

Stylistic roots

Through both ends of the looking glass: a view of and from the German school of trombone playing

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I. Introduction

As an American trombonist who for over 20 years participated in some of the leading German orchestras and chamber ensembles as well as taking part as both contestant and juror in international solo-competitions, I was often asked by my German colleagues and students to define the differences in the styles or schools of trombone playing between Germany and the USA. Having returned to the U.S. as professor at Indiana University's School of Music, I am now frequently asked similar questions from this side in my teaching or when I perform in various settings here in the U.S.

Collecting my thoughts, impressions, and experiences on this subject and compiling them into an article was one of the many things on my "To do" list upon returning to this country in 1998, and I must add that it is not the only entry on that list that is yet unfinished. Two recent events have helped jump-start this undertaking: 1) an email exchange with Fort Worth bass-trombonist and ITA editor Dennis Bubert, citing an orchestral experience of his that seems tailor-made for this context, and 2) the recent release of my new solo CD ("The Audition Window/Timeless Trombone Tales", Summit Records DCD 354) containing the Ferdinand David *Konzertino*, the reading of which has elicited frequent comments about its apparent Germanic style and interpretation. This is similar to being told you have an accent: you are often the last one to notice.

I am cautious with generalizations. It is as difficult to define "the German school of brass playing", with its differences between Berlin, Leipzig, Munich, Hamburg and other German orchestras as it is to put Cleveland, Minnesota, Chicago, Boston, Philadelphia, et al, under one stylistic hat. But the exercise may be helpful in defining at least a broad sense of "German style" to students working on German literature, just as I often try to describe a French stylistic approach to students preparing works in that genre. There are some overriding concepts that can be identified, and the endeavor itself contains much food for thought. Describing and defining these and other fine points can help you locate yourself on the large map of styles, and maybe recognize a few tools to help you reach a certain goal, whether adding a nuance of expression or fashioning a whole new veneer for part of your repertoire.

This article will not be a primer in how to sound German in 5 easy steps, with practical applications for the Hindemith *Sonate* and the *Ride of the Valkyries*. Instead, we will look at some of the factors that have influenced significant stylistic traits of German trombone playing. Writing for the ITA Journal, with its great majority of readers being American, the primary objective will be to illuminate aspects of German trombone playing for those readers, but occasional glimpses "from the other end of the looking glass" can hardly be avoided. When looking through a glass there is often a reflection after all!

Globalization, as espoused in so many venues, is a very real issue in the music world. The past decades have shown that the blessings of audio technology can be mixed. While the near universal availability of high quality recordings of the world's great artists and ensembles is an inestimable resource that has doubtlessly helped raise the general standard of playing, it is sometimes criticized as creating standardized styles of playing. The same could be said about a world class of conductors who try to put their stamp on an orchestra in Los Angeles one week and Paris or Hamburg the next.

These reasons, among others, encourage me to try to define the sometimes-elusive stylistic differences and identify some of their origins. Let us hope that it will not be like trying to define humor, where the joke often tends to suffer in the process.

And now, to Dennis Bubert's experience - in our email exchange, he related the following:

"Years ago, the Fort Worth Symphony Orchestra played an all-Wagner concert at a festival in San Antonio, with soloists and chorus from the Berlin Opera. The conductor for that program was Horst Stein, renowned German conductor of concert and opera. We had all played some Wagner, of course - certainly the more often performed overtures, etc. But it was the first time many of us had played an entire (and long) program of this music, and with a German conductor. He was not particularly pleased with us for the first rehearsal or two, and then (I remember this clearly), he stopped us early on in the next rehearsal and said, "Look, brass section, you are all trying to play this music the way you think German brass players would play it - long note lengths, big broad sounds, broad articulation - that is fine; there's just one small problem. German brass players don't play that way - that's just your American idea of how they would play!" He then went on (and on) to discuss the need for greater clarity in articulation, the difference between playing this music on the stage and in the pit, etc. It was really quite an education! I remember it as being one of the best concerts I've ever played with the orchestra."

II. Stylistic traits

Upon joining the Bavarian State Orchestra in Munich's National Theatre as a young man

in 1977, I was almost overloaded with a flood of new musical impressions. The German "Sidewinder" trumpets were uniquely different from what I was used to, and the woodwind playing was wonderfully new to my ears. But the trombonists, who in West Germany at that time almost all played American trombones, also sounded quite different than what I was used to - even though they were playing basically the same equipment that I did! That was - and is - food for thought, and elicits an important point:

"It is not the equipment that one plays, but rather the concepts that make the difference."

It seems unfair to capture and reduce the myriad of stylistic impressions into a few mere categories and generalizations, but it is necessary for our purposes here. The brief general descriptions I offer here should take on more detailed meaning as we then look at the influences that have helped mold and form these concepts.

Articulation/Rhythm

When playing "their" repertoire, German symphonic players tend to emphasize metrical and rhythmical structures such as pick-ups, dotted rhythms, and syncopations. Metric and rhythmic contours are clearly delineated and emphasized. This does not preclude legato, as these qualities can be and are incorporated into a beautiful legato style. In this approach, merely subdividing correctly and delivering notes in a properly timed chronology is not yet rhythmical. The figure should also *sound* rhythmical, almost as if giving rhythmical dictation. The opposite of this approach could be portrayed as a smooth murmuring of the rhythm, or a placid, glossed-over delivery of the phrase.

It would be interesting to study the relationship between languages and music in this context. For our purposes here I will merely note that German is a very phonetic language, with each and every syllable - really almost every vowel and consonant - being pronounced clearly. Maybe this has something to do with the musical execution of phrases and figures.

Tone/Phrasing

In its November 1985 issue, the magazine *Das Orchester* featured a comparison of German and American trombones based on a lecture given previously by Heinrich Thein. (*"Deutsches" und "Amerikanisches" Posaunenkonzept. Anmerkungen zur Geschichte und Klangbild.*) Here the tonal difference is described as German trombones producing more of an *aah* to *eee* vowel sound, and American trombones more *ooh* to *uuh*. While this is the simplest part of the comparison, it serves well here, and I would project it beyond the instrument to the overall tonal concepts, which in the German approach show a broader palette

of vowel colorings in the tone, much as one might expect from a singer. Their mentions this also in the context of section blend, citing the German section as a blend with an 'eee' coloration on first, 'ay' (as in 'hay') on second, and 'ooh' on bass, as compared to a more homogenous, unified 'ooh' or 'uuh' in the typical American section.

Further vocal and lyrical qualities can show up in a freer, more expressive manner of phrasing. And to use the "v-word" here, I remember Professor Johann Doms of the Berlin Philharmonic telling me "in our orchestra the principal trombone player may use a *tasteful* vibrato in *appropriate* passages." This can also lend a sheen of vocal lyricism - and why shouldn't a principal trombonist enjoy the same virtuosic license as the principal oboe or cello player?

Language is a powerful tool, and it is interesting to note some of the words that German trombonists use to characterize ideal tone qualities: One of the highest praises for a beautiful tone is "soft" (*weich* - soft - as in velvety, which doesn't mean it can't also be full, big, or loud). One of the most frequently used deprecating adjectives would be "hard".

Drama/Expression

These elements of articulation/rhythm and tone/phrasing can ideally combine to help create a tangibly expressive approach to playing, whether the *cantilena* passage in the first movement of the David *Konzertino* with the melting schmaltz of a lyric tenor, or a Wagnerian motif announced with the sheer weight and gravity of a stomping giant. The musical history especially of the German culture is one in which music is used to express, even explain things, events, thoughts, feelings and more, from children's songs with cake recipes or holiday sagas to the highly expressive lieder and opera. Thus it is not surprising to encounter an immediacy of interpretation, often more concrete than abstract.

III. Influences

It is possible to phonetically speak your way through a foreign language sentence, without understanding a single word that you are saying. But the delivery will not be captivating or spellbinding, and may occasionally have the em-PHA-sis on the wrong syl-LA-ble. If you know the language you are reading aloud, you will certainly make a better presentation of it. In music, we can read all of the notes and sometimes still get the meaning or inflection wrong.

*"It helps to know the language - or in our case the idiom,
and some of the cultural contexts of it as well".*

Folk music

What are the roots of these traits? Certainly the rich heritage of European Folk Music, so deeply ingrained in the culture and mentality, must be cited here. Rhythmically, an example that most musicians know would be the Viennese Waltz, where the rhythm and stride have that uniquely placed second beat, making it decidedly different from the 3/4 beat of, say, a Tchaikovsky Polonaise. If you dance a waltz, you should feel the lightness of that second step quite clearly. Likewise, a Mazurka (Chopin) or Ländler (Mahler) have their special, folksy feel and inflection that cannot be exactly expressed in terms of meter and dynamic. The scherzo in Dvorak's 6th Symphony came alive to me when I better understood the *Zwiefacher* and other folk dances with alternating duple/triple meter. The Hungarian Rhapsodies of Liszt, and Hungarian Dances of Brahms are born of the rich heritage of Hungarian Folk Music, which also shows up in Johann Strauss' *Fledermaus* (Czardas). The various movements of the Bach Cello Suites are born of folk dances. Beethoven's 6th Symphony, Dvorak's 8th symphony with the village band quotation in the 2nd movement, and many other symphonic examples bear witness to these folk roots.

Looking briefly through the "other end of the looking glass" I like to remember a production of Bernstein's *Symphonic Dances from West Side Story* with the Bamberg Symphony and the American conductor Carl St. Clair, who is so adept at communicating these typically American inflections to German musicians. When we got to the finger-snapping part, he said he could immediately pick out the Americans in the orchestra, just by seeing the loose, jazzy way that they snapped their fingers. Everyone picked it up quickly, however, and I remember that concert as being an exceptional highlight. Likewise, most American musicians may be more natural and at home with any Swing, Rock, or Funk elements in symphonic music. Hoedowns, square dances, spirituals, power ballads, salsa rhythms also come to mind. I can also remember working with our dear very Germanically steeped Kapellmeister in an opera production of Werner Egk's opera *Peer Gynt*, which has some pointed jazz elements in it. If I may freely translate: "*Ladiess and Chentlemen, zis is jazz. It must sving!! Eins, zwei, drei, vier...!!!*" You can imagine the result.

"Just as I would prefer not to hear Goethe read with a Texas twang, so might I also cringe at hearing Mark Twain read with a German accent."

But just as a professional speaker can go beyond the dialect or accent of his or her upbringing, so can musicians and ensembles acquire stylistic traits and make them their own. The much-touted international language of music does not mean

everything gets played with the same dialect, but rather refers to the ease with which we can experience other cultures through music - certainly more easily than mastering the actual language!

Opera/vocal music

"Opera is most decidedly a large influence on the musicality in a culture where most musicians spend at least some part of their career playing opera."

In addition to all of the lyrical elements of singing, in opera we also have drama and theatre. Dramatic interpretation, theatrical timing, musical interpretation enhanced and underscored by the visual elements on stage - these things add new levels and parameters to communication and expression. Believe me, if they are slaying a dragon on stage, you will be playing quite ferociously in the pit! Likewise, if the music is accompanying the stealthy footsteps of a murderer, the heartfelt sadness at losing a child, anger-fueled revenge, passionate yearnings, or soothing endearment, the musicians will portray that. For those who have experienced it, this vividness of interpretation carries over into non-theatrical music as well.

It is worth mentioning in this context that Richard Wagner, for all intents and purposes, wrote only for the theatre, even though his opera music enjoys occasional concert performances. I also believe that to fully know Richard Strauss, one has to know his writing for the voice and for theatre. To enjoy Giacomo Puccini's genius, you must also go to the opera.

I like to watch cartoons, especially the older Warner Brothers and Loony Toons productions with Bugs, Tom & Jerry, et al. The soundtracks in these classics are a good example of dramatic, theatrical interpretation - and based so closely on opera sometimes! At the height of the extra-terrestrial movie craze, members of an opera orchestra in Munich were hired as an ensemble to record film scores. That group quickly gained a reputation for getting the drama of the moment on first try!

A further vocal influence is the regular performance of the sacred oratorios, requiems, masses, etc. This makes vocal doubling a substantial part of a trombonist's work. Here we not only have the direct correlation to the voice again, but also the regular use of the alto trombone in the section, thus lending that voice - and with it the section - a special tone, just as your altos in the chorus sound different than the tenors even when singing unison with them. When most of these works were originally composed, the trombone section also included a bass

trombone in F, thus lending a further differentiation in the tonal *blend* - or perhaps the concept of *mix* is better suited here.

It is interesting to note here that it was Richard Wagner's writing that transformed the trombone section from one of three different tessituras into one with three tenor/bass trombones, all in b-flat length and blending homogeneously. This is the basis for our symphonic trombone section to this day.

Competitions

While especially the French conservatories are steeped in competitions, all of Europe practices a much more intensive competition regimen than their American counterparts, although we are witnessing an increase in such events here in the US. The major events of Munich, Geneva, and Prague are complemented by dozens of further competitions, many of which offer substantial prize money and performance opportunities. As a result, instrumentalists in Europe probably spend more time on the concerto repertoire than their American counterparts who are, however, often better versed in the orchestral excerpts. Indeed, competitions offer a whole stratum of activity as a bridge for young musicians between their studies and professional career.

As a rule, German orchestra auditions begin with a solo concerto for the first round. The David *Konzertino*, or for bass trombone the Sachse, are almost always expected. Just as discussions at a violin audition would revolve around a candidate's style in the requisite Mozart concerto, brass players listening to a trombone candidate perform the David are inevitably trying to imagine playing Wagner alongside this person. It is also interesting in this context that the job description "Principal-Trombone" is usually announced as "*Solo-Posaune*", again underscoring the soloistic, virtuosic expectations.

Technique

Practice and pedagogical techniques also reveal a few factors worth pondering, as we try to imagine how the results are achieved rather than what the actual dots and dashes are. Going back to articulation, it is certainly justified to refer to the German school of playing as a very articulate one. Great emphasis is placed on a proper *Stoss* (attack). A good example of a technical exercise that I almost never hear in America, but which is broadly practiced in Germany would be Ernst Gaetke's daily lip and tongue exercises, which are built on samples such as this:



There is an old school of legato in Germany, whereby one uses no tongue even for intra-partial (smear) connections. Professors Weschke and Bambula (of Berlin

and Dresden respectively) were great proponents of this technique, and while it is rarely taught in Germany any more, it doubtlessly influenced the general approach to legato, which tends to go beyond the mere seamless connecting of notes toward a more truly slurred connection. A more thorough handling of this can be found in my article "100 Years of Trombone History" (ITA Journal Vol. 25, No.3 - also available at www.indiana.edu/~trombone/StudioLenthe.htm)

Again from the other end of the glass, it is fun to point out in this context that the beautiful trombone legato we hear and love from the top jazz artists is usually achieved without tonguing each note in the *dah-dah-dah* manner so prevalent in symphonic playing today.

"What goes around comes around!"

Instrument

And in last place, for reasons mentioned above, the instruments themselves can contribute to the different concepts and help mold and form these. Looking at the orchestra as a whole, the rotary-valve trumpets and the regular use of the F-tuba will stand out as significantly different. In neighboring Austria, the Viennese oboes and horns are also quite unique. Distinguishing aspects of the German trombone include more overall length in the slide section, a greater "conicity" or conical taper (beginning smaller and ending larger than American trombones, with a lot of taper in the main tuning slide), and a soft, malleable gold brass bell, sometimes adorned with a nickel-silver wreath or "*Kranz*". Dennis Wick, in his book "Trombone Technique" opines that German trombone players get results more in spite of their instrument than because of it, and briefly comparing those instruments to the open, free-blowing American models might lead one to that conclusion. Having played a German trombone for quite a few years, I can attest that the instrument did help me better attain the tonal and articulation concepts we are outlining in this article. In back-to-back comparisons, American ears have often cited the German trombone as sounding broad, warm, soft, thick, and more present in forte while covered in piano. By contrast the American trombone sounded slender, more focused, freer, and clearer to the same ears. Jay Friedman, in a recent article on his Website, notes that the German trombones have an even sound with less core and more resonance, with a dense, saturated sound in the soft dynamics.

Even though my German colleagues in the 70's and 80's were playing Bach, Conn, and American-style Yamaha instruments, they had grown up with the German instruments that doubtlessly influenced their approach, which they then carried over to the American instruments. Curiously, when I experience American trumpet sections playing rotary-valve trumpets, they don't sound German to me, although I can hear a nuance of tonal difference. Likewise, when my German

trumpet colleagues would occasionally take out the American piston-valve trumpets (which they called "jazz trumpets"), they didn't sound markedly different than on their conventional rotary trumpets ("concert trumpets"). As some trombone sections here in the U.S. venture into similar experiments, I don't expect markedly different results - at least not due to the instruments themselves.

IV. Non-conclusion

Hiking in a state park, if I were to draw your attention to a beautiful panorama view, you probably wouldn't ask, "So, what's your point?" Although I might answer such a question with something about the mix of foliage, the effect of the terrain on hibernating chipmunks, or other fun facts, my pointing out the panorama was more to heighten our shared enjoyment. Likewise here, it is my pleasure to be able to offer a glimpse at this particular symphonic vista, and share some fun facts, insights, and perspectives around it.

"Any stylistic trait can be cultivated - or left undeveloped - to a fault."

The great players usually integrate qualities from many schools and styles into their scope of expression, and draw upon these as their informed sense of style leads them. A plaid jacket over a checkered sweater with striped pants will keep you warm, but style-wise it will only look right at the circus! As your knowledge and sense of style expands and matures you should become better versed and more fluent in a variety of musical idioms and dialects. It is my hope that this short discourse may prove helpful in that pursuit.

With that, I can now cross an aged item off my 'to do' list.

Carl Lenthe

Following a 21-year career as a symphonic trombonist in Germany, Carl Lenthe joined Indiana University's School of Music as Professor of Music in 1998. He remains orchestrally active through occasional projects with the orchestras of Indianapolis, Minnesota, and Philadelphia, while pursuing a wide range of solo and chamber activity, including concerts, tours, and recordings with Summit Brass. His recent solo CD release "The Audition Window" (Summit Records DCD 354) is coordinated with a pioneer project in online music instruction, "LentheLessons" at www.music.indiana.edu/~trombone/StudioLenthe.htm