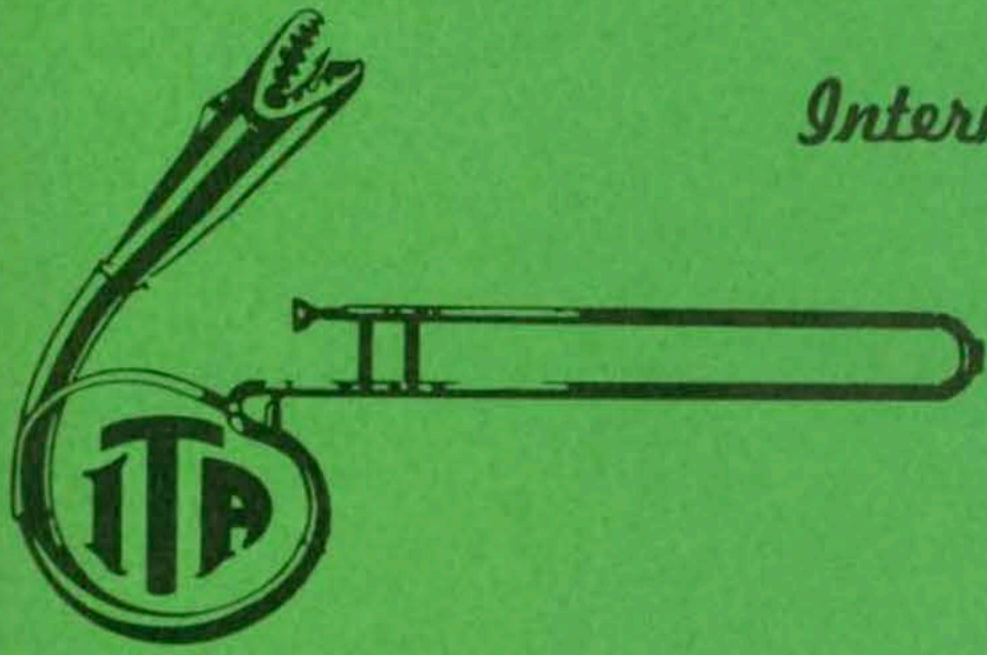


*International Trombone Association*



# Journal 1

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# Journal

*dedicated to the artistic advancement of trombone teaching, performance and literature*

Volume XII, No. 3

Vern Kagarice, Editor

July 1984

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(Cover photo) Ole Kristian Hanssen Accepts ITA-Norway Plaque from Irvin Wagner

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# In Defense of the Single Valve Bass Trombone

by Douglas Yeo

This article was undergoing a final editing when I received the April, 1984 *ITA Journal* with Dwight Gatwood's article, "Is Dual In-Line Really Better?" His article raises some interesting questions, and while I propose to carry his arguments even further, I feel inclined, at the same time, to comment on some of his conclusions.

Ask any trombonist what the most important aspect of playing is and he (or she) is sure to say "sound" (if he doesn't, he's in big trouble!). Technique, slide and valve facility, ease of execution, impeccable rhythm, style, intonation—all are for naught if the sound produced isn't of the highest quality. The trombone, as originally conceived, was capable of the "purest" sound of any brass instrument, owing to the fact that there were no impediments to the flow of air from the initial attack to the sound leaving the bell flare. Until, of course, the "F-attachment" and subsequent other valve related developments came about.

It must be said early on that when choosing an instrument, one must first decide for what purpose it will be used. I remember Dick Shearer of the Stan Kenton Band, when asked what he thought of the Conn 88-H, saying, "Well, we just heard a college big band where all the trombone players used them and it sounded like a squadron of baritone horns!" Obviously, the instrument must fit the style. In the area of bass trombones, there are three basic types currently available on the mass market, all of which are distinguished by the number and positioning of the valves: single valve, double valve "stacked dependent" and double valve "in-line." Each has its own selling points, and Dwight Gatwood covered many of the problems relating to the "in-line" horns in his article.

I am a full time professional symphony player, and I too have searched for the "perfect horn." For years I had played on one instrument; a Bach 50B2 with a "stacked dependent" valve system, tuned to F and D. It worked great and still does. When I began playing with the Baltimore Symphony, however, I felt it was time to have another horn, and went about deciding what to get.

I must say I agree with Mr. Gatwood on most of his arguments against the double valve "in-line" bass trombone. The resistance problem is a real one, and even those people that use it will tell you, as they've told me, that the main advantage is a whole new set of "trigger positions" that allow them greater flexibility to execute difficult passages with more ease. That, however, seems like a small benefit for the sacrifice in tone quality. In fact, I have never heard someone, either professional or student, play an "in-line" bass trombone that didn't *sound* better on a "stacked dependent" horn. For me., the sound sealed its fate. In addition, there is the problem of having to press two trigger paddles simultaneously when going from an open horn to a double valve note. With the necessary trigger configuration of thumb and middle finger on "in-line" horns, and the resulting different spring tensions, a synchronized motion is difficult if not impossible.

Here, though, is where I take exception with Gatwood's argument. The trigger set up requiring the use of the thumb and middle finger is, to me, far superior to the traditional "side by side" trigger paddles available on most stock "stacked dependent" bass trombones. In fact, the "side by side" set up requires a total shift of the positioning of the horn (or at least an awkward, jarring thumb motion) in order to go from a

single valve to a double valve note (making legato extremely difficult), even with the Holton "magic paddle" which is, arguably, the most logical of the "side by side" paddle arrangements. What I and many other trombonists have done is to convert their "stacked dependent" triggers to the thumb and middle finger configuration. If held as I hold it in photo 1,

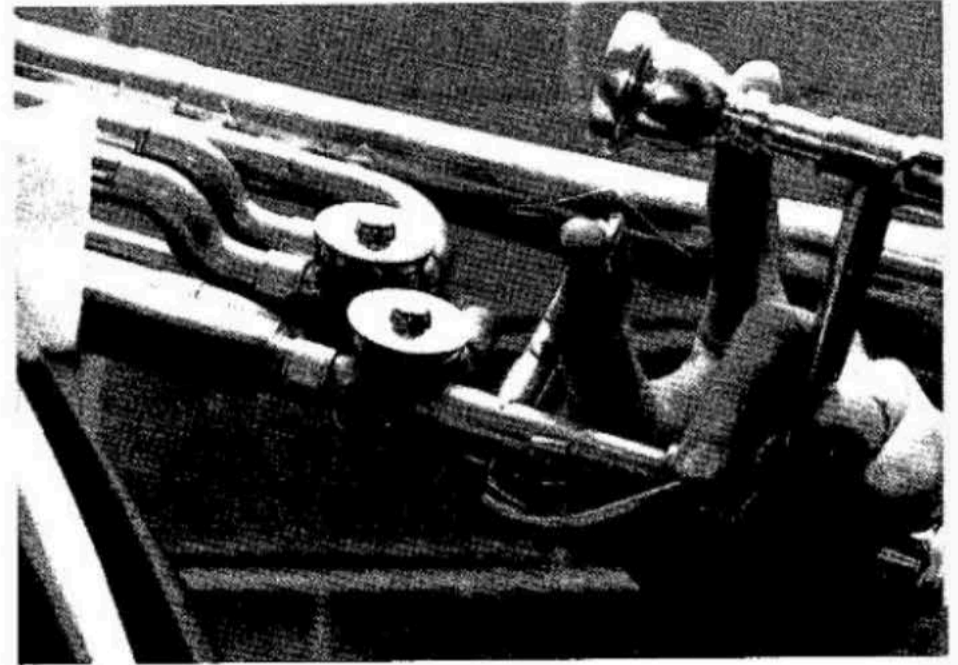


Photo 1

Thumb and middle finger trigger set-up  
Preferred hand positioning  
(all photos by Dave Federly)

there is no compromise in horn balance, as the instrument is supported by the butt of the left hand, index finger and fourth finger, leaving the third finger free to operate the second valve. Balance and fatigue become problems only if the player uses his middle finger to *both* support the horn and operate the second valve as in photo 2. One obvious benefit of this

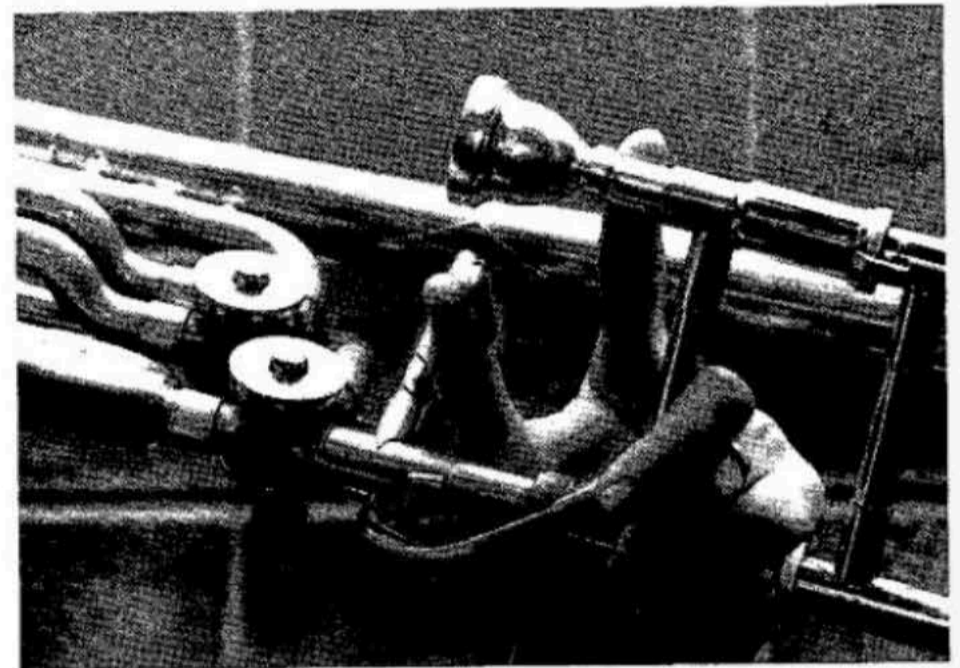


Photo 2

Thumb and middle finger trigger set-up  
Fatigue inducing hand positioning

alignment is the fact that you can go from an open horn note to a double valve note by depressing only one valve if you have previously activated the second valve which, when used alone, does not do anything. This, of course, requires some forethought, but for me it has become automatic, and I very rarely have to depress or release both triggers at the same time.

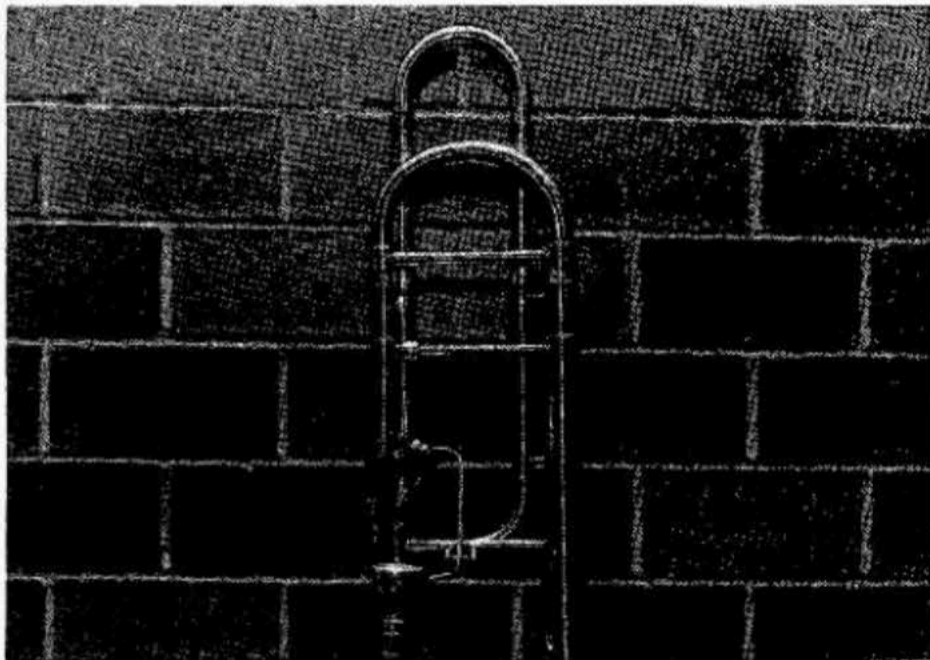
But I have strayed from my thesis—that for the symphony bass trombonist, neither of these double valve bass trombones are wholly satisfactory, as notes played on the "F attachment"

have to pass through both valves on both types of horn, and it is in the valves and valve sections that the greatest sacrifice of tone quality is made.

The answer, of course, is that prehistoric dinosaur, the single valve bass trombone. I made a rather careful survey of the roughly 131 different pieces of symphonic music I've played over the past three years in the BSO (not including "pops" concerts—more on them later) and I came up with a rather startling discovery—126 of the pieces, or 96.5% required the use of only one valve. Three pieces had isolated low B's that necessitated a "pull" of the F slide (more on that later, too) and only two pieces (Bartok's *Concerto for Orchestra* and his *Miraculous Mandarin Ballet*) absolutely required a double valve trombone since both of those pieces have glissandos from low B up to F, a physically impossible feat on a 7 position trombone unless you have two valves (the "string trick"—that is tying a string to a pulled F slide and closing it by pulling the string while moving the slide in at the same time—works great on the *Concerto*, but it won't work in *Mandarin* where the F-B-F glissando must be made 21 times in rapid succession). Virtually everything could be played on one valve! The choice seems clear.

"Now . . . wait a minute," you may say. "Don't tell me that you can play technically difficult things on just a single valve horn." To which I will say "Show me some in the symphonic literature I can't!" It's a myth that the orchestral literature is full of technically impossible parts to play. Among those pieces I've done with only one valve are *Ein Heldenleben*, *Die Walküre* (the complete opera!), the *Berg Violin Concerto*, *The Planets*, all the Brahms symphonies, *Pines of Rome*; the list goes on. Sure, it takes a little thinking, but I have never felt uncomfortable using just one valve. It is the same logical principle tenor players that use a "straight horn" instead of a "F attachment" horn use. Why play on equipment that I don't need most of the time which, at the same time, sacrifices my sound?

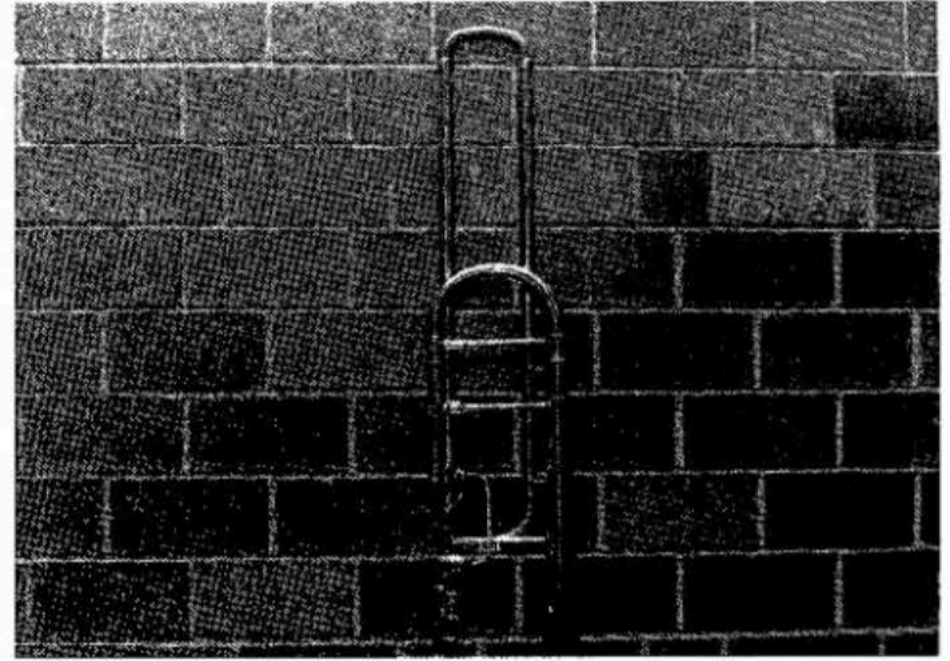
Now I must say that I plan my playing carefully. And it is not really enough to just pull out your F slide and hope for a good low B because it just won't happen when you need it. The trombone I now use is a modified Bach 50B with an axial flow valve (designed and converted by O. Edward Thayer) which, to me, is the answer (see photo 3). The "F attachment" consists of



**Photo 3**  
Single valve axial flow valve bass trombone  
"F" slide in place

a single wrap of tubing, and the air never encounters an abrupt change of direction or interruption as any kind of traditional rotary valve trombone will have. It is possible to use two of the axial flow valves in line, too, which does eliminate some of the

problems of the rotary in-line horn. William Cramer and Bob Biddlecome, among others, have bass trombones with this application. However, when I need a low B, I use a totally different tuning slide which, when inserted, gives me a single valve in E flat with E flat in first position and therefore low B in a real seventh (as opposed to a very flat, almost off the slide seventh on the usual "E pull" of the "F attachment") (see photo 4). While it looks unusual and you have to watch you



**Photo 4**  
Single valve axial flow valve bass trombone  
"E flat" slide in place

don't bang into the wall, it works extremely well, and produces the most open low B imaginable on a trombone. It works wonders on pieces such as *Till Eulenspiegel*, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* and *Die Walküre*.

I promised I'd talk about pops concerts. Early on I mentioned that you must use the right horn for the right kind of playing. For commercial or studio type playing, when you never know what you might see when you sit down and open the book (as is the case in most symphony pops concerts), it is always advisable to cover yourself and bring a double valve horn. In those situations (and in the world of brass quintet playing, for that matter), there is no denying that the double valve horn gives you greater flexibility and allows you to play those truly difficult technical passages written by arrangers who think that since pedal B flat is close to C on the piano, it must be easy to do on the bass trombone. I use my double valve horn at any rehearsal where I don't know what to expect—a pops program, or a premiere of a piece that the composer hasn't finished until five minutes before the first rehearsal so I couldn't see the part. Still, in most cases, I am able to use my single valve horn for a concert because I am usually able to get around any technical problems after seeing the part, and the sound on my single valve horn is so much better than what can be produced on the double valve horn.

Dwight Gatwood made an interesting statement in his article which said, when describing his buying a "stacked dependent" double valve instrument instead of an "in-line" one, ". . . I realize that I have alienated myself from the mainstream of the buying trend . . ." Really? In the October, 1983 *ITA Journal*, I wrote an article that surveyed the equipment used by 24 of the 29 major American symphony orchestra bass trombonists. The results were very interesting. In brief, of the 24 players, 3 use single valve horns as their primary instrument and 21 use double valves. But of those double valves, only 9 are "in-line". In fact, a statistic that did not get into that article is the fact that the 24 players owned 50 bass trombones between them. 11 of them were single valves, 39 were doubles, and only 17 of

them were "in-line". And of the 39 double valve horns, 26 had trigger set-ups that used the thumb and middle finger, while only 13 used the traditional "side by side" paddles. This would show the trend, among full time professional symphonic players at least, to be *away* from "in-line" and *toward* converting "stacked dependent side by side" triggers to the thumb and middle finger configuration.

However, full time professional orchestral bass trombonists do not make up the lion's share of the market—students do. And it is a rare student that can resist buying the most expensive and biggest thing available on the market with the mistaken notion that more valves and a bigger bell flare will make the sound bigger. It is just not true. In the case of trombones, the path of least resistance is the road best taken. And the way of dual bore slides resulting in more conical bore and oversize  $10\frac{1}{2}$ " bells, in fact seems to make the instrument sound not like a "bigger sounding" trombone, but rather like a slide baritone or tuba. A bass trombone is a bass trombone. Period.

I don't think I'm contradicting myself when I say a double valve horn is a necessity if the player has only one instrument. But, should you find yourself with the financial means to own two horns, *and* the type of work you do makes it sensible to do so, then I think you should consider a single valve horn. And for me, the Thayer axial flow valve has made all the difference, because even a stock model single valve bass trombone has problems, since it has the absolutely tortuous bends required in rotary valve horns.

Try it. You'll like it.

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