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The Divergent Trombone in Sixteenth Century Europe

The trombone, consisting in its minimum of a double-folded flaring tube with a telescopic half, is one of the simplest and oldest brass instruments available from the long list of presently extant varieties. Other than the adjustments of small details and features, the majority of trombones sold today are exceptionally similar to the examples that appeared during the forefront of its development in the 1500s.¹ In stark contrast to this relatively minimal evolution² of design, the ways in which the trombone family of instruments has been utilized has shifted many times. It has, through the centuries, worn many masks, as idealized in the words of Hector Berlioz:

The trombone is, in my opinion, the true chief of that rage of wind instruments which I have designated as epic instruments. It possesses, in an eminent degree, both nobelness and grandeur; it has all the deep and powerful accents of high musical poetry, from the religious accent, calm and imposing, to the wild clamours of the orgy. It depends on the composer to make it by turn chaunt like a choir of priests; threaten, lament, ring a funeral knell, raise a hymn of glory,

¹ There is common misunderstanding that the word “trombone”, in its modern use, connotes a different instrument than the Renaissance “sackbut” which is often discussed in the realm of early brass instruments. Sackbut, instead of differentiating a unique form of instrument, is most practically considered a simple colloquial term derived from the French *sacquebut*, a term used to describe some manner of slide-trumpets in the fifteenth century. This term was adopted in the English vernacular around this time, eventually giving way to the Italian *trombone* in later years. In the vernacular German, the term for the trombone—*posaune*—has remained the same from the early derivations to the modern day. Translated to a common point, they all reference the same trombone, regardless of its time and place of origin.

² The term “evolution” is debated within the current organological climate, and must not be taken to have any deep implications when discussing instrument chronology, as it does not extend to the idea of inheritance or improvement in this case. Instead, it is used only as a placeholder in its broad original sense, to denote that instruments, like all creations of human culture, are constantly shifting in their scope and purpose.

*break forth into frantic cries, or sound its dread flourish to awaken the dead or doom the living.*³

Looking at the first complete century of the trombone's existence (1500-1600), one sees rapid development and distinction between two consequent thought processes which differed greatly from the instrument's original use as a form of natural trumpet: the trombone as an extension of the choir in sacred settings, and the trombone as an avenue of underscore and accompaniment in secular dramas.

The Early Trombone: Preceding the Sixteenth Century

Current understanding places the genesis of the trombone in Central Europe sometime around the turn of the fifteenth century.⁴ Variations on the trumpet which utilized a nature of telescopic section are known extant and may have existed as early as the 1300s, but these 'slide trumpets' should be clearly separated from what is to be considered an early trombone. The slide on these instruments, by nature of using only a single telescoping tube, was not capable of extending the chromatic range of the natural trumpet, instead being used as a tool to more precisely and fluidly control the intonation, relieving some responsibility from the players embouchure.⁵ It was not until the introduction of the U-shaped slide, as seen on any modern trombone, that a fully chromatic instrument evolved from the natural trumpet and began the lineage of a truly new instrument. This development occurred sometime during the later years of the fifteenth century. Iconographic depictions show different slide-trumpet instruments that could be construed as using a U-shaped slide through the 1460s to 1480s, but all of them are mechanically flawed or

³ Hector Berlioz, *Treatise on Modern Instrumentation and Orchestration* (Boston: Oliver Ditson & Co, ca. 1850), 156

⁴ David Guion, *A History of the Trombone* (Plymouth, UK: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 20-21

⁵ Murray Campbell, Clive Greated and Arnold Myers, *Musical Instruments: History, Technology, and Performance of Instruments of Western Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 195

infeasible as practical, playable instruments.⁶ The first known image which shows a trombone in the anatomically correct form consistent with the earliest known extant instruments appears in Filippino Lippi's "Assumption of the Virgin", painted in the church of S. Maria sopra Minerva in 1490.⁷ The trombone as we know it today had appeared, at least in pictorial fashion, before the advent of the sixteenth century. It stands to reason that the instrument would have existed in the depicted form for at least a few years before it was rendered by an artist, but without any written records or other corroborating evidence a clear date cannot be determined.



Figure 1: Detail of trombone-playing angel from Lippi's *Assumption*. Photo credit: Kimball Trombone

From this time period of early development there are unfortunately no written sources directly referencing the use of a trombone in any particular musical instance. For all intents and purposes, they were lumped in with the descriptions of early Renaissance ensembles with the natural

⁶ Keith Polk, "The Trombone in Archival Documents, 1350-1500," *ITA Journal* 15 (Summer 1987): 28-29

⁷ Herbert Myers, "Evidence of the Emerging Trombone in the Late Fifteenth Century: What Iconography May Be Trying to Tell Us," *Historic Brass Society Journal* 17 (2005): 17-23

trumpet, relegated seemingly to playing processional and ceremonial music in noble and practical settings to accompany marked occasions or celebrations.⁸ The earliest trombones, like the other brass of the time (natural trumpets and horns), would have existed within the *alta band*—from the Latin for “loud”—which functioned almost exclusively in outdoor or large settings such as the burgeoning large cathedrals of important city-centres.⁹ They undoubtedly were involved in the performance of secular and functional music like all instruments of the time, and in some rare cases, accompanied liturgical settings within a sacred ceremony such as the mass. Until the very end of the Fifteenth century, surviving records indicate that the primary usage of these *alta band* ensembles under noble patronage was private, personal entertainment without any sacred connections. Although vocalists were implemented in such settings singing popular songs of the time, there was no direct connection between the ensembles and the choir.¹⁰ Instrumental ensembles were occasionally contracted to provide minor accompaniment or affective flourish to masses during the later decade of the fifteenth century, which sometimes included the brass instruments or other members of the *haut* ensembles, but there is no record of music being utilized in a way that involved any instruments functioning outside the realm of independent contrast to the voices of the choir.¹¹ At the end of the Fifteenth Century, the trombone, still in its very infancy, was clearly associated as an ensemble instrument used primarily in secular and practical settings. Liturgical function was rare, and combinations

⁸ Anthony Baines, *European and American Musical Instruments* (London: B T Batsford, 1966), 135-137

⁹ Keith Polk, “Patronage and Innovation in Instrumental Music in the 15th Century,” *Historic Brass Society Journal* 3 (1991): 157-159

¹⁰ Maricarmen Gomez, “Minstrel Schools in the Late Middle Ages,” *Early Music* 18 (1990): 213-214

¹¹ Edmund Bowles, “Were Musical Instruments Used in the Liturgical Services during the Middle Ages?” *Galpin Society Journal* 10 (1957): 48-52

involving *haut* instruments and singers even rarer.¹² The following years however, after the turn of the last century of the Renaissance, showed profound shifts in the way the trombone was perceived within the larger musical context.

The Sixteenth Century: Trombone Divergence and Choral Intermingling

The beginning of the sixteenth century was the time when the trombone began to take its own direction, separating itself from the trumpet with which it had largely been interchangeable in previous decades. In this time, the world of ensemble-based instrumental music itself began to split into two distinct realms: liturgical ceremony and secular drama. The *alta* band of the fifteenth century and the delineation between the loud and soft instruments gave way to more inclusive ensembles which were more often combined with the choir, and had at least somewhat through-composed settings of contemporary pieces.¹³

On the secular side, the driving force in instrumental music reform during the early sixteenth century came out of Florence in the form of the *intermedii*. These Florentine *intermedii* were short works developed to pass the time between movements or scenes of dramatic plays commissioned to expound on the extravagance of festivals held by the Florentine nobility. The Medici family, backed by copious wealth generated from operations as the primary banking family of the time, staged lavish events for their courts which almost always incorporated some form of musical and theatrical entertainment.¹⁴ The first well-documented use of *intermedii* was in 1518, during the celebrations of Lorenzo de' Medici's wedding to Madeleine of France.

Medici organized a performance of Lorenzo Strozzi's *Comedia in Versi*, with a mixed ensemble

¹² Guion, *History of the Trombone*, 97

¹³ G. B. Lane, *The Trombone in the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1982), 114-116

¹⁴ Ernie Hills, "The Use of the Trombone in the Florentine *Intermedii*, 1518-1589" (PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 1984), 7-8

of strings and winds providing underscoring for the action and short performances between scenes. Among the ensemble was a consort of four trombones. This instance is important in two regards: firstly, it is the earliest known remark on a group of multiple trombones being used together as an individual consort.¹⁵ Second, it is apparently one of, if not the first of this type of intermedii, as Francesco Zeffi (ca. 1470-1550, the de'Medici historian) noted that "This music has since been imitated many times, but at that time it had never been used or perhaps even considered...."¹⁶ This early intermedii seems to have used minimal combinations of instruments and voices, a concept which would be further expanded in following works.

In 1539, Cosimo de'Medici was wed to Eleanor of Toledo. Much like the festival of Lorenzo's wedding, Cosimo's again included an elaborate staged drama with mixed musical accompaniment. A set of seven intermedii were set between scenes of Antonio Landi's *Il Comodo*. Of note from this set is that the last intermedii consisted of an original composition of secular song in five-parts accompanied by a consort of four trombones like the one used without voices in the intermedii of *Comedia in Versi*.¹⁷

The intermedii continued to be popular through the sixteenth century with prominent examples in 1548, 1581, and 1589, and a few characteristics can be noted from their features that impart heavily on the development of the trombone. In these intermedii, the trombone consort is used entirely in a homogenous fashion. Other than a select few moments where the trombone consort is featured alone, it functioned typically as the bottom four-voices of five or more part

¹⁵ Although the original manuscript of this setting has not been recovered, it does beg the question as to whether or not the composer explicitly indicated the trombone in his score. Zeffi recounts that the last act was accompanied by four trombones alone, and if the composer had made such clear in his writing this intermedii would far precede the readily accepted *Sonata pian'e forte* as the earliest piece in which specific instruments are assigned specific parts in the writing.

¹⁶ Ernie Hills, *Florentine Intermedii*, 34-35

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 43-44

works. It was also often doubled with either analogous viol or cornetti consorts.¹⁸ One shared characteristic between these archetypal consorts is that their timbre is commonly associated or described as being unified with the human voice.¹⁹ This connection was crucial in the development of the trombone consort and its proliferation of both secular and liturgical works of the time period. The arrangement of such consorts as noted by contemporary witnesses such as Zeffi is noted to uniquely contain trombones of various sizes. Sebastian Virdung's *Musica Getutscht* (1511) references only one size of trombone, and the iconographic and descriptive sources from before 1518 all depict instruments of seemingly similar proportion, and never in groups of more than two.²⁰ Somewhere between the 1510s and around 1540, the trombone had branched from a single instrument into a family of instruments, aligned much in the way that vocal parts are distinguished in register. Typically, one would find an alto trombone in A, a pair of tenor trombones in C, and a low bass trombone in F. These pitches were of course arbitrary, with no standard of tuning outside of individual cities it is possible that an instrument considered in A would in practical use be in C in a distant region. The spacing between members of the trombone family, regardless of exact pitch centers, were usually displaced by fifths or some relationship within two steps of the fifth.²¹ Regardless of the exact differences, this relationship made the trombone an excellent choice for supporting, enhancing, and mimicking the typical division of vocal parts within a choir. Interestingly the high soprano parts were rarely played on

¹⁸ Ibid., 177-182

¹⁹ Berlioz, *Treatise*, 151, 156, 159,

²⁰ Tom Naylor, *The Trumpet and Trombone in Graphic Arts, 1500-1800* (Nashville: Brass Press, 1979)

²¹ Howard Brown, *Sixteenth Century Instrumentation: The Music for the Florentine Intermedii* (American Institute of Musicology, 1973), 86-88

trombone—there is no surviving mention or evidence of a soprano-register variation until 1677²²—but instead where typically played by a cornetto.²³

Moving away from the entertainment-based music of the court commissioned dramas, the trombone began to be recognized as a suitable church instrument around 1530. The earliest variety of instrumental church music was derived from the canzonas (popularized derivations of the French *chansons*) composed by church organists. These pieces were not intended for any sort of mixed ensemble, and were performed exclusively in consorts of trombones, cornetti, or viols.²⁴ In the earliest documented instances from this time, the function of instrumental ensembles in the liturgy mirrored that of the organ. It did not generally play with the choir, but alternated with the choir and other officiants through the course of the service. The organ also in some instances was substituted for a choir, either when one was not available or was not an effective match for the space and congregation. This interjection of instrumental canzonas was commonplace throughout central Europe until about 1550. Around this time, the orchestration of the music within the mass began to change and instead of simply alternating with the choir and officiants, the organ was seen as a useful tool in playing with the choir. A book of organ works compiled in 1550 for Santa Maria Maggiore in Bergamo shows music being written specifically to accompany chants during the mass.²⁵ Around this same time, large consorts of instrumentalists came under consistent patronage at Italian churches in numerous city-states.²⁶ By 1560, use of

²² Lars Laubhoold, “Sensation or Forgery? The 1677 Soprano Trombone of Cristiann Kofahl,” *Historic Brass Society Journal* 12 (2000): 259-265

²³ Brown, *Sixteenth Century Instrumentation*, 94

²⁴ Guion, *History of the Trombone*, 123

²⁵ Gary Towne, “Gaspar del Albertis and Music at Santa Maria Maggiore in Bergamo in the Sixteenth Century” (Ph.D. diss.: University of California, Santa Barbara, 1985), 233-35

²⁶ Guion, *History of the Trombone*, 117

instrumental groups beyond simple consorts was widespread through churches large and small across what is now France, Italy, and Spain.²⁷

As mentioned earlier, the multi-part trombone consort was common at this time which allowed the instrument to cover traditional vocal pieces. Expanding upon this capability, and following in the footsteps of the organ in becoming a means of accompaniment, the trombone consort began to be paired with the choir in performances. Apparently this change came about quickly and widely, at least within the scope of written record, as the practice is mentioned in all major Catholic regions (including England) by the 1570s.²⁸ Venice in particular had a strong affinity for the use of trombones to reinforce the voice, especially under the musical direction of Girolamo dalla Case, who was hired in 1568 to form a wind band specifically for use in the Venetian liturgy in San Marco. Under his guide, the trombones were used to double vocal parts in a mixed choir, to provide low voices for a female choir, and to substitute for a choir altogether depending on the nature of the service.²⁹ In the 1580s, the nuns of the San Giovanni Battista hired an outside trombonist to teach at their convent, so that they could perform more fulfilling musical arrangements during their services with all available voices.³⁰ All of these uses obviously furthered the sound produced by the choir in sheer volume, but they also served a very practical function. Due to the nature of its slide, the trombone was capable not only of producing all of the diatonic and chromatic notes that might have appeared, but it could also infinitely adjust the tuning and intonation easier than any other instrument available at the time. Groups of

²⁷ Germany, working under strong Lutheran leadership and ideals, had abandoned polyphonic instrumental music in the church for the majority of the sixteenth century.

²⁸ Guion, *History of the Trombone*, 122

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 118

³⁰ Craig Monson, "Disembodied Voices: Music in the Nunneries of Bologna in the Midst of the Counter-Reformation," in *The Crannied Wall: Women, Religion, and the Arts in Early Modern Europe* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), 200

trombonists, if they performed at more than one church in an area, could easily match the varying pitches of their organs and subsequent performances. They could also adapt better to various temperaments and the common pure intervals found in what was previously strictly vocal music, providing better support to the choir than an instrument such as the cornetti. This ability to match tuning “on the fly” provided a much more centered base for the choir, allowing them to perform more freely than instruments which would have more difficulty creating a homogenous pitch.³¹ Combined with the vocal quality of its tone and dynamic capabilities, these functions made the trombone the preeminent choice for instrumental ensemble performance in sacred settings during the second half of the sixteenth century.³²

Moving Towards the Baroque: Conclusions on the Divergent Trombone of the Sixteenth Century

Roughly one hundred years after its birth as a separate instrument, the trombone had expanded far beyond its initial role of providing a more in-tune alternative to the natural trumpet. Through the avenues of secular drama and liturgical ceremony, it had developed two primary functions by 1590. It served as part of the earliest predecessor to the orchestra, the mixed ensembles typified by the Florentine intermedii, which combined loud and soft instruments to form instrumental accompaniment and underscoring for largely recitational comedies. In the church, it became an extension of the organ, anchoring and amplifying the work of the choir beyond the capabilities of the voice alone. Both of these uses would continue on and be developed past the turn of the seventeenth century, but would be quickly supplanted by burgeoning Baroque styles such as the infancy of opera and the concerto grosso. In the idiomatic use of the trombone throughout music

³¹ David Guion, “Theories of Tuning and Ensemble Practice in Italian Dramatic Music of the Early Baroque,” *Historic Brass Society Journal* 12 (2000): 236-37

³² Robert Weaver, “Sixteenth Century Instrumentation,” *Musical Quarterly* 47 (1961): 363-78

history, these two distinct styles and settings of the sixteenth century—performed on instruments practically identical to those introduced in the 1500s—are unique points in its lineage which cannot be overlooked when considering its development as a whole.

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