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Literature Review

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A Review of Literature about the Connection Between Brass Evolution  
and the Music Written at the Time.

The brass section has some of the most exciting parts in orchestral literature. As composers like Mahler and Strauss have given brass sections the center stage in their pieces, the compositions for the section have become increasingly difficult and more interesting. Brass instruments weren't always written for in this way. From the sacbut in the Renaissance period to the valved instruments in the Romantic period, musical literature was composed to reflect the development of the instrument at that time. There are many sources about the physical development of the instrument and its history, but since the brass instruments have seemingly stopped evolving, there are few sources that talk about the recent compositions for brass. Through a number of historical texts, orchestration texts, and books about each brass instrument, I will be reviewing the sources that exist in order to highlight the availability of literature about brass instruments and the music written for them throughout their development.

When preparing music as a brass instrumentalist, especially pieces that were written in the classical period and before, it is important to remember that brass instruments in their current form aren't always suited to the way that the composer

originally intended. Samuel Adler, Juilliard professor of composition and author of *The Study of Orchestration*, said it best:

“It is important that you pay close attention to the evolution and development of this choir to understand more clearly how composers of the past wrote for it. In addition, with today’s increased interest in the accurate performance of early music, we must be cognizant of issues concerning the use of brass instruments, particularly those played before 1650; these issues are no longer relevant today. We must be aware that the early brass instruments – especially trumpets and horns—had a different sound; players employed techniques and rules of intonation that were different from modern ones. The character and gestures of the music played by these instruments were dictated by a different set of constraints, which around the middle of the nineteenth century slowly began to resemble those that apply now” (2002, 296).

By knowing what resources are available, performers can research and learn the information they need to accurately represent period pieces.

One of the first places to check would be a text about specific instruments and their history. Each instrument has several books about their history, construction, and technique. Within most of these, are examples of the best literature from different musical periods. For example, in *The Trumpet* by John Wallace and Alexander McGrattan, there is a chapter about “Germany in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and the trumpet writing of Handel, Telemann, and Bach” In *A History of the Trombone* by David M. Guion

there are chapters on “The Decline and Revival of the Trombone, 1630-1830” and “The Modern Trombone, 1830-2000.” By covering the historical information of the instrument, one can usually find information on the literature written for the instrument at the respective time.

In addition to books written about individual instruments, there are articles that talk about instruments in more specific time periods. In the 1600’s there was an instrument called the sacbut, which was similar to a trombone. In “The Sacbut, its Evolution and History,” author F. W. Galpin discusses in detail the life and use of the sacbut, which was a rather limited amount of time. Other books like “Horn and Horn-playing: and the Austro-Bohemian tradition from 1680-1830,” offer a detailed look into a specific time in an instruments development. This book specifically talks about the use of hand-horn and then development into the Vienna horn.

Orchestration books offer a wider rather than deeper view of individual brass instruments and the brass section. They often don’t go into as much detail as you would find in a book about a specific instrument because they have so much more to cover than just brass instruments. Composers and arrangers have used orchestration manuals as a primary source of information about each instrument. In most recent years, Samuel Adler’s *The Study of Orchestration* (as mentioned earlier) has become the staple in instrumentation and orchestration classes. As the most widely used orchestration book of the present, the sections concerning brass focus mainly on the brass instruments in their current form in respect to where they’ve been. The chapters on each brass instrument begin with a brief history of the instrument and its evolution. In most cases, there is an excerpt from a piece of music demonstrating the writing for the instrument at the time, but the main focus is on

the instruments in their current form and the techniques available. For example, in Adler's book (first edition in 1982) and Donald Grantham's *The Technique of Orchestration* (first edition in 1952), you will find sections regarding mutes and extended techniques such as trills, tremolos, and glissandi. Some of the other popular orchestration texts such as Rimsky-Korsakov's "Principles of Orchestration", which was written in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, don't have the extensive techniques but focus only on range and timbre. Because these texts were written at different periods in history, they allow one to see how the writing for brass instruments has evolved.

Hector Berlioz was a revolutionary composer for the time period, who made major contributions to the area of orchestration, one being his *Treatise on Instrumentation*. Since the treatise was published in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, it covers the evolution of brass from crooks to valves. The introduction of valves was controversial at the time and Berlioz paid respect to that. One of the major differences between the treatise and Adler's text is range, specifically in regard to the trumpet. In recent years instrumentalists have pushed the boundaries of the instruments. Berlioz puts the top range of the trumpet at a written C above the treble clef. Modern trumpet players are consistently playing in even higher ranges. Adler puts the top of the B-flat trumpet range at the written D above the treble clef and then talks about the use of extended range in jazz, wind band repertoire, and marching bands. For contemporary writing and literature, Adler's orchestration book is going to be more relevant, but Berlioz's treatise holds historical value and acts as a time capsule to the instruments in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Similar sources to the orchestration books are papers written on specific composers and the brass writing in their compositions. Through the online library, I was able to find

two writings that pertain to this subject. The first was a short journal article on “Mozart’s Orchestral Brass.” This peer-reviewed article goes through each of the brass instruments Mozart used—horn, trombone, serpents, and trumpet—and discussed the challenges and problems with the orchestral writing. At the time, brass instruments did not have valves; the trumpet and horn were played on natural harmonics. The trombone however was fashioned similarly to modern trombones with two u-shaped pipes. Knowing this, performers would be able to glean insight to Mozart’s view of each instrument and how it affected orchestral brass parts.

The other source was a thesis written by David G. Ritter titled “The Brass Instruments as used in Brahms’s Four Symphonies.” Like the article about Mozart’s brass writing, Ritter discusses the writing for each instrument—horn, trumpet, trombone, and tuba. Brahms’s orchestras were written during the shift to valve instruments. It is well known that Brahms was a classicist in regards to valved instruments, especially horn. Therefore, much of his horn writing was composed around horns with crooks. Because natural horns can only play notes in the harmonic series, Brahms often scored for four horns. Horns one and two would be scored in one key and horns three and four in another. This allowed Brahms to access pitches outside the harmonic series by alternating between the horn parts. Ritter covers these issues as well as others in the respective brass instruments. By knowing the composer’s intent and challenges when composing these brass parts, performers are more likely to give an authentic performance.

When I began gathering literature for this review, I expected to find a lack of sources regarding recent compositions for brass instruments. What I did find was plenty of detailed sources about instruments in their current form in regards to their construction and

playing capabilities, as well as histories about the evolution of each brass instrument. What is missing are sources about the connections between the music written and the instruments available at the time. The only sources that I was able to find about the connection were the orchestration texts concerning Mozart's and Brahms' orchestral brass writing. Information can be pieced together from the books about individual brass instruments and orchestration texts, but what may be more helpful, is an anthology with a collection of music that contains examples from different points in history during different stages of the development of each brass instruments from their inception up to their current form. If not one whole collection, then one volume for each instrument. This would allow composers and performers to get most of the information they need about playing pieces from different time periods from one book.

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Hector, Berlioz. *Treatise on Instrumentation*. Enlarged and Revised by Richard Strauss, trans. Theodore Front. New York, New York: Edwin F. Kalmus, 1945.

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