

## SERPENTISTS IN CHARLES WILD'S *CHOIR OF THE CATHEDRAL OF AMIENS* (ca. 1826)<sup>1</sup>

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The history of the serpent in France has been documented by Bevan,<sup>2</sup> Palmer,<sup>3</sup> and others, yet questions awaiting further research remain. In particular, debate over the holding and playing positions of the instrument rages (if such a word can be used to describe ongoing discussions of an arguably small cadre of players and scholars). From its invention ca. 1590 by Canon Edmé Guillaume of Auxerre, the serpent, first utilized to accompany chant in the church, was held in a vertical position, with the player usually standing. In this position, the hands of the player both are “palm down,” with holes 1, 2, and 3 corresponding to the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th fingers of the left hand, and holes 4, 5, and 6 corresponding to the same fingers of the right hand. Abbé Lunel, serpentist at Notre-Dame de Paris (1772-1780), first proposed an alternative, counterintuitive, and more horizontal hand position with the right hand being held “palm up,” whereby for the right hand, fingers 4, 3, 2 would correspond with holes 4, 5, and 6.<sup>4</sup> Hermenge, in his *Méthode*,<sup>5</sup> proposed a further variation on the horizontal position.

There appears to be little argument among players and scholars that military serpents, both those made in England and those from the continent, were constructed to be played in the horizontal position. The drilling of holes on extant historical examples of military serpents tends to support this view, although it is tradition alone that attributes this playing position to King George III (1738-1820).<sup>6</sup> Church serpents are another matter; historical specimens held and played by the author<sup>7</sup> all have finger holes that clearly support the “palm down” position. However, while most players who play “palm up” prefer to have the finger holes of the right hand drilled differently than those for a “palm down” instrument, a serpent constructed for the “palm down” position can be played “palm up” (albeit with some contortion of the right hand); the drilling of finger holes does not tell the whole story as to preferred playing position of the serpentist. While many modern church serpentists in England hold the church serpents “palm up,”<sup>8</sup> contemporary French players of the church serpent seem to prefer “palm down.”<sup>9</sup> In the interest of full disclosure, my preference is for “palm down” when playing both my modern Monk Workshop church serpent (1996) and my historic church serpent by Baudouin (ca. 1810). With such a diversity of preference exhibited by modern players—a diversity that may simply be attributed to personal comfort rather than historical precedent—iconographical evidence may be helpful in observing the playing position and posture habits of historical church serpentists in France.



**Figure 1**

Charles Wild's *Choir of the Cathedral of Amiens* (1826).

In 1998 I came into possession of a hand-colored engraving depicting the choir and altar during high Mass in a Gothic-style church. The single page appeared to be an intact leaf from a folio mounted on stiff paper (Figure 1).<sup>10</sup> The print measures 47.5 cm x 27 cm and is mounted on a backing measuring 54.5 cm x 42 cm. A thin line drawn on the backing, serving as a border (in ink), appears 2 cm out from the print.

Of particular interest is the fact that two serpentists (playing “palm down”) are shown in the engraving, one on each side of the choir. This is the only drawing of which I am aware that shows two serpentists playing in a choir.<sup>11</sup> The ensuing search to identify the artist and the church depicted was fraught with frustrations and difficulties as well as unexpected discoveries and pleasures, with significant implications regarding musical life in churches in France.

### **The Cathedral of Notre Dame d’Amiens**

The most distinctive features of the church pictured in the engraving are the unique high altar with a distinctive glory and the elaborately carved choir stalls. A survey of books on French Gothic architecture in the Boston Public Library led to identification of the church as the Cathedral of Notre Dame d’Amiens (France).<sup>12</sup> The introduction of Christianity to Amiens, which became the capital of Picardy (Picardie), came in the fourth century, with Saint Firmin (Firminus) as the first bishop. His martyrdom during the rule of Emperor Diocletian resulted in his being buried outside the city walls. By the mid-fourth century, a basilica was built to protect Saint Firmin’s burial, although it was destroyed during the persecution of Christians shortly thereafter. In the seventh century, Saint Honoré discovered the grave of Firmin and other martyrs and had their bones removed to a new location within the city walls, where a cathedral was constructed to house the relics. The cathedral suffered devastating fires in 1019, 1137, and 1218.<sup>13</sup>

Even before the fire of 1218, plans were forming in Amiens to build a new cathedral. In 1206 Wallon de Sarton, Canon of Picquigny, brought to Amiens what he believed to be the head of John the Baptist, which he obtained during the Fourth Crusade.<sup>14</sup> Desiring a cathedral of sufficient majesty to house the new relic as well as the bones of Saint Firmin, Bishop Evrard de Fouilloy oversaw the beginning of construction of the present cathedral in 1220, which was designed by Robert de Lusarches (Luzarches); after Bishop Evrard’s death, Thomas de Cormont aéd his son, Renaud, continued overseeing construction.<sup>15</sup> Work proceeded at such a rapid pace that in 1236 the nave was completed and the Cathedral could be used for worship. Lack of funds interrupted construction from 1240-1258, after which time work resumed; the main structure was completed by 1270. The side chapels were constructed between 1292 and 1375, the façade and south tower in 1366, and the north tower in the early fifteenth century.<sup>16</sup>

Notre Dame d’Amiens is the largest Gothic Cathedral in France, and represents the pinnacle of high Gothic architecture in that country. Among its principal glories are the magnificently carved choir stalls, which were carved between 1508 and 1519 (see below). The high altar and unique glory (with clouds and sculpture of angels) date from the eighteenth century (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2**

Contemporary (2000) view of the choir, high altar and glory at Notre Dame d'Amiens.  
Photo by Douglas Yeo.

### **The print**

Having identified the subject of the engraving as the high altar and choir of Amiens, attention turned to determining the artist and date of the print. Marjorie Cohn, of Harvard University's Fogg Art Museum, was certain, after examining the print, that it dated from the early nineteenth century, was English, and was a hand-colored aquatint (watercolor) engraving.

A significant discovery came after many months when I purchased a used copy of T. Francis Bumpus' *The Cathedrals of France*.<sup>17</sup> Bumpus' book contains a detailed description of several dozen French cathedrals as well as reproductions of etchings and drawings by various artists and color plates by H. Marshall. One can only imagine the shock and surprise which ensued when between pages 34 and 35, a black-and-white plate was found that reproduced in miniature the print in question, with the caption "Amiens Cathedral: The Choir During High Mass (From a drawing by Wild)."

### **The artist**

Marjorie Cohn seemed certain that the "Wild" in question was Charles Wild (1781-1835), an architectural watercolorist who provided many images for portfolios of views of gothic churches and buildings in Britain and on the Continent. Born in London, he was perhaps best known for a series of six works on English cathedrals (Canterbury, York, Chester,

Lichfield, Lincoln, Worcester), which appeared between 1807 and 1823. Wild became a full member of the “Old Watercolour” Society in 1812, and served as the Society’s treasurer in 1822 and later as secretary (1827).<sup>18</sup>

Further research yielded information about a volume of Wild’s, *Twelve Select Examples of the Ecclesiastical Architecture of the Middle Ages, Chiefly in France* (ca. 1826), containing twelve aquatint prints of exterior and interior views of eight cathedrals, including three of Amiens. A single copy of the folio exists in the United States: at Harvard University’s Houghton Library.<sup>19</sup>

The Houghton Library’s copy of Wild’s *Twelve Select Examples of the Ecclesiastical Architecture of the Middle Ages, Chiefly in France* finds the twelve prints<sup>20</sup> bound in a half-purple morocco, green cloth portfolio case. The cover is stamped with the title *Wild’s Foreign Cathedrals*. No title page or text is included, although when the volume was deposited at the Houghton Library in 1963,<sup>21</sup> the book was positively identified as Wild’s *Twelve Select Examples* by comparison to the contents listed in a number of catalogs and source books on engravings and watercolors.<sup>22</sup>

The engraving in question is number 5 in Wild’s folio (*Choir of the Cathedral of Amiens*) and both my copy and the copy in the Houghton Library are identical in size, clarity of engraving and aquatint.



**Figure 3**

Detail of serpent player in north choir from Wild’s *Choir of the Cathedral of Amiens*.



**Figure 4**

Detail of serpent player in south choir from Wild's *Choir of the Cathedral of Amiens*.

### **The serpentists**

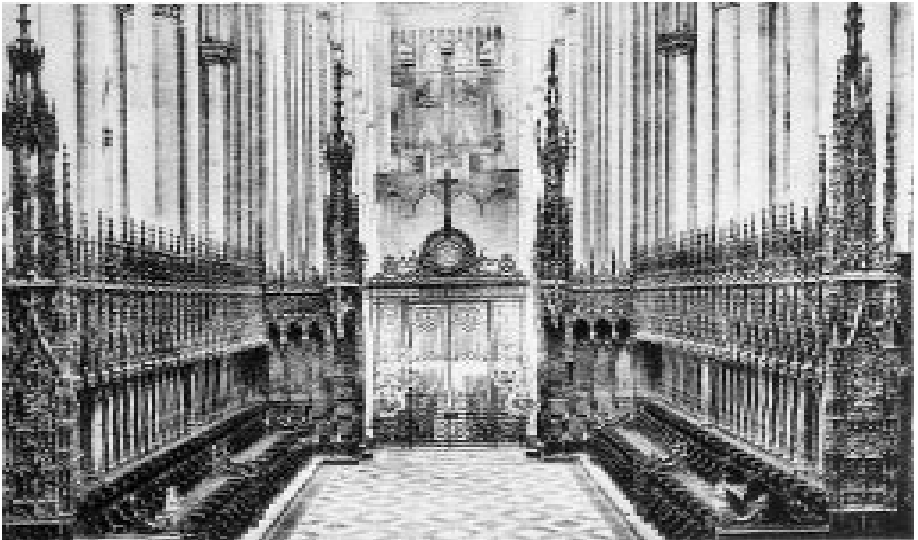
An examination of the two serpent players in Wild's engraving of the "Choir of the Cathedral of Amiens" reveals several details. First, both players are shown to be holding their serpents in the "palm down" position. Before drawing any conclusions as to the accuracy of Wild's depiction of the serpentists, the author carefully compared images in the print with the actual architecture and furnishings of Amiens Cathedral. Wild's attention to detail was found to be remarkable, even duplicating the exact number of panels of glass in the windows and rays of "light" from the glory behind the high altar. While one can only offer conjecture as to whether Wild drew his preparatory sketches for the engraving during an actual service, or later reconstructed the scene from memory, the details of the architecture, altar, glory, and choir stalls give confidence that his depiction of the people shown in the engraving is accurate as well. The serpent player on the north side of the choir (detail in Figure 3) is playing his instrument, while the serpentist on the south side (detail in Figure 4) is not.

### The choir stalls

The choir stalls of Amiens Cathedral (Figure 5) are among the most unique and richly carved in the world. Constructed of white oak between 1508 and 1519, the principal craftsmen were Jean Turpin, Arnould Boulin, Alexandre Huet, and Antoine Avernier, who labored with assistance of many others to carve over 400 groups and single figures, comprising a staggering 3,560 figures in all.<sup>23</sup> Originally numbering 120, there are today only 110 stalls.<sup>24</sup> Scenes from the Bible and from everyday life adorn the stalls and the folding seats (“misericorde”), against which choristers and others could lean while standing through long services.

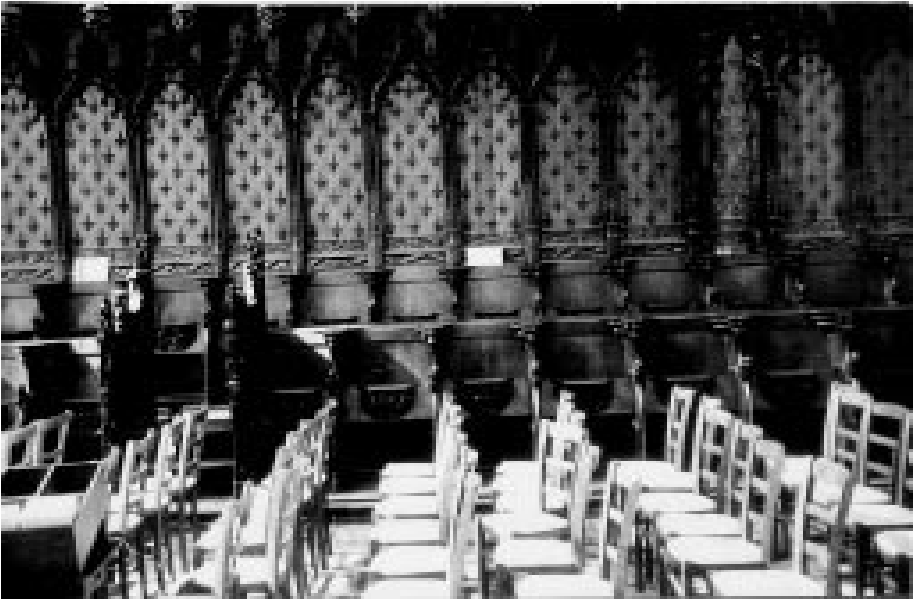
Above the stalls is elaborately carved decorative work (see below) and the most intricate carving is reserved for thrones for the King and for the Dean of the Chapter, each capped with towers over ten meters high

The stalls are found on all three sides of the choir in a double row. In the middle of the row of lower stalls on the north and south sides is an aisle, the width of a single stall, allowing access to the upper stalls (Figure 6). Wild’s engraving shows the serpent players standing in the lower choir stalls, west of the aisle leading to the upper choir.



**Figure 5**

The choir stalls of Notre Dame d’Amiens, looking to the west (late nineteenth-century view). Photo of unknown origin.



**Figure 6**

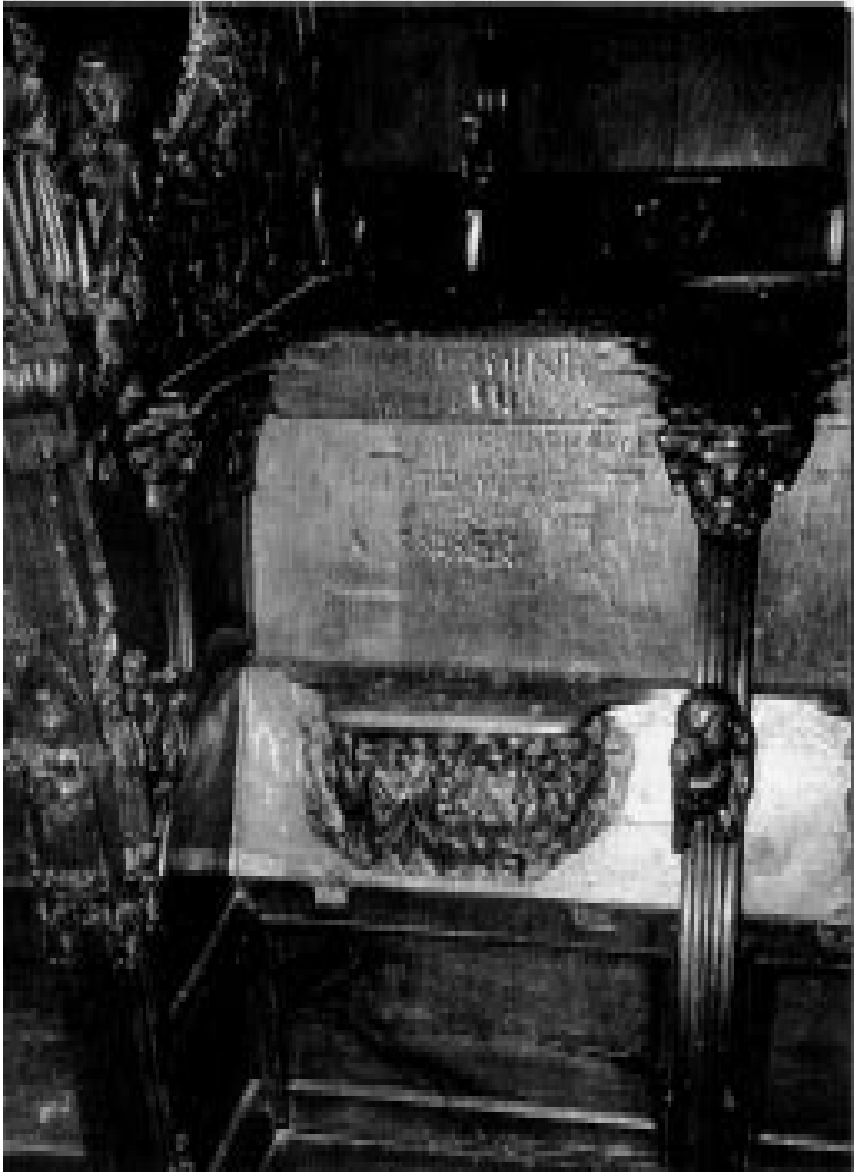
Detail of south choir stalls, Notre Dame d'Amiens. Photo by Douglas Yeo.

### **The graffiti**

In a conversation in Paris with French serpentist Michel Godard, I learned that there were choir stalls in Amiens that contained hand-carved graffiti. Upon examination, six stalls were found to have significant graffiti, mostly names of people and various dates (Figure 7). However, the stall in the south choir, where Wild showed a serpent player standing, contains a spectacular find: not only are names and dates engraved, but two small carvings of serpents are found as well (detail, Figure 8).

An examination of Figure 8<sup>25</sup> shows several identifiable names and dates. Central to the graffiti on the back of the stall is the name "N. Barbier" with another name, "L. Crepin," carved above "Barbier." Immediately below "Barbier" is an intricate carving, 3 cm high, of a serpent, including mouthpiece. To the right and below "Barbier" can be found the date "1679" (or perhaps 1879) with a more crudely carved serpent in the middle of the date. A small rendering of a music staff can be seen as well. The graffiti in the stall are copious, with carving upon carving, which makes identification of specific names difficult.





**Figure 7**

South choir stall with carved graffiti where Wild depicts a serpent player standing, Notre Dame d'Amiens. Photo by Douglas Yeo.



**Figure 8**

Detail of south choir serpent player's stall, Notre Dame d'Amiens.  
Photo by Douglas Yeo.

### Implications

That some cathedrals in France, and Amiens in particular, used two serpent players has been well documented. Charles Burney wrote in 1771, "In French Churches, there is an instrument on each side of the choir, called the serpent, from its shape, I suppose, for it undulates like one,"<sup>26</sup> while Frank Dobbins, writing in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), notes, regarding musical life in Amiens Cathedral in the eighteenth century, "apart from the organist, two serpent players were engaged (one doubling on bassoon), supplemented by two cellos on feast days."<sup>27</sup>

The discovery of graffiti depicting serpents in the very stall where Wild drew a serpentist in his "Choir of the Cathedral of Amiens" adds additional credibility to the accuracy of his engraving. The jumble of carvings in the stall allows for few names to be definitely identified, but those which can be clearly seen include "N. Barbier," "L. Crepin," and "Dominic." Tantalizingly, Clifford Bevan has identified a serpentist named "Barbier" as playing in the cathedral in Carpentras, Vaucluse in 1639. While Carpentras is in the south of France and Amiens in the northwest, it is not outside the realm of possibility that the "Barbier" of the graffiti could be the same person, or from a family that had more than one serpent player among its number.<sup>28</sup>

### A final discovery

While examining the choir stalls in Amiens, my attention fell to the ornamental carvings that hang over the upper stalls (Figure 9). Above the north upper choir, near the throne, can be found an exquisite carving of four angels playing *cornetti* (Figure 10). On first glance, one may be tempted to think the angels are playing serpents, rendered in a stylized way. However, given that the carving of the stalls was completed by 1519 and the serpent not invented until ca. 1590, it seems more likely that a form of cornetto is depicted.

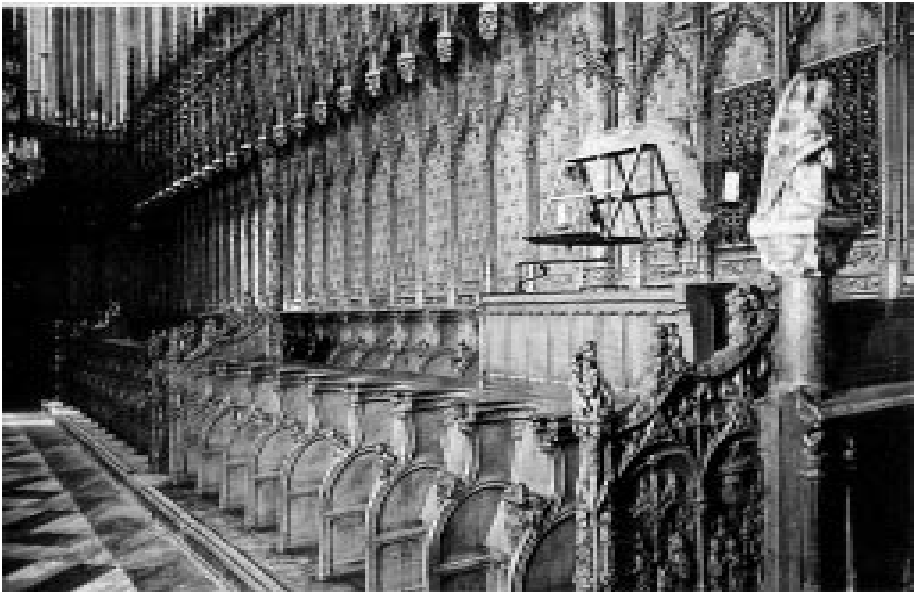


Figure 9

North choir stall including carvings above upper stalls, Notre Dame d'Amiens.  
Photo by Douglas Yeo.

### Future research

Charles Wild's engraving, *Choir of the Cathedral of Amiens*, provides scholars with a jumping-off point for further significant research. A more complete history of the musical life of Amiens is certainly needed.<sup>29</sup> Wild's engraving dates from ca. 1826, but the scene represented may have occurred before that time. A study of the vestments worn by the Mass celebrants in Wild's engraving might offer clues as to the specific service being celebrated.

The fact that the serpent players and the graffiti in the stall all show serpents in the vertical ("palm down") position is another piece of evidence in the ongoing discussion of how serpents were held in churches in France. While definitive conclusions cannot be



**Figure 10**

Detail of carving of angels playing cornetto above north choir stalls, Notre Dame d'Amiens. Photo by Douglas Yeo.

drawn, what can be said is that while Abbé Lunel and Hermenge had proposed a more horizontal posture of holding the serpent as early as 1772, that posture had not been adapted in Amiens as late as ca. 1826. There may be a practical reason for this as well: the choir

stalls in Amiens (as in most cathedrals) are quite narrow, and the vertical position offers the only means of holding the instrument in the choir, given the close proximity to the arm rests separating the stalls. Wild's engraving provides strong iconographic evidence that the vertical position had by no means been abandoned by players in churches and cathedrals in early nineteenth-century France and that Lunel and Hermenge, while proposing a new playing position, did not find universal acceptance of their proposal.

The choir stall graffiti offer fertile ground for further study. My time in the choir in Amiens was severely limited by my own schedule and the fact that the choir was being set for a wedding later in the day. I was unable to secure permission to make rubbings of the graffiti for further study, or even to photograph all of the stalls (approximately six in number) that had graffiti. Painstaking deciphering of the many layers of graffiti might yield more names, which then could be investigated for possible connections to the serpent. And, given the seeming endless number of upper rooms and attics in churches and homes in France, we can hold out hope that someday, serpents and other instruments used in Amiens in antiquity might be discovered.

Finally, the presence of the carving of cornetto-playing angels brings up important questions regarding instruments used in and around Amiens at the time the stalls were built (1508-1519).

In sum, Wild's detailed engraving and the presence of graffiti, some of which were almost certainly carved by serpent players, provides scholars and players with a fascinating glimpse into musical life in early nineteenth-century Amiens.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The date of the print has been given variously as "1825" (British Museum Catalog, London), "ca. 1826" and "1826" (OCLC Catalog), and "1826" (Houghton Library Catalog, Harvard University). As no date appears on the print itself and the two known extant copies of the folio in which it appears (held by the British Museum and the Houghton Library) are lacking a title page, a date of ca.1826 seems to be a sensible consensus.

<sup>2</sup> Clifford Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Winchester: Piccolo Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> Philip Palmer, *The Serpent: An Historical Survey of the Instrument and its Literature, Performance Practice and Problems, and Past and Present Uses* (Ph.D. diss., Columbia Pacific University, 1987). Also Philip R. Palmer, "In Defense of the Serpent," *Historic Brass Society Journal* 2 (1990): 132-86.

<sup>4</sup> The reference to Abbé Lunel's suggestion of the horizontal position is made, considerably after the fact, in *Méthode de Serpent adopté par le Conservatoire Impérial de Musique pour le Service du Culte et le Service Militaire* (Paris, 1814; facs. ed., Geneva; Minkoff, 1974), p. 2. Cited in Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>5</sup> C. Hermenge, *Méthode élémentaire de serpent ordinaire et à clé* (Paris, ca. 1817), p. 5. Reproductions of the drawings of Hermenge's suggested hand position and posture may also be found in Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, p. 72.

<sup>6</sup> Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, p. 70, "There is a tradition that George III suggested [that the serpent in the military band] should be held sideways to prevent its entanglement with the marching bandsmen's legs and that the bell should be turned outwards to increase the volume of tone."

<sup>7</sup> Instruments included in this survey include French and other Continental church serpents of the seventeenth through nineteenth century, owned by the Boston Symphony Orchestra (Casadesus Collection), Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and several players, private collectors, and antiquities dealers in France.

<sup>8</sup> Contemporary English serpentists who prefer "palm up" position when playing church serpent include Clifford Bevan, Alan Lumsden, Andrew van der Beek, and Phil Humphries.

<sup>9</sup> Contemporary French church serpentists who prefer "palm down" position include Michel Godard and Bernard Fourtet.

<sup>10</sup> This, and other selected images that accompany this article, may be seen in color at: [www.yeodoug.com/amiens.html](http://www.yeodoug.com/amiens.html)

<sup>11</sup> An undated painting by Bazin, "Procession à Saint-Sulpice," which hangs in the Parisian church of the same name, shows a procession inside the church including two serpentists. One is clearly shown (playing palm down); the other is somewhat hidden (his hands are not visible). The painting is reproduced on the cover of *Le Livre d'Orgue de Montréal*, Ateliers du Fresne CD 300 002.2.

<sup>12</sup> The author would like to thank R. Eugene Zepp of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Department of the Boston Public Library for his kind assistance.

<sup>13</sup> The history of Amiens Cathedral may be found in myriad sources, especially Jacques Brandicourt and Jean Desobry, *The Cathedral of Amiens*, Eng. transl. by M. Geffray. (n.p., n.d.); Pierre Leroy, *Cathédrale d'Amiens* (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Latines, 1979), Eng. transl. by Geoffrey Capner (n.p., n.d.); Pierre-Marie Pontroué, *Notre-Dame d'Amiens*, Eng. trans. by Nicola Randall (Amiens: Martelle, 1997); T. Francis Bumpus, *The Cathedrals of France* (London: T. Werner Laurie, Ltd., 1927); Elizabeth Boyle O'Reilly, *How France Built Her Cathedrals: A Study in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1921); Herbert Marshall, *Cathedral Cities of France* (New York: Dodd, 1907); and *Amiens Before and During the War* (Clermont-Ferrand: Michelin, 1919).

<sup>14</sup> See Jean Macrez, *Le chef de Saint-Jean-Baptiste de la Cathédrale d'Amiens: Histoires anciennes et Histoires modernes mais Histoire vraie* (n.p., n.d.). Scientific studies conducted in 1958-59 make a case that the relic is indeed the head of John the Baptist. It is currently displayed in the Cathedral on a platter of gold made in 1876 by P. Poussielgue-Rosamd, a copy of a fifteenth-century reliquary that had previously been lost.

<sup>15</sup> O'Reilly, *How France Built Her Cathedrals*, p. 204.

<sup>16</sup> LeRoy, *Cathédrale d'Amiens*, pp. 2-3.

<sup>17</sup> Bumpus, *Cathedrals of France*.

<sup>18</sup> *The Dictionary of National Biography from the Earliest Times to 1900*, founded 1882 by George

Smith, ed. Sir Leslie Stephen and Sir Sidney Lee (London: Oxford University Press, 1917), 21: 221. See also *Allgemeines Lexikon der bildenden Künstler von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, ed. Hans Vollmer (Leipzig: E.A. Seemann, 1942.), 53: 558.

<sup>19</sup> A copy may also be found in the British Library, catalog 557.h.15.

<sup>20</sup> The twelve prints are of the following subjects: 1. Choir of the Cathedral of Cologne, 2. Choir of the Cathedral of Beauvais, 3. Choir of the Cathedral of Rheims, 4. West Front of the Cathedral of Rheims, 5. Choir of the Cathedral of Amiens, 6. Nave of the Cathedral of Amiens, 7. West Front of the Cathedral of Amiens, 8. West front of the Cathedral of Strasburg, 9. West Front of the Cathedral of Chartres, 10. Interior of the Transept of St. Ouen, 11. View of the Abbey Church of St. Ouen, 12. South Entrance to the Cathedral of Rouen.

<sup>21</sup> *Twelve Select Examples* is one of many volumes deposited in the Houghton Library in October 1963 by Mrs. James M. Hunnewell. Houghton Library Accessions \*63-450 PF. The author wishes to thank Elizabeth Falsey of the Houghton Library for her kind assistance.

<sup>22</sup> The contents of the Houghton Library's copy of Wild's *Twelve Select Examples* was compared, for positive identification, with the contents of the folio listed in: Georg Kasper Nagler. *Neues allgemeines Künstler-Lexicon; oder, Nachrichten von dem Leben und den Werken der Maler, Bildhauer, Baumeister, Kupferstecher, etc.* (Munich: E.A. Fleischmann, 1835-52); Sarah Treverbian Prideaux. *Aquatint Engraving: a Chapter in the History of Book Illustration* (London: Duckworth & Co., 1909); John Lewis Roget. *A History of the "Old Water-Colour" Society, Now the Royal Society of Painters in Water Colours* (London, New York: Longmans, Green, 1891); British Museum Department of Printed Books. *General Catalogue of Printed Books: Photolithographic Edition to 1955*. (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1959-1966).

<sup>23</sup> Bumpus, *Cathedrals of France*, pp. 40-41

<sup>24</sup> Ten stalls were removed when the entrance to the choir was enlarged in 1761 to accommodate a new rood screen, replacing a smaller screen that had been erected in 1490.

<sup>25</sup> A much larger, clearer, color, high-resolution copy of Figure 8 may be found at <http://www.yeodoug.com/amiens1highres.html>.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted in Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, p. 92.

<sup>27</sup> *New Grove Dictionary of Musicians*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell, online edition edited by Laura Macy (London: Macmillan, 2001; online edition: [www.grovemusic.com](http://www.grovemusic.com)), s.v. "Amiens," by Frank Dobbins.

<sup>28</sup> Bevan, *The Tuba Family*, p. 556.

<sup>29</sup> For a preliminary study, see G. Durand, "La musique de la cathedrale d'Amiens avant la Revolution," *Bulletin de la Societe des antiquaires de Picardie* 29 (1920-22): 329-457; reprinted in *La vie musicale dans les provinces francaises* (Geneva: Minkoff, 1971).