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Book Author(s): ELISA KOEHLER

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5 The Slide Trumpet

Unlike the natural trumpet, the modern Baroque trumpet with vent holes, and the *cornetto*, the slide trumpet has not enjoyed a similar level of attention in the period instrument revival. The reason may be that the term “slide trumpet” describes three or more different instruments depending on the historical time period, musical style, and geographical location under consideration. The instrument’s repertoire is also partially to blame, some of which remains a source of conjecture, especially several cantatas by Johann Sebastian Bach. The primary focus of this chapter is the *tromba da tirarsi* and its predecessors, along with the flat (or flatt) trumpet and the English slide trumpet, as well as related instruments such as the *cornetto da tirarsi* and the soprano, or piccolo, trombone, which makes occasional cameo appearances in jazz performances under the name “slide trumpet.”

Before going any further, it is necessary to acknowledge that the trombone evolved from the slide trumpet in the Renaissance and that for some time these two cylindrical brass instruments and their slide mechanisms were not standardized. Also, details of instrumental construction and nomenclature were rather fluid in the sixteenth century. Differences between the horn, the trumpet, and the trombone became more distinct in the seventeenth century.¹

The Renaissance Slide Trumpet

According to Renaissance iconography, fifteenth-century slide trumpets are the preferred instruments of angels in heaven. And it is a good thing that we have that pictorial evidence because few original instruments survive. Some of the earliest trumpets known to scholars are the long, straight Billingsgate trumpet (fourteenth century) and the recently discovered Guitbert trumpet (made in 1442), which are both natural trumpets without slides. These instruments were found in swampy circumstances: a bog (Billingsgate) and sediment deep inside a well in the courtyard of a French castle (Guitbert), which perhaps helped preserve the brass.² The earliest surviving slide trumpet, a Baroque slide trumpet made by Huns Veit of Naumberg, Saxony, dates from 1651.³

The slide trumpet in the Renaissance usually doubled the slow-moving chant line (*cantus firmus*) in the small medieval wind band known as the *alta cappella* (two shawms and a slide trumpet) and played along with choral music, much like

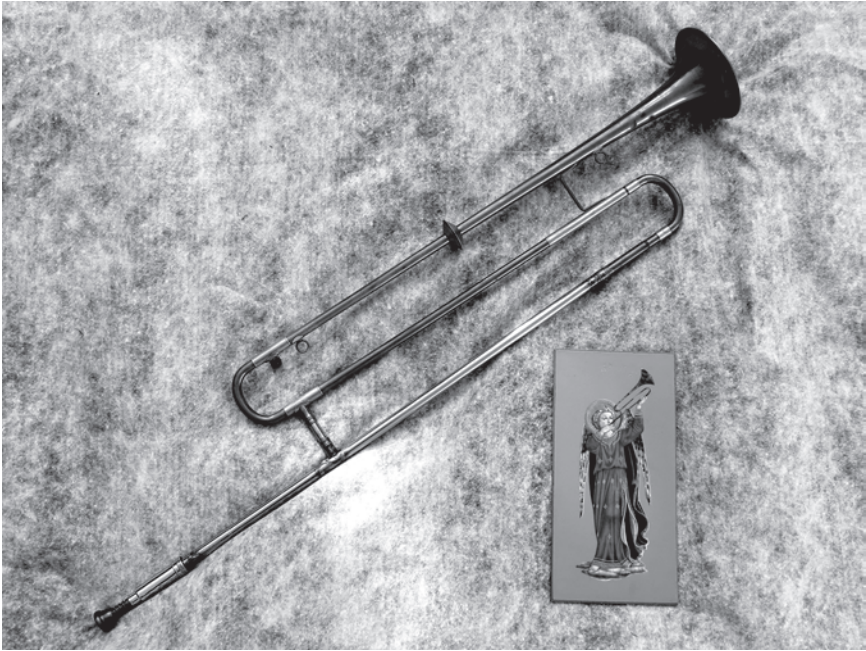


FIGURE 5.1. A reproduction of a Renaissance slide trumpet by Henry Meredith. The picture at the bottom right (from a Christmas card) imitates Renaissance paintings that depict a similar instrument. Photo courtesy Henry Meredith of his instrument.

the early trombone into which it evolved. Unlike the trombone with its familiar U-shaped double slide, the earliest form of the slide trumpet featured a long leadpipe on which the body of the entire trumpet was moved back and forth. The slide trumpet was commonly built in an S-shape. The player held the mouthpiece and leadpipe like a cigarette in the left hand and then gripped the body of the instrument with the right (figure 5.1). Because evidence of the Renaissance slide trumpet is scant, musicologists have engaged in lively debates while reconstructing the history of the instrument and its repertoire.⁴

The slide trumpet was known in French-speaking lands as the *trompette des menestrels* (trumpet of the minstrels) as distinct from the *trompette de guerre* (military trumpet or trumpet of war). Sebastian Virdung labeled the instrument a *Thurner Horn* (tower horn) in his *Musica getutscht* of 1511. These names underscore an important point regarding the use of the slide trumpet: it was socially and musically separate from the natural trumpets played by court trumpeters (*Hoftrumpeter*). The slide trumpet was the instrument of the civic musicians known as the “town waits” (*Stadtpfeifer*). When the trumpet guilds were formed in the seventeenth century, many of the subsequent “mandates against the unauthorized playing of trumpets” concerned municipal trumpeters taking work away

from military and court trumpeters during peacetime by performing ceremonial music on a slide trumpet.⁵

The Baroque Slide Trumpet

The slide trumpet appeared under a variety of names during the Baroque era. The Italian term, *tromba da tirarsi*, appears only in the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. The German equivalent is *Zugtrompete*, which literally means “gliding trumpet.” Bach regularly used Italian terms for instrumental designations in his scores. Technically, the slide trumpet was capable of lowering the pitch of each harmonic of the overtone series (usually in the lower register) by as much as two whole steps through five positions.⁶ Although this system does not produce a full chromatic scale, it certainly covered many of the gaps in the lower range of the overtone series. The traditional playing position of the Baroque slide trumpet was similar to that of the Renaissance instrument with the “cigarette grip” of the mouthpiece (figure 5.2).



FIGURE 5.2. Stanley Curtis demonstrates the traditional playing position of a Baroque slide trumpet (reproduction by Graham Nicholson, 2000, after Johann Leonard Ehe III, 1746) with the sliding leadpipe extended.



FIGURE 5.3. A reproduction of a *corno da tirarsi* by Rainer Egger. Photo courtesy Rick Murrell.

Although only six of Bach's cantatas call for the slide trumpet by this name (BWV 5, 20, 46, 67, 77, 162), some scholars believe that a large number of cantata movements (especially chorale movements) were intended for the instrument where it was not specifically named.⁷ Where it is named, Bach consistently uses the Italian, *tromba da tirarsi*, with the exception of BWV 67 and 162, which call for *corno da tirarsi*.

The *corno da tirarsi* is an unusual case. Although no copies of this unique instrument survive, recent research by Oliver Picon postulates that the instrument was played by only Gottfried Reiche and was actually a variation of a coiled natural trumpet (or *tromba da caccia*) with a crook featuring a double slide attached to the mouthpiece receiver (leadpipe).⁸ A modern reproduction of the instrument has been devised by Rainer Egger in collaboration with Gerd Friedel, Mike Diprose, and Oliver Picon (figure 5.3). On the other hand, Gisela and Jozseph Csiba have conducted research suggesting that some coiled trumpets during Bach's time may have been equipped with small slides (shorter than the sliding leadpipe of the Baroque slide trumpet) that might have enabled trumpeters to correct intonation without "lipping."⁹

The slide trumpet was capable of playing nonharmonic tones in the lower octave of the trumpet's range, especially between C4 and C5. As musicologist

Thomas MacCracken pointed out, a large number of unspecified trumpet parts may have been played by the slide trumpet.¹⁰ Specifically, there are twenty-six movements (mostly chorale melodies) that fit this description; even the famous chorale melody for “Jesu, Joy of Man’s Desiring” (BWV 147, Mvt. 6) may have been performed on a slide trumpet at its premiere on July 2, 1723. Don Smithers has argued that lipping may have been used more often if the slide was merely used to lengthen the tubing in order to transpose the trumpet to a different key (harmonic series).¹¹

Just as the *tromba da tirarsi* was primarily associated with the music of Bach, the flat trumpet (sometimes identified in seventeenth-century orthography as the “flatt” trumpet) was primarily associated with the music of Henry Purcell. The instrument is called a flatt trumpet because it is usually played in minor keys often referred to as “flatt keys.”¹² Its slide mechanism differed from that of the *Zugtrompete* because it moves the back of the instrument (a U-shaped double slide) rather than the front. Purcell’s best-known composition for the flat trumpet is the *Funeral Music for Queen Mary*.

The English Slide Trumpet

Without a doubt, the most celebrated and enduring incarnation of the slide trumpet flourished in England during the nineteenth century. The English slide trumpet was developed from experiments with slide mechanisms at the turn of the nineteenth century. Although it developed from the flat trumpet described earlier, the impetus for its invention was most likely an unflattering review of a performance by a natural trumpeter in 1784. Specifically, the eminent British music historian Charles Burney published the following commentary after festival performances in London commemorating the centennial of Handel’s birth:

The favourite Base song, “The Trumpet shall sound,” . . . was very well performed by Signore Tasca and Mr. [James] Sarjant, who accompanied him on the trumpet admirably. There are, however, some passages in the Trumpet-part to this Air, which have always a bad effect, from the natural imperfection of the instrument. In HANDEL’S time, composers were not so delicate in writing for Trumpets and French-horns, as at present; it being now laid down as a rule, that the fourth and sixth of a key [the eleventh and thirteenth partials, F5 and A5] on both of these instruments, being naturally so much out of tune that no player can make them perfect, shall never be used but in short passing notes, to which no base is given that can discover their false intonation. Mr. Sarjant’s tone is extremely sweet and clear, but every time that he was obliged to dwell upon G, the fourth of D, displeasure appeared in every countenance; for which I was extremely concerned, knowing how inevitable such an effect must be from such a cause (a).

[Footnote:] (a) In the Allelujah, p. 150, of the printed score, G, the fourth of the key, is found and sustained during two entire bars. In the Dettingen *Te Deum*, p. 30, and in many other places, the *false concord*, or interval, perpetually deforms the fair

face of harmony, and indeed the face of almost everyone that hears it, with an expression of pain. It is very much to be wished that this animating and brilliant instrument could have its defects removed by some ingenious mechanical contrivance, as those of the German flute are, by keys.¹³

Two early responses to Burney's famous critique of 1784 were the 1787 trumpet with vent holes by William Shaw (discussed in chapter 3) and Charles Clagget's "Cromatic [*sic*] Trumpet" of 1788. Clagget's instrument included a simple box valve that toggled between two connected trumpets pitched a half step apart (in the keys of D and E-flat). Clagget even references Burney's comments in his patent.¹⁴ Shaw and Clagget's innovations failed to catch on, but John Hyde struck gold when he developed an early version of the English slide trumpet approximately ten years later. Hyde first described the instrument in his 1799 publication, *A New and Compleat Preceptor for the Trumpet and Bugle Horn*, so it was perhaps developed that year or earlier.

The earliest English slide trumpets were converted natural trumpets in F that employed a slide operated by a clock-spring mechanism. Whereas slide trumpets from earlier centuries employed an elongated leadpipe or a double slide that moved backward (in the case of the flat trumpet), the English slide trumpet had a more compact design with a slide situated in the center of the instrument. The player held the instrument upside down with the left hand and operated the slide by means of a T-shaped finger pull with the right hand (figure 5.4). The English slide trumpet also came equipped with crooks to lower the pitch of the F trumpet to E, E-flat, D, and C; combinations of crooks could be used to reach lower keys (D-flat, B, B-flat, A, and A-flat), but with less secure intonation. Its mouthpiece was similar in dimensions to those used on natural trumpets of the time. The instrument lacked a tuning slide but employed tuning bits that were inserted into the leadpipe, like eighteenth-century natural trumpets (see figure 2.2).¹⁵ Like contemporary trombones, English slide trumpets were most likely lubricated with pure olive oil, known as Provence oil.¹⁶

What made the English slide trumpet so successful was its ability to correct the out-of-tune notes in the harmonic overtone series and play other chromatic pitches while maintaining the characteristic noble tone of the natural trumpet. This explains the title of Art Brownlow's definitive book on the instrument, *The Last Trumpet*. The English slide trumpet was primarily an orchestral instrument rather than a vehicle for virtuosi, but it was especially popular for performing the obbligato trumpet solos in Handel arias. Through the celebrity of Thomas Harper and his son, Thomas John Harper Jr., the English slide trumpet enjoyed a tradition that lasted more than a century.¹⁷ Other notable performers of the English slide trumpet were John Distin and John Norton. As is described in chapter 9, a public competition was held in 1834 in New York City (Niblo's Pleasure Garden) between John Norton on the slide trumpet and Alessandro Gambati on an early valved trumpet. Norton won hands down.



FIGURE 5.4. Crispian Steele-Perkins performing on an English slide trumpet with three tuning bits inserted into the leadpipe.

The English slide trumpet was a mainstay in British orchestras through the end of the nineteenth century and eventually gave way to the “long F” trumpet with valves, in the same key (also six feet of tubing). The instrument was revived by Crispian Steele-Perkins in the late twentieth century, who made several recordings that demonstrate its noble tone.

Other Types of Slide Trumpets

French trumpeter Joseph-David Buhl designed his own version of a slide trumpet in 1833, but it suffered from a slow, resistant slide mechanism and failed to prosper. Buhl’s nephew François Dauverné (Arban’s teacher at the Paris Conservatory) designed a type of slide trumpet that featured a forward-moving slide mechanism rather than the English design.¹⁸ How it compared to his uncle’s instrument is unknown. Dauverné’s slide trumpet was featured in his 1857 *Méthode* but did not enjoy anything approaching the success of the English slide trumpet.

In contemporary jazz performances, trombonists have occasionally been known to use the soprano or piccolo trombone. This instrument has sometimes been referred to as a slide trumpet, but it is not widely used and bears no relation to the instruments discussed in this chapter. While valve trumpets eventually banished the slide trumpet from the mainstream, perhaps a bit of its legacy lives on in the movable first and third valve slides on modern trumpets.