

ON “ORGANOLOGY”: A POSITION PAPER

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The round table on “organology” held in Paris during the symposium *Journées des cuivres anciens* in March 1999 gave rise to a conversation on the different meanings assigned to this word by scholars, musicians, and enthusiasts in the field. As a consequence I was invited by Jeffrey Nussbaum and Trevor Herbert to submit to the *Historic Brass Society Journal* some reflections on the topic.

The following comments, informed by experience acquired in some fifteen years of research and almost as many years of teaching in this discipline, reflect and support the use of that term in its proper meaning—a meaning in fact not frequently assigned to it. Many use the word “organology” (or the adjective “organologic”) to refer solely to aspects of the design and construction of musical instruments. Others use it in the more restrictive sense of “science of organs” (a periodical devoted to the organ studies is named *Acta organologica*). More correctly, however, the term denotes the discipline which studies musical instruments (or, as some prefer, “sounding objects”), whatever the perspective or means of approach to them.

The linguistic value of the word “organology” as well as its acceptance in the modern English language were discussed by Wesley M. Oler in a stimulating paper published in the 1970 issue of the *Galpin Society Journal*. There is no need here to rehearse in detail the arguments presented by Oler (whose principal shortcoming was that he skimmed over the use of the term in other languages), but it is worth recalling that he identified in Bessaraboff’s well-known *Ancient European Musical Instruments* (Boston, 1941) the earliest use of the word in the restricted sense of “scientific and engineering [technical] aspects of musical instruments.” All evidence points to Bessaraboff as the one initially responsible for the improper usage of the term, as subsequently encountered in scholarly literature as well as in common parlance. He, however, was writing at the very beginning of the 1940s. Today there is an urgent need for a less arbitrary definition of our discipline.

My personal inclination has always been to give the broadest and most articulated meaning to the word—a point of view that I summarized in a recent article published in Italian.¹ My observations move from the etymology of the term and from its nominal meaning of “study *on* musical instruments.” Let us say *on*, for the study *of* an instrument, even though very much to be recommended, can in no way substitute for historical and technological investigation, tasks peculiar to the organologist. The historical approach recognizes the possible relationships between the instrument and the society that manufactured

and used it, while the technical one entails the examination of a self-standing handwork, based on a more or less complex internal “architecture.”

Both historical and technical perspectives are therefore obligatory, so that we may avoid misunderstanding surviving instruments as well as related sources. The mere survival of a specific item in fact does not always accurately reflect the diffusion of that instrument in the past; an experimental instrument may survive, while one that enjoyed a remarkable degree of popularity may have disappeared completely. Moreover, the ingenuity of an invention is not sufficient to guarantee its acceptance and success; it must also appear at the appropriate moment (i.e., when there is a need for it) and its potential must be recognized by prospective users. Furthermore, since different countries have different musical traditions, what was valid in one place might not be so in another. (Let me only mention the many instruments invented in the nineteenth century that, even though musically effective, were not accepted, or were accepted only in a restricted area or milieu, because they did not answer one or more of the aforementioned requirements.)

In the paper I read in Paris I presented two examples that seem representative in this regard: a) a valved horn with both bell and mechanism on the right (a structural solution forbidding the use of the right hand inside the bell); and b) the so-called *trombone contrabasso Verdi* (Verdi contrabass trombone), only the last in a series of instruments used to cope with the “cimbasso” parts in nineteenth-century Italian opera scores. The first instrument had some acceptance, after about 1840, in Austria and Italy (the latter being ruled by the former in those days) and was preferred by some renowned *virtuosi*, the aforementioned hindrance to the right hand notwithstanding. The second is a cumbersome trombone that substituted in Italy for all the instruments previously entrusted with the lowest parts of the brass, to the point of performing all the orchestral music written for them.²

The study *on* these instruments cannot be confined to the mere “scientific and technical aspects,” which will of course limit the understanding of both them. In the first case such a perspective fails to explain the preference for a model technically inferior to many others then available (a preference which, by the way, I am as yet unable to explain fully). In the second case, it would not explain the use of a trombone in place of instruments with completely different tubing and sound, formerly entrusted with the same orchestral parts. The understanding of these models actually requires an approach that cannot be based solely on the analysis of the object *per se*, but rather on the awareness of the context—an operation that can be undertaken only with the advantage of historical knowledge.

In this perspective we must invoke “organology” in the broadest possible meaning of the term, using other names (why not even “organography”?) in reference merely to the technical and design aspects of a musical instrument. And assuming that the assessment of

a new discipline is based not only on the awareness of its aim, but of its historical roots as well, it seems worth mentioning a text which, to my knowledge, contains the earliest use of the term “organology” in a sense similar to that promoted in this essay—the *Manuale del capomusica* (Bandmaster’s Handbook) by Amintore Galli, a book printed in Milan in 1889. In a substantial section of the book entitled “Organologia,” the author discusses all the principal band instruments. Each article on instruments is organized in five sections: (1) history, (2) aesthetics, (3) design and production of sound, (4) technology and technique, (5) resource materials. Thus while Galli’s *Manuale* is primarily a book on instrumentation for bands, he approaches the instruments in a very systematic—and in my opinion, forward-looking—manner.

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NOTES

¹ Renato Meucci, “Organologia: definizione e contenuti di una recente disciplina,” in *Il museo degli strumenti musicali del Conservatorio “Luigi Cherubini,”* (Il luogo del David, no. 2), a cura di Mirella Branca (Livorno: Sillabe, 1999), pp. 108-119. Among studies on the same topic published recently, I would draw attention on the outstanding article by John Henry van der Meer in the new edition of *Die Musik in Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1998), s.v. “Instrumentenkunde.”

² See my article “The Cimbasso and Related Instruments in 19th-Century Italy,” *Galpin Society Journal* 49 (1996): 143-79.