

## “KNOWLEDGE IN THE MAKING”: RECENT DISCOURSE ON BACH AND THE SLIDE TRUMPET

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“Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making.”<sup>1</sup> John Milton’s inspiring words were originally penned in 1644 in support of “the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing,” but today they seem an apposite description of a central tenet of scholarship as well. That tenet is one that acknowledges the solitary nature of research and scholarly thought, but at the same time holds that it is the action of the scholarly community, tugging, pulling, stretching, rejecting, confirming, challenging, and reformulating that moves our undertaking forward; that transforms our “opinions” into what will be held (at least for the moment) as “knowledge.” Collaboration, in the *processing* of our ideas—necessary dialogue and exchange—lies at the heart of our enterprise.<sup>2</sup> And as Milton knew, “there of necessity will be much arguing.”

In the past decade, one prominent controversy in the field of historical brass research has concerned the *tromba da tirarsi* in the music of J.S.Bach, with substantial views advanced by Thomas G. MacCracken and Don L. Smithers.<sup>3</sup> As much of their discourse has appeared only in German, it seems timely in these pages to offer an overview of their work for English readers, particularly to allow the “tugging and pulling, etc.” to be undertaken in a wider community. The fruitful processing of ideas is naturally best served by a respectful consideration of the arguments in detail, a degree of information beyond the scope of this essay. However, an overview can hopefully introduce the issues and help guide further investigations.

The issue at hand centers on a few Bach cantata trumpet parts that specify a slide trumpet or slide horn (*tromba da tirarsi* or *corno da tirarsi*) in the context of melodic lines that move outside the notes of the overtone series. At question are

1. the instruments themselves: what instrument is implied by the designation *tromba da tirarsi* or *corno da tirarsi*?
2. the authority of the instrument designations: at what point were they written in the sources and by whom?
3. the applicability of a slide instrument to parts with non-harmonic tones *where no slide instrument is specified*, and conversely, the applicability of the technique of “lipping” to parts that (at one time or another) *were specified for a slide instrument*.
4. issues of methodology

## The Instruments

Our murky knowledge of the slide trumpet in the Baroque Era is based on regrettably limited resources. Smithers underscores that major organological treatises in the seventeenth century—Praetorius, Mersenne, and Trichet, for example—do not mention it, and in the absence of this kind of contemporary discussion, sources such as iconography, musical evidence, and instrument inventories must play a large role.<sup>4</sup> The limited nature of the sources is never more apparent than the fact that only one Baroque slide trumpet has survived, an instrument made by Hans Veit in 1651, perhaps for Naumburg, now in Berlin's *Staatliches Institut für Musikforschung*. The Veit instrument is in appearance like the normal twice-folded, elongated natural trumpet, but with a telescopic sliding mouthpipe within the first yard. Sadly, modern investigation is constrained by the loss of the original slide, a casualty of the Second World War.

MacCracken accepts the Veit instrument as an example of the kind of instrument that Bach and his contemporaries would have known as a *tromba da tirarsi*.<sup>5</sup> Smithers, on the other hand, sounds a decidedly more skeptical note. In the first place he questions whether or not the Veit instrument was originally intended to be a slide trumpet at all; later he questions the ability to link the Veit instrument with Bach's world and whether the Veit instrument is, in fact, one of the slide trumpets listed in contemporary Naumburg inventories.<sup>6</sup> Such are the difficulties when the surviving instruments are so few in number. But at least the slide trumpet may claim an extant example; not so the case with the *cornò da tirarsi*, of which no example survives. MacCracken, for whom the *tromba* and *cornò da tirarsi* are essentially the same, holds that circular horn forms do not admit the use of a slide.<sup>7</sup> Smithers counters with the hypothesis that the coiled, cylindrical trumpet/horn (*tromba da caccia* or *Waldhorn*-) might have been combined with a discant trombone slide to create what might identifiably be a *cornò da tirarsi*.<sup>8</sup>

## The Designations

A small number of cantatas contain parts labeled *da tirarsi*, a label that occurs generally only on the parts, not in the scores. MacCracken proposes six relevant works—BWV 5, 20, 46, 67, 77, and 162—noting that in three instances the qualifying phrase *da tirarsi* is added to a copyist's designation of *cornò* or *tromba*, and that in two instances the phrase is penned in full by the composer.<sup>9</sup>

To MacCracken's list of six works, Smithers would append a seventh, *Meinem Jesum lass ich nicht*, BWV 124. (MacCracken rejects this cantata on the chronological grounds that its qualifying phrase was not written until the last part of the eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup> The disagreement in the number of relevant works takes place amid other questions of autography and chronology: Smithers stresses that the qualifying phrases were typically added later and that Bach's autography is suspect.<sup>11</sup>

### Slide Trumpets, Lipping, and Non-harmonic tones

MacCracken and Smithers have often examined similar sources and reached, nevertheless, strikingly different conclusions. In no area is this more significant or extensive than that regarding Bach's use of non-harmonic tones for the trumpet: How extensive was it? What were the norms? How were the non-harmonic tones negotiated? With the use of a slide instrument? With the well-documented practice of lipping or tone bending?

MacCracken's position is essentially as follows:

(1) In parts for multiple trumpets, Bach's use of notes outside the harmonic series is occasional, generally involving unstressed lower neighbor tones.

(2) Where Bach's writing exceeds these norms, as for instance in parts doubling soprano chorale melodies, these parts may be viewed as unidentified parts for slide trumpet, a usage that extends the explicit employment of the slide instrument in a few pieces with non-harmonic tones to a general practice. That the sources do not generally indicate or specify the slide trumpet has to do with the possibilities of oral instruction and/or the players' reading of the context.<sup>12</sup>

Smithers, on the other hand, travels a different path.

(1) Bach's use of non-harmonic tones for trumpet is less occasional than MacCracken avers: "Unlike the vast majority of his contemporaries, Bach did not limit his *tromba* parts merely to notes within a given harmonic series... ." <sup>13</sup>

(2) In the absence of a direction for the slide instrument, Smithers proposes the technique of lipping as a normal way of rendering the notes outside of the overtone series. Thus, in parts not labeled *da tirarsi*, he sees no reason to assume the slide trumpet as part of a general practice. The relatively few examples in which slide instruments are explicitly designated show evidence of a time lag between the original copying and the designation. Perhaps this later designating of a part as one for a slide instrument reflects a change in the ability of Bach's trumpeters. For example, Bach's virtuoso Leipzig trumpeter, Gottfried Reiche, may have lipped the non-harmonic tones, whereas his successors may have required a slide instrument to the same end.<sup>14</sup>

### Methodology

The strong contrasts observed above are not only matters of detail nor are they only matters of interpretation; they proceed from different methodological perspectives as well. MacCracken seeks to build a wide application out of the details of a particular case, the case of the few parts labeled for *tromba da tirarsi*. In that particular case, non-harmonic tones were negotiated by mechanical means, at least at some point. MacCracken then extends

this idea to other cases of non-harmonic writing, an inductive extension that at this point cannot be conclusively averred, but one that has demonstrable, practical possibility.

Smithers aims to propose a range of possibilities for the same circumstances. Taking both the theoretical and empirical knowledge of lipping as his point of departure, he proposes that some players, Reiche for instance, may not have needed mechanical means to play the variety of notes required. Others, presumably at a later point in time, may have on occasion required the slide trumpet or other alternatives, thus giving rise to the instances where the parts are designated for slide instruments. Here, although he gives a priority to the single technique of lipping, Smithers places it in a context of changing practices and multiple possibilities.

In our own day, these different solutions present familiar resonances. In one theory, human industry seeks a mechanical solution for taming nature. In the other, human ability overcomes natural limitations, unassisted. These tensions between mechanism and human strength are recurrent, it would seem, throughout much of our history, and they are tensions, one suspects, that provide a creative energy for much discourse and various enterprises. In the case of Bach, non-harmonic tones, and slide trumpets, it would seem that the final chapter has yet to be written, if it can ever be written at all. The present discourse is provocative, with much to ponder at length. That it is a discourse of controversy may well reflect a stage of “knowledge in the making.” Let the community of players and scholars continue to grapple with these and other issues in order that it may be so, for only through the grappling *can* it be so.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> John Milton, *Areopagitica*, ed. John W. Hales (Oxford, 1894), p. 46.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Edward Hallet Carr's *What is History?* (London, 1961). In exploring the distinction between a fact and a “historical fact,” Carr stresses that it is the acceptance *by other historians* of the thesis in support of which the fact is offered that will transform the ordinary “fact” into a “historical fact.” See pp. 6-7.

<sup>3</sup> Both MacCracken and Smithers have dealt with this subject at length on various occasions. See Thomas G. MacCracken, “Bach and the Tromba da Tirarsi,” a paper read before the AMIS (April, 1979) and the American Chapter of the NBS (Sept., 1979); MacCracken, “Die Verwendung der Blechblasinstrumente bei J. S. Bach unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Tromba da tirarsi,” *Bach Jahrbuch* 70 (1984): 59-89; Don L. Smithers, “Die Verwendung der Blechblasinstrumente bei J. S. Bach unter Berücksichtigung der Tromba da tirarsi. Kritische Anmerkungen zum gleichnamigen Aufsatz von Thomas G. MacCracken,” *Bach Jahrbuch* 76 (1990): 37-51; MacCracken, “Nochmals: Die Verwendung der Blechblasinstrumente bei J. S. Bach—Erwiderung auf Don L. Smithers’ ‘Kritische Anmerkungen,’” *Bach Jahrbuch* 78 (1992): 123-130; and Smithers, “Smithers *versus* MacCracken: The Progress of a controversy, or, Some more noise on the *tromba da tirarsi*,” a paper read before the New York Chapter of the AMS (April, 1995). Both authors kindly shared with me original English versions of their work, for which courtesy I am grateful.

<sup>4</sup> Smithers, “Kritische Anmerkungen,” p. 38.

- <sup>5</sup> MacCracken, "Blechblasinstrumente," p. 61.
- <sup>6</sup> Smithers, "Kritische Anmerkungen," pp. 38, 39.
- <sup>7</sup> MacCracken, "Blechblasinstrumente," p. 62.
- <sup>8</sup> Smithers, "Kritische Anmerkungen," pp. 45-46.
- <sup>9</sup> MacCracken, "Blechblasinstrumente," pp. 59-60.
- <sup>10</sup> MacCracken, "Nochmals," pp. 128-129.
- <sup>11</sup> Smithers, "Kritische Anmerkungen," p. 39; "Progress of a Controversy."
- <sup>12</sup> MacCracken, "Blechblasinstrumente," pp. 63-64, 69-71, 72.
- <sup>13</sup> Smithers, "Kritische Anmerkungen," p. 41.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid, pp. 42, 47.