



the trombone

The instrument maker says to the coppersmith, how do you make a brass tube longer? Dub, says the coppersmith, add more tube. Simple as the answer sounds, it took until the 1800s to perfect the valve, which diverts airflow in brass instruments into a new section of pipe, making the instrument longer, expanding its range. Any new trend has its nonconformists, and the modern orchestra features one such outlier that has remained virtually unchanged since its earliest incarnations.

The first slide trombones appeared in the Flemish court in the mid-to-late-15th century, a variation on the medieval trumpet accordingly called the trompette-saqueboute. The name became, in English, sackbut, fodder for a good, childish guffaw until you remember the related word saqueboute, a 14th-century Norman weapon for pulling riders off of horses. By the 16th century, these trombones were regular features in church music, while small-town brass bands became a common attraction. A surviving manuscript from the era is Matthew Locke's "Music for his Majesty's Sagbutts and Cornets." Now that's fodder for a guffaw.

The instrument entered the orchestra as a sacred music specialist in the 18th century, around the time the word "trombone," from the Italian for trumpet, *tromba*, mercifully made its first published appearance. Gluck was an early convert, while Mozart used trombone only in his sacred works and operas. Even then he applied his characteristic genius, resulting in two required passages for trombone virtuosos: the supper scene of *Don Giovanni* and in the Requiem's Tuba mirum. Drafted into military bands in the 19th century, the trombone is now a well-established presence, though, sadly, no longer a verb; in his 1884 travelogue *Tropical Africa*, evangelist Henry Drummond wrote, "The hippopotami...tromboning at us within pistol-shot kept us awake at night." Could have been worse, Mr. Drummond. He could have been sackbutting.

- Arthur Ryel-Lindsey

