariably closed his eyes; using no notes, and, as it were, allowing the violin to wander on at will into the most plaintive passages ever heard by rustic man. There was a certain lingual character in the supplicatory expressions he produced, which would well-nigh have drawn an ache from the heart of a gate-post. He could make any child in the parish, who was at all sensitive to music, burst into tears in a few minutes by simply fiddling one of the old dance-tunes he almost entirely affected — country jigs, reels, and “Favourite Quick Steps” of the last century — some mutilated remains of which even now reappear as nameless phantoms in new quadrilles and gallops, where they are recognized only by the curious, or by such old-fashioned and far-between people as have been thrown with men like Wat Ollamoor in their early life.

His date was a little later than that of the old Mellstock quire-band which comprised the Dewys, Mail, and the rest — in fact, he did not rise above the horizon thereabout till those well-known musicians were disbanded as ecclesiastical functionaries. In their honest love of thoroughness they despised the new man’s style. Theophilus Dewy (Reuben the tranter’s younger brother) used to say there was no “plumness” in it — no bowing, no

<sup>23</sup> Adam Carse, *Musical Wind Instruments: A History of the Wind Instruments Used in European Orchestras and Wind-Bands From the Later Middle Ages Up To the Present Time* (London: Macmillan, 1939), 274–5.

solidity — it was all fantastical. And probably this was true. Anyhow, Mop had, very obviously, never bowed a note of church-music from his birth; he never once sat in the gallery of Mellstock church where the others had tuned their venerable psalmody so many hundreds of times; had never, in all likelihood, entered a church at all. All were devil's tunes in his repertory. "He could no more play the Wold Hundredth to his true time than he could play the brazen serpent," the tranter would say. (The brazen serpent was supposed in Mellstock to be a musical instrument particularly hard to blow.)<sup>24</sup>

While Hardy may have used the word "brazen" to mean "bold" or "harsh," it is possible he had another meaning in mind: that the serpent was made of brass or another metal. More than a few metal serpents were made in England in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. A notable example in copper was made c. 1825 in Mere, Wiltshire by William Lander (1763–1843). This serpent (Figure 10), with its distinctive bell flare, narrow bore and unusual fingering requirements, is, in fact, "particularly hard to blow," and the tranter's dismissal of Mop's fiddle ability — he did not come up through the church gallery band and therefore was suspect in the tranter's eyes — was unequivocal no matter Hardy's intended meaning.

These references to the serpent in Thomas Hardy's works display his first-hand knowledge of the instrument. While he never played in a church gallery band and never knew his grandfather, Thomas Hardy Senior who was the first in the family to bring his musical talent to the church, Hardy came of age during the serpent's swan song in England and lived through its extinction. From his positive comments about the serpent — variously referred to as "a good old note," "a deep, rich note," "booming," played by men who were "sound and powerful musicians and strong-winded," "the chief wind instrument," and emitting a "note that nearly lifted the roof" — Hardy seems to have held the serpent in particular esteem. Perhaps aware that in his lifetime the serpent was already coming in for criticism as something that may never have been played well, Hardy may have seen the serpent as a symbol of a time past



FIGURE 10 The author with serpent by William Lander (c. 1825, Wiltshire), by permission of the Joe R. and Joella F. Utley Collection, National Music Museum, The University of South Dakota, catalogue NMM 7129. Photograph by Mark Olencki.

<sup>24</sup> Hardy, "The Fiddler of the Reels," *Life's Little Ironies* (1929), 173.

that represented family, community and collegiality in a way that his time had lost. Hardy did not live to see the modern revival of the serpent — begun by the late Christopher Monk (1921–1991) around 1970<sup>25</sup> — but thanks in part to his frequent mention of an instrument that was already being forgotten by his readers, the serpent’s flame was kept alive until Monk, the London Serpent Trio,<sup>26</sup> the Mellstock Band,<sup>27</sup> and others took the “good old note” off dusty shelves in museums and breathed life into it again.

There’s worse things than serpents, indeed.

## Notes on contributor

Douglas Yeo ([www.yeodoug.com](http://www.yeodoug.com)) has been bass trombonist of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and on the faculty of New England Conservatory of Music since 1985. He began playing serpent in 1994 for Boston Symphony performances of Hector Berlioz’s *Messe solennelle*; since that time he has become one of the world’s leading exponents of the instrument as a performer and scholar. His solo compact disc of music for serpent, *Le Monde du Serpent*, and his DVD project, *Approaching the Serpent: An Historical and Pedagogical Overview*, have met with critical acclaim. A graduate of Wheaton College (Illinois) and New York University, he has given recitals and lectures on five continents and his serpent playing is heard on museum audio guides in Europe, Britain and the United States.

<sup>25</sup> See: Clifford Bevan, “Christopher Monk: 1921–1991 The Purest Serpentist,” *Historic Brass Society Journal*, Volume 3 (1991), 1–3.

<sup>26</sup> [www.londonserpenttrio.co.uk](http://www.londonserpenttrio.co.uk), accessed December 19, 2010.

<sup>27</sup> [www.mellstockband.com](http://www.mellstockband.com), accessed December 19, 2010.