

Enthusiasts celebrate the sound of the serpent

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Enthusiasts celebrate the sound of the serpent

An obscure and striking-looking musical instrument is making a comeback in the Swiss canton of Jura thanks to the work of a local craftsman. The serpent, a snake-shaped wind instrument thought to originate in late-16th-century in France, was the highlight of a recent musical workshop organised by Stephan Berger and his wife Erna Suter near the town of Saignelégier.

For four days, 24 serpent players from France, Germany and Switzerland came together to share their experiences and, above all, continue learning to play. The workshop culminated in a well-attended concert. The participants had a chance to show off their newly acquired skills playing.

They demonstrated the versatility of this somewhat unwieldy instrument with a programme mixing ancient, classical, contemporary and jazz pieces.

For Stefan Berger, the event represented a personal and professional milestone. Until six years ago, he had never touched a serpent, much less played one – nor any other instrument for that matter.

One fateful evening, he went to a concert by Michel Godard. “It was the ‘choc instrumentale’, the instrumental shock,” says Berger quietly. “It was not just the sound of the instrument, but the way Michel played it, that fascinated me.”

As it turned out, Godard was looking for someone who might be willing to re-do the leather covering of his instrument, and make a copy of it at the same time. Berger is a leather specialist, but he also has the soul of an inventor.

Two serpentine halves had to be cut out of precious walnut planks, and hollowed out to the proper thickness. These were then glued together before being carefully whittled down to a smooth roundness.



A slither of serpent players

Once he finished his first prototype, however, Berger decided to take a major innovative step, one that would have far-reaching consequences for the instrument: he started manufacturing serpents of carbon composite, which is easier to shape, lighter to carry and cheaper to produce.

Built to accompany singers in church, the serpent has a two-and-a-half octave range. Being made of wood, it has a warm voice, somewhat breathy owing to the large holes the performer uses to change notes. It produces few harmonics, which gives it a very strong bass voice. Historically, the instrument was mostly played in France, where it reached the court of Louis XIV and later had its place in the average orchestra. Until recently, the number of serpent players in the world could be counted on one hand. It is not every musician’s favourite, of course. As 19th century composer Hector Berlioz put it: “The essentially barbaric timbre of this instrument would have been far more appropriate to the ceremonies of the bloody cult of the Druids than to those of the Catholic religion.”

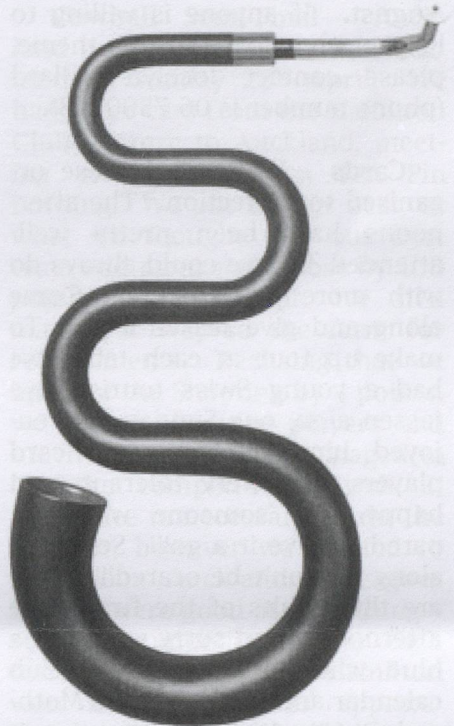
This may say more about the performance than the serpent itself, which is exceedingly difficult to play well. The holes were placed to accommodate the performer’s fingers, but they do not make any acoustical sense. The player has to correct the sound

with his lips, and that is difficult. The appearance of affordable instruments and workshops like the recent one in the Jura, represent a major step in the revival of an instrument that led a very cloistered existence. The participants at the workshop were all enthusiasts, and mostly professional musicians.

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What is a serpent?

The serpent is a 16th century musical wind instrument, related to the modern tuba and euphonium.



It is blown with a cup-shaped mouthpiece which is very similar to that of a trombone or euphonium.

The instrument was historically made from wood, although other materials such as brass were used.

Most wooden Serpents are covered in an airtight sheath to strengthen the instrument and prevent leaks. The sheath material is either leather or varnished cloth.