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Performing on the Trombone: a Chronological Survey

David M. Guion

The trombone is one of the oldest wind instruments currently in use. The trumpet, horn, and flute have a longer history, but have changed in construction and playing technique far more than the trombone, which reached its present form sometime in the 15th century. The name "trombone," Italian for "big trumpet," is attested as early as 1439. The German word *Posaune* may have referred to an instrument with a slide as early as 1363.¹ The old English word "sackbut," on the other hand, first appeared in 1495, and cognate terms appeared in Spain and France not much earlier than that. Therefore the confusing and misleading practice of referring to a baroque-style trombone as a sackbut should be abandoned. Using two words for a trombone wrongly implies two different instruments, and at times leads to the erroneous notion that the sackbut is the "forerunner" of the trombone.

¹ Keith Polk, "The Trombone, the Slide Trumpet and the Ensemble Tradition of the Early Renaissance," *Early Music* 17 (1989), 392-3; "The Trombone in Archival Documents—1350-1500," *ITA Journal (International Trombone Association Journal)* 15 (Summer 1987), 29; *German Instrumental Music of the Late Middle Ages: Players, Patrons, and Performance Practice* (New York, 1992), 58-59.

Trombones have been made in various sizes from soprano to contrabass, but the alto, tenor, and bass became the most common. The tenor in B^b may be regarded as the basic instrument, to which all others are compared. Alto trombones are made a 4th higher than the tenor. The term bass trombone has referred to two different instruments. The earliest was made a 4th or 5th lower than the tenor. Its slide was too long for the player to be able to reach the outer positions without a special handle, which made rapid playing awkward. The modern bass trombone is in B^b like the tenor, but has a wider bore and one or two valves, called triggers, operated with the player's left thumb. The trigger is the only radical change to the slide trombone since the 15th century.

Although all other 15th-century instruments have been either abandoned or radically altered, the trombone remains relatively unchanged. Modern trombones are made of thicker metal, have a greater proportion of conical bore, fixed stays, and terminate in a bell with more flare. They also have a tuning slide, a water key, and stockings at the end of the inner slides. These changes, although minor, have important implications for the playing technique, timbre, and character of the instrument. When the slide is closed, the tenor produces an overtone series on B^b, and with slide successively lengthened six additional series are available, each a semitone apart, on A, A^b, G, G^b, F, and E.

Fifteenth Century

Archival, literary, and iconographical references to what was probably a slide trumpet appear as early as the 1360s. The modern trombone slide probably existed by 1450.² The earliest unambiguous reference to the trombone occurs in Tinctoris when he describes

² Heinrich Bessler, "Die Entstehung der Posaune," *Acta musicologica* 22 (1950), 30-31.

shawm bands.³ The trombone appears to have performed only in such an ensemble. It was not a solo instrument and did not perform in ensembles with soft instruments or singers until late in the 15th century. The repertoire of the shawm band consisted of popular songs, dance music (notably improvisations on *basse danse* melodies), motets, and occasionally even portions of masses. The shawm band did not play in the church or for the liturgy, but it did play for processions, street plays, feasts, banquets, market days, and to honor visiting dignitaries.

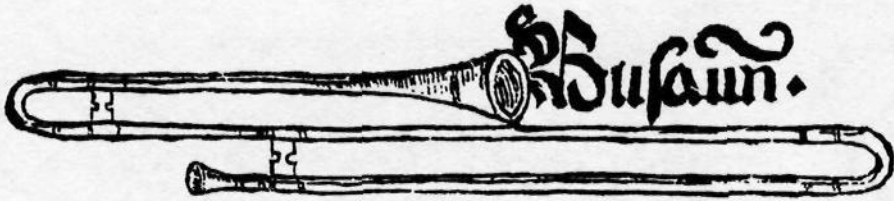
Throughout most of the 15th century, it must be presumed that members of the shawm bands could not read music. They did not need to. They were skilled in improvisation and, if they ever needed to play anything "as written," they could learn it by rote and memorize it. A few pieces from early in the century, however, have contratenors marked *trompette* or something similar. It is difficult to imagine why else they would have been marked in this way unless the contratenors were actually intended to be played on a slide trumpet. That would mark the earliest music intended for voices with a brass instrument, a possibility that raises so many problems that few scholars accept it. Since the pieces were written over a very short span of time by composers who all had ties to the court of Burgundy, perhaps they represent an experiment that was not deemed successful. The combination of voices and trombones did not become common for another hundred years.

Sixteenth Century

Beginning with the 16th century, our knowledge becomes less speculative. The earliest surviving trombones were produced in the 16th century. Iconographic and literary references to the trombone became more frequent and detailed as the century progressed and show that trombones performed both secular and sacred music. The

³ Anthony Baines, "Fifteenth-Century Instruments in Tinctoris's *De inventione et usu musicae*," *Galpin Society Journal* 3 (1950), 20-21.

Sebastian Virdung, *Musica getutscht* (Basel, 1511).
Woodcut, showing a trombone (top), as contrasted
with various kinds of trumpet.



Heinrich Aldegrever, *Music for a Wedding Dance* (1538), copperplate engraving. The trombone (in front) is combined with two slide trumpets. Note the difference in playing technique.



old distinction between loud and soft instruments had broken down, and trombones played in ensembles with soft instruments and voices as well as with shawms and cornetts. Trombones continued to play dance music, chansons, and motets. In addition, they began to play during the mass and for spectacular courtly entertainments that were among the precursors of opera.

16th-century instrumental tutors provide the earliest indications of performance practice for wind instruments. These show high standards of improvised instrumental virtuosity, far beyond anything demanded in published music of the period. They also counseled wind players to express the mood of the words when playing vocal music, just as a singer would. One of the earliest of these tutors, Silvestro Ganassi's *La fontegara* (1535), a diminution manual and tutor for recorder, mentions three types of tonguing: the rough and harsh *teche teche teche*, a medium *tere tere tere*, and the smooth and pleasing *lere lere lere*, along with certain variants.⁴ (These syllables must be pronounced in Italian to produce the intended effects.) Other Italian authors as much as a century later described tonguing in similar terms.

Seventeenth Century

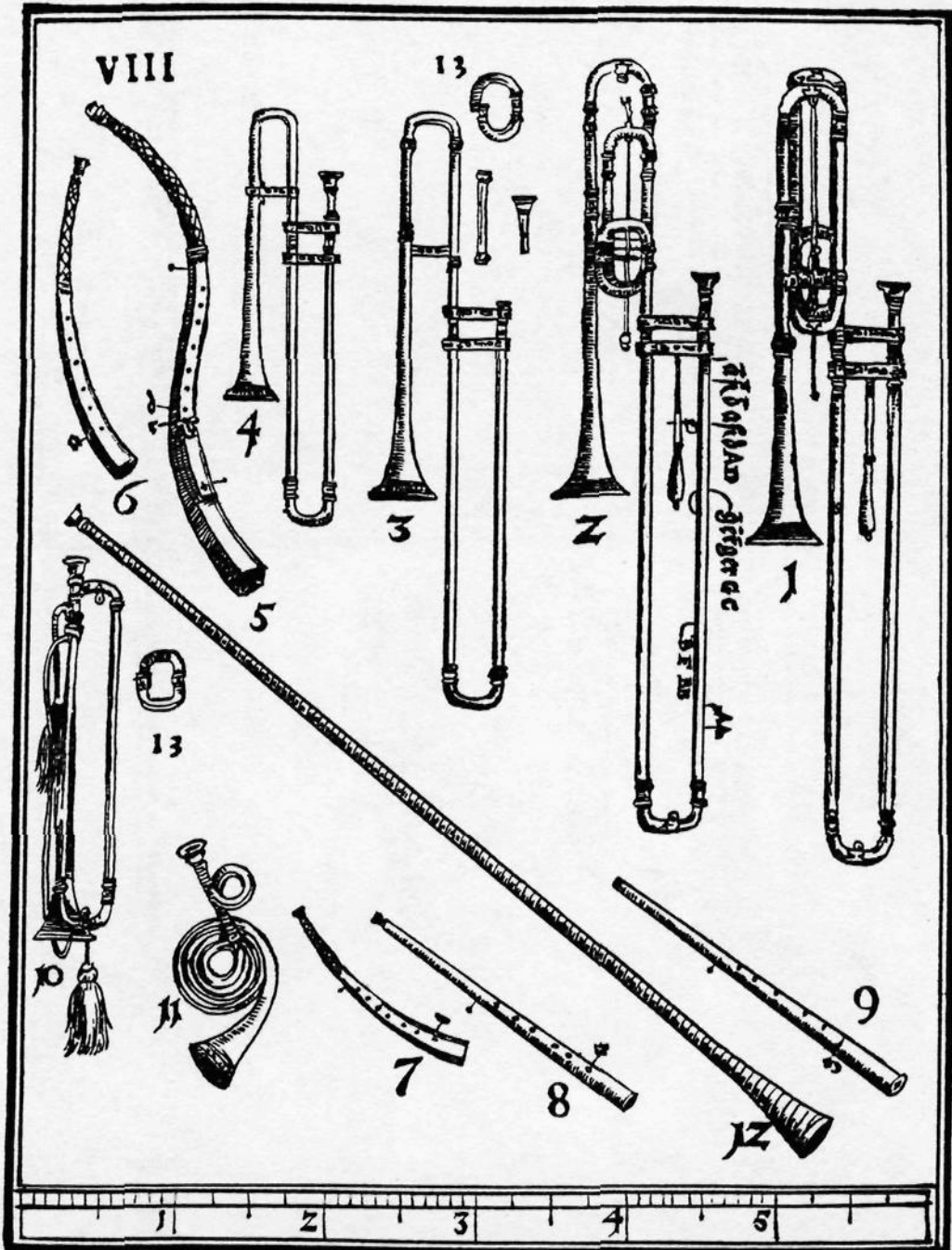
Instrumental music reached a decisive turning point with the appearance of Giovanni Gabrieli's *Sacrae symphoniae* (1597), in which instruments, including trombones, are called upon to play specific parts. The next thirty years in Italy witnessed a great many parts designated for trombone, not only in large-scale works, but also in smaller ensembles (sacred or secular), and in music both with and without voices. Similar music with unspecified instrumentation was also common. The trombone was among the instruments most likely to perform it. After about 1630, however, the trombone almost disappeared from Italy. It had already disappeared from France

⁴ Imogene Horsley, "Wind Techniques in the Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries," *Brass Quarterly* 4 (1960), 49-63.

Michael Praetorius, *Syntagma musicum* (Wolfenbüttel, 1618-20), detail from title page, showing two trombonists performing in a musical ensemble.

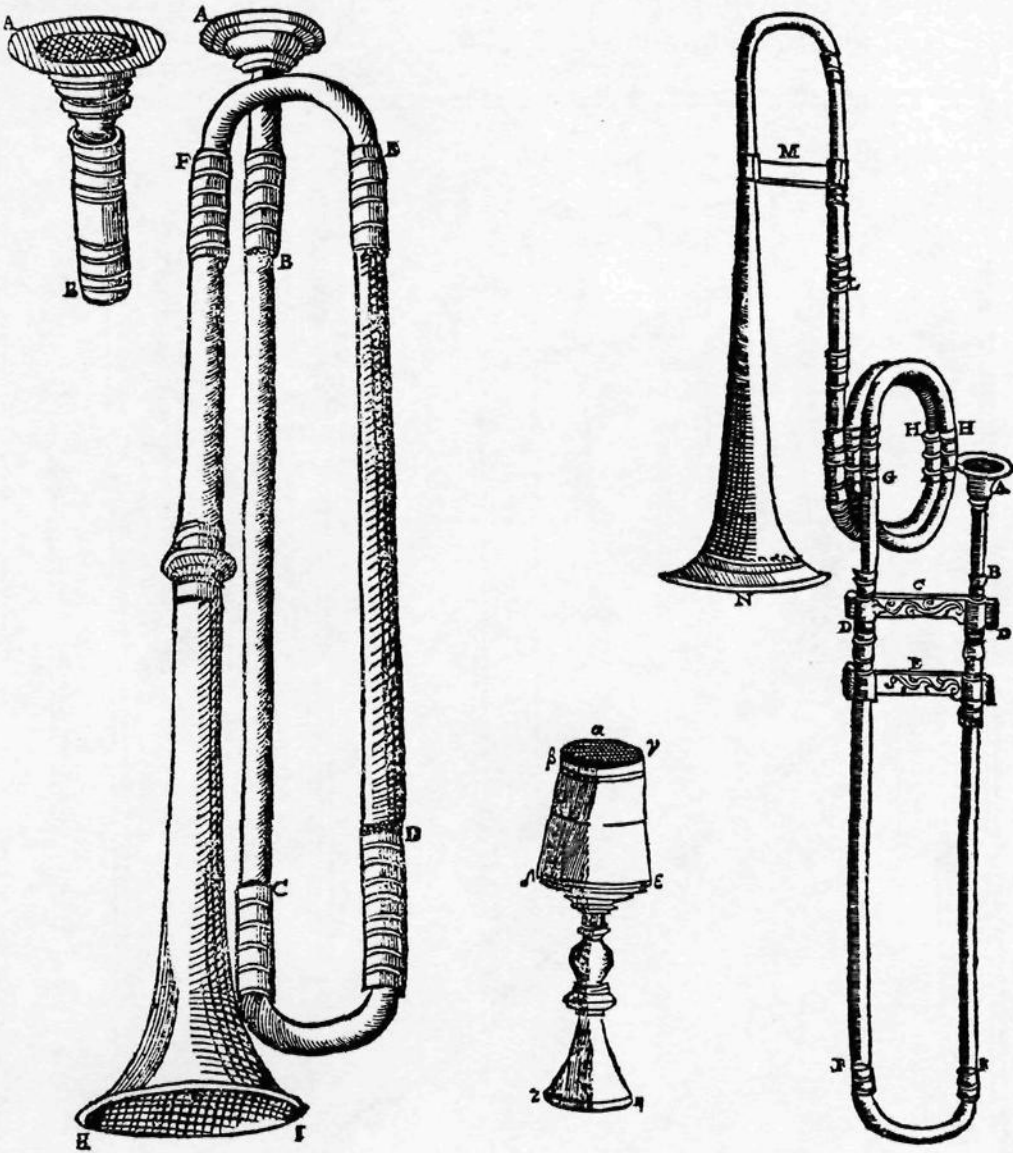


Michael Praetorius, *Syntagma musicum* (Wolfenbüttel, 1618-20), illustration showing four sizes of trombone, two quart-trombones, an "ordinary" (*recht gemeine*) trombone, and an alto trombone (1, 2, 3, 4).



1, 2. Quart-Posaunen. 3. Rechte gemeine Posaun. 4. Alt Posaun. 5. Corno. Groß's Tenor-Cornet. 6. Rechte Chor-Zinck. 7. Klein Discant-Zinck. so ein Quint höher. 8. Gerader Zinck mit ein Mundstück. 9. Still Zinck. 10. Trommet. 11. Jäger Trommet. 12. Holzern Trommet. 13. Krummbügel auf ein ganz Ton.

Marin Mersenne, *Harmonie universelle*, bk. 5 (Paris, 1636),
trumpet and trombone with mouthpiece and mute.



and persisted in England only until about the 1680s. Until well into the 18th century, it was heard principally in German-speaking countries, where towns and churches owned the instruments and provided them to the players. In choral music, a trio of trombones (alto, tenor, bass) typically doubled the vocal parts. Such a trio, with one or more cornetts, also formed the typical German town band from the late Renaissance throughout much of the 18th century. Some of the most effective 17th-century trombone writing occurs in Schütz's *Fili mi Absolon* and *Attendite, popule meam* for four trombones and bass voice.

Several 17th-century authors referred to aspects of trombone playing. Praetorius⁵ wrote that some trombonists could manage an exceptionally wide range, including falset tones and (in one instance) pedal tones. He also mentioned a virtuoso who played rapid coloratura divisions, a continuation of the earlier Renaissance practice. Praetorius preferred the tone quality of the tenor trombone, which he felt with practice could play as high as the alto (an instrument of inferior tone quality in his estimation). Mersenne,⁶ too, spoke of diminutions (these in 16th notes), but counseled against allowing the trombone to sound like a trumpet, which he considered vicious. Speer⁷ mentioned the use of trills, showing that virtuosity was still expected of trombonists late in the century. His explanation of slide

⁵ Michael Praetorius, *Syntagma musicum II, De organographia, Parts I and II* (Wolfenbüttel, 1618), trans. and ed. David Z. Crookes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 43.

⁶ Marin Mersenne, *Harmonie universelle: The Books on Instruments* (Paris, 1636-37), trans. Roger E. Chapman (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1957), 343.

⁷ Daniel Speer, *Grund-richtiger . . . Unterricht der musicalischen Kunst* (Ulm, 1697), trans. in David M. Guion, *The Trombone: Its Music and History, 1697-1811* (New York, 1988), 17-21.

positions is the clearest of several indications that the baroque tenor trombone was in A, not in B^b.

Praetorius described two types of contrabass trombone, one apparently twice as long as a tenor, the other probably with a four-legged (rather than two-legged) slide. Such instruments (preserved in museums) show that the distances between slide positions on the latter form were identical with those of the tenor. Also a smaller trombone, the soprano, first appeared in the late 17th century. Pitched an 8ve above the tenor, it exactly duplicates the range of a present-day B^b trumpet. With its extremely short slide, both the slide technique and intonation become unreasonably difficult, and the instrument has remained a curiosity (although it was called for in a few 18th-century German liturgical pieces and in Moravian trombone choir music).

Eighteenth Century

During the first part of the 18th century the trombone was little used. It had become obsolete in France and England, and nearly so in Italy, while in Germany it had only limited use. In Austria, however, the alto trombone was a common solo instrument in church music and oratorios.⁸ The trombone solo in Mozart's *Die Schuldigkeit des ersten Gebots* is a late example of this tradition. Some Austrian composers, notably Wagenseil and Albrechtsberger wrote concertos for alto trombone. When not used as a solo instrument, trombones frequently doubled the chorus in sacred music. In the 1760s Gluck began to use them in his dramatic music. Mozart called upon them for both church music and opera. These two composers rescued the trombone from oblivion. Gluck awakened French composers to the dramatic possibilities of the instrument. During the French Revolu-

⁸ Stewart Carter, "Trombone Obbligatos in the Viennese Oratorios of the Baroque," *Historic Brass Society Journal* (1990). 52-77; C. Robert Wigness, *The Soloistic Use of the Trombone in Eighteenth-Century Vienna* (Nashville, 1978).

tion a wind band of unprecedented size came into being and featured a new, very simple style of writing trombone parts that quickly moved into French operatic and symphonic music as well.⁹ Some of the structural changes that distinguish the modern trombone from its earlier form began in the 18th century, notably the flaring bell, which gave the trombone a more penetrating sound than earlier.

Nineteenth Century

The 19th century witnessed an extraordinary revolution in technology, as seen especially in the invention of the valve. For the trombone, replacement of the slide with valves increased facility in the lower register, but at the expense of tone quality as well as loss of control over intonation (although Sax's six-valve instrument provided perfect intonation). By the end of the 1850s German trombonists abandoned valves, although Italians continued to use them throughout the century.

Some manufacturers tinkered with the bell, sometimes pointing it backwards over the player's shoulder. A more fanciful adaptation became known as the *buccin*. In place of the standard bell section, it had a widely curving tube ending with a gaudily painted serpent's or dragon's head. The same makers also put monster's heads on serpents, serpent bassoons, and other precursors of the ophicleid.

Judging from the trombone parts in French music during or after the Revolution, the trombone was played loudly, primarily in the lower register. Its sound must have been coarse and at times entirely unmusical. Burney once described a badly-played serpent as "exactly resembling in tone, that of a great hungry, or rather angry Essex calf." Putting a dragon's head on either instrument could only emphasize the worst aspects of their sound. Castil-Blaze, writing in 1821, observed, "This form, picturesque for the eye, essentially harms the results of the instrument, of which it hinders and curtails

⁹ Guion, *Trombone*, 167-95.

the vibrations. The sound of the *buccin* is duller, harsher, and drier than that of the trombone."¹⁰

Early in the century writers such as Braun, G. Weber, and Fröhlich described both tenor and bass trombones in B^b; the bass differed from the tenor only by having a wider bore and bell, and larger mouthpiece. In 1839 the instrument maker C.F. Sattler equipped this kind of bass trombone with a trigger, which lowers the basic pitch of the instrument by a 4th to *F* or (by means of a tuning slide) down to *E*.

Beethoven established the trombone in orchestral music in his Symphony no. 5, although trombones had occasionally appeared in symphonies by lesser composers since the 1760s. The trio of alto, tenor, and bass nominally became the standard orchestral section, but in practice the alto was encountered mainly in Germany and Austria, and even there the tenor for the top part became standard by the late 19th century. Sometimes both the alto and bass were abandoned in favor of an entire section of tenor trombones. Small mouthpieces gave the tenor the entire practical range of the alto. Large mouthpieces, coupled with a trigger enabled the tenor to replace the bass.

By mid-century German trombonists began to use an instrument in B^b with a trigger and the same size bell and bore of the bass in *F* as a tenor trombone. Eventually, this size became the standard symphonic tenor, while the bass trombone was made with an even larger bore, mouthpiece, and bell. In the hands of a player like Carl T. Queisser, the trombone became a respected solo instrument in Germany. To this day, the *Concertino* (op. 4) of Ferdinand David, written for Queisser, remains one of the most frequently played solos for trombone.

Trombone music in the 19th century demanded a more aggressive tone and tonguing than in earlier music, as well as a wider range of

¹⁰ Henri Castil-Blaze, *Dictionnaire de musique moderne* (Paris: Magazin de musique de la lyre moderne, 1822), s.v. "Buccin."

pitch and dynamics. Many of the 19th-century orchestral trombone parts were limited to the instrument's least interesting capabilities: providing volume, rhythmic punctuation, and harmonic filler with little melodic or thematic significance. In some instances, though, exceptional techniques did begin to appear. Berlioz introduced the pedal register into orchestral music, and the solo (written for Antoine Dieppo) in his *Symphonie funèbre et triomphale* is among the most outstanding in trombone literature. Wagner, too, placed unprecedented technical demands on orchestral trombonists. He also demanded contrabass trombones, which are not always available. The tuba often serves as a substitute, although its conical bore and resulting broader and mellower timbre thicken the texture and make it a less than ideal bass for a trombone choir.

Twentieth Century

Trombone makers have continued to refine the design of the trombone throughout the 20th century, although none of their changes have been as radical as those of the 19th century. Two recent alterations to the trigger are representative: the axial-flow valve, which eliminates two sharp bends in the airway, overcoming sluggish response and a slight deterioration in tone quality, and open-wrap valve tubing that eliminates other bends.

Performers in the 20th century are returning to the realization that using large-bore tenor trombones for both the first and second parts robs the section of color and often creates difficulties of balance at some dynamic levels. Principal trombonists of major orchestras have begun to select the alto for some of the standard repertoire. The alto requires a subtle but real difference in playing technique, since it has a shorter slide and entirely different slide positions. It also requires adjustments in breathing and tonguing, although many trombonists minimize these problems by choosing a wider bore trombone than was ever made earlier.

Short solo passages for trombone are more common in 20th-century orchestral music than before. The trombone also made its first ap-

pearance in chamber music since the middle of the 18th-century, not only in non-standard mixed chamber groups such as devised by Stravinsky in *L'Histoire du soldat* and *Octet*, but also in the new standard ensembles of brass trio (trumpet, horn, trombone) and brass quintet (two trumpets, horn, trombone, and tuba or bass trombone). Of these two, the quintet is the more important. Those of Gunther Schuller and Malcolm Arnold are among the best known. Francis Poulenc composed the most important of the trios.

In the 1940s, the trombone acquired a new seriousness as a solo instrument. Paul Hindemith composed the first sonata for trombone in 1941 and Davis Shuman presented the first full-length trombone recital in 1947. Since then, the trombone recital has become commonplace and the trombone's solo repertoire has grown considerably, although little of the newer music has been written by composers of Hindemith's stature. In recent years, Christian Lindberg has become the first person in history to make a career as solo trombonist.

The only real changes in playing technique, however, have come from jazz and the avant-garde. Jazz places more demands on the trombonist's improvisatory skills than any music since the early Renaissance. A note is not a mere fixed pitch, but can be manipulated by bends, glissandi, blue notes, and various kinds of vibrato. Flutter tonguing and mutes (especially the plunger) lend changeability to the trombone's tone quality. Tommy Dorsey's *sumptuous cantabile* was one the glories of the swing era. J.J. Johnson (in bebop) demonstrated the slide trombone's capacities at a time when other jazz trombonists were tempted to switch to valve trombone.

When electronic music emerged after World War II, some traditional musicians (most notably Stuart Dempster and Vinko Globokar) attempted to produce similar sounds on the trombone. The means is to hum and play different pitches simultaneously, thereby producing

beats and difference tones. When used with various mutes, percussive effects such as striking the mouthpiece, audibly breathing through the instrument, etc., a wide range of previously unimagined sounds become available. Works using these techniques are usually either unaccompanied or accompanied by a prerecorded tape. An outstanding example is Berio's unaccompanied *Sequenza V*.

In summary, the late 20th century demands unprecedented flexibility from musicians. The standard orchestral and operatic repertoire, solo playing, chamber music, jazz, the avant garde, and a wide variety of early music styles each have their own requirements both of technique and taste. Hardly anyone can function, let alone succeed as a trombonist without familiarity with several of these environments.