

Cornet vs. Trumpet

Dr. Richard Strange, Arizona State University

Is there a valid distinction in today's bands?

Most experienced band directors have opinions on this subject that are set in concrete; therefore, the title above may not thrill “old-timers” who have heard many times before much of what follows. May I hasten to add, “So have I.” However, my opinion, which has been formed over a period of time after careful study of the “problem” with an eye to its historical antecedents, may be of some value to younger members of our profession.

Most directors like the tone of both the cornet and the trumpet, but would be hard pressed to say why both are included in the “normal” band instrumentation. They also would be hard pressed to justify (on the basis of tone quality alone) the selection by most arrangers/composers of either of the two instruments for any one specific part. If these two statements are even partially true, why has there been so much dissension through the years about the topic?

First let us draw up a list of “historically agreed-upon characteristics” unique to each instrument in order to facilitate discussion. (See the chart.)

Are the above characteristics really true under all circumstances? Let us examine number one objectively. Hypothesize a small-bore cornet with a 12C mouthpiece

versus a large-bore trumpet with a 1 1/2 C mouthpiece. If the two instruments were played from behind a screen by the same fine player, chances are that most musicians would be unable to identify either instrument correctly in a series of trials (this experiment has been conducted many times with the same “predictable” results).

Cornet:

1. Mellow “lyrical” tone (conical bore)
2. Less blowing resistance
3. “Larger” overtone slot
4. Total dynamic range softer than trumpet

Trumpet:

1. Bright “piercing” tone (cylindrical bore)
2. More blowing resistance
3. “Smaller” overtone slot
4. Total dynamic range louder than cornet

It should be obvious, then, that when we speak of the tone of each instrument, we really are speaking of our idealization of the tone quality that we believe should emanate from the instrument. Let's face the “fact” (born out by past objective testing) that there is no readily identifiable difference in the tone of the two instruments when played by most performers. (Please understand that this statement is made only from the listener's point of view. The player can tell a difference in the “blowing” characteristics of the cornet as compared to the trumpet [see

characteristics 2 and 3 in the chart].)

Joseph Wagner, composer and author of a well-known book on band scoring practices, had this to say back in 1960, “Actually, these two instruments [cornet and trumpet] are more alike now than at any previous time in their development. There is a mid-

Twentieth Century trend toward replacing cornets with trumpets in American bands.”¹ The original pronounced difference between the two instruments almost has been erased in the last few years, mainly due to the expansion of the trumpet bore and mouthpiece size to “darken” the tone (and keep the tone dark at today's high orchestral volume levels).

The cornet and trumpet sounded markedly different from each other in the 19th Century. The natural (valveless) trumpet had a proud and ancient heritage, while the cornet was the “new kid on the block.” In order to understand the differing acoustical properties of the two instruments in a historical sense, it is necessary to remember that the cornet came into being as we know it in the early 19th Century. Forsyth tells us that, “This instrument is really a military development of the Post-Horn [family, originally without valves].

Cornet vs. Trumpet

Its short tube is partly cylindrical and part conical. The bore is larger than that of the Trumpet, and a cup-shaped mouthpiece is used.”² Circa 1824, valves were added to give the instrument true chromatic capability, and this innovation was adopted readily by cornetists of that time.

It is interesting to note that many trumpet players resisted valves, and continued to perform on natural trumpets (no valves) until the middle of the century. The rivalry between performers on the cornet and trumpet became so pronounced that at one time the Paris Conservatoire de Musique had different studios for each instrument, Arban being the cornet teacher.

The valve-cornet seemed particularly suited to solo performance because of its ability to play melodies in the vocal register (the valveless trumpet could only play melodies at the top of its tessitura), and because its conical bore made it a more flexible instrument from a technical standpoint. But, in spite of these advantages, it was never adopted as a necessary instrument by orchestra composers (with a few exceptions).

The truth is that the 19th Century orchestra probably did not need another melodic voice, since the strings and woodwinds served that function so well. This orchestral “cold shoulder,” however, gave the cornet an opportunity to assume the role of the violin in concert bands (that had to rely on orchestral transcriptions because there was almost no original repertoire).

Historically, this led to the inclusion of a cornet section (usually three parts) playing the role of strings, while trumpets (two parts) played the trumpet parts found in the original orchestra score, much of the time in a different key from the original. In these mid-19th Century bands, doubtless the cornet had

more technical facility (needed for the string parts) than many of the woodwinds, which one would normally expect to play the technical string lines. Besides, the outdoor venue of the band organizations of that day dictated that more volume was needed on the melodic parts than could be supplied by only a few (probably) out-of-tune woodwinds (if Berlioz is to be believed).

So, we see a historical reason, having nothing to do with tone quality, for three cornet parts and two trumpet parts, a reason that no longer seems valid to

most of today’s composers. They just don’t see the necessity of writing for five separate parts, and have started writing for only one of the two instruments (interchangeably, it seems). Some write for three (or four) cornets, some for three (or four) trumpets, and at least one well-known contemporary composer utilizes three trumpet and two cornet parts. (Alfred Reed, at least, has “method in his madness.” He believes in scoring the cylindrical brass together [trumpets with trombones], and conical brass together [cornets with French horns

and euphoniums]. This makes some sense, although conical tubas many times are scored as the bass line of both different instrument combinations. Also, since most bands no longer use cornets, trumpets usually play all parts in spite of the instrument named on the page of music.)

This brings us to the practicality of modern concert band (wind ensemble) instrumentation. Yes, cornets and trumpets do have different characteristics (especially to the player), but, does it matter in light of the “fact” that most performers today play the trumpet as their instrument of choice. When I was the band director at Carnegie-Mellon University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, many years ago, I was the proud

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Cornet vs. Trumpet

possessor of nine (count 'em, nine) Bach Stradivarius medium-large bore cornets. They were beautiful, expensive instruments, and my excellent students “hated” them. They played them only during band period, and never practiced their band music on the cornets they were assigned to play.

They practiced the music all right, but on their own trumpets. This meant that they never sounded as secure on the cornets in band as they sounded on their trumpet in recital, or in the practice room. Not only that, since they only practiced (and cared about) the trumpet, they made their cornets sound just like the trumpet. Why shouldn't they? That was the tonal concept they had in their heads. I finally gave up after several years of fighting the “cornet battle,” and decided to let them play their own instruments. Immediately, the section sounded more secure, and better in tune.

Another reason I have never gone back to using cornets is because I cannot look at (and sing) most cornet/trumpet parts and make a judgment, based on the character of the music, as to which instrument should be used. Should cornets only play florid melodies, with trumpets intoning only brilliant fanfares and march-like themes? If this is so, why is so much music seemingly scored just the opposite for the two instruments (or, at best, with a mixture of these styles)? I just don't think most contemporary

composers separate out their parts according to the criteria listed above.

What then are the criteria that they use? I must confess, most of the time I don't know. I believe many composers just put down the name cornet or trumpet by habit (or the dictates of the publisher), and not by conscious choice based on the subjective musical feeling of the part. If there is a good possibility that this is so, why should directors worry about tonal differences of the two instruments when these seemingly make no real difference to the composer, and cannot be heard by most of the audience. To contend that one or the other instrument truly will enhance the realization of the composer's musical intentions must be mostly illusory.

What then is the “bottom line” in this discussion? I believe the cornet/trumpet war has been won decisively by the trumpet (this may or may not be “good,” it simply is a fact). The trumpet is the instrument of choice of most all young students who aspire to be professional players and teachers. To buck this historical trend is to waste time and energy on an issue that already has been settled in the “marketplace.” Slowly, but surely, composers and arrangers are writing band music in such a fashion as to phase out the cornet entirely. It has been relegated to its rightful position in brass bands as both a section and solo instrument. This probably is all to the good, and simplifies the scoring task of today's composers and arrangers. Let's leave well enough alone.

Dr. Richard Strange, Professor of Music and Director of Bands, Emeritus at Arizona State University. He was director of bands at Carnegie-Mellon University, where his bands gave six annual concerts in New York's Carnegie Hall. While in Pittsburgh, he played oboe with the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. He has served as guest conductor with the US Marine Band, the US Air Force Band, the US Army Band (Pershing's Own), the US Army Field Band, the US Coast Guard Band, Armed Forces Bicentennial Band, Dallas Wind Symphony, the Texas Wind Symphony the Fresno Wind Symphony and L'Orchestre d'Harmonie de la Ville du Havre at “Coups de Vents” (1991 and 1994) in Le Havre, France. Dr. Strange is listed in the International Who's Who in Music and Musicians Directory. Dr. Strange was president and currently is Executive Director of the American Bandmasters Association. In the past few years he has conducted, judged or given clinics in Austria, Belgium, Canada, England, France, Germany, Guam, Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, The Netherlands, New Zealand, Switzerland, and the United States. At present, Dr. Strange is Music Director and Conductor of the 90-member Tempe (Arizona) Symphony Orchestra.

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¹ Wagner, Joseph, *Band Scoring*, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1960), 126-136

² Forsyth, Cecil, *Orchestration*, (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1949), 103.