ALEX HITZEROTH

blow by blow

Text CF Team **Pictures** Alex Hitzeroth

I meet trombonist Alex Hitzeroth just before a concert by the Johannesburg Philharmonic Orchestra to talk about his instrument and musical career. It is the JPO's last concert season for the year, and for Alex, (like many Gauteng-based freelance orchestral musicians), it is moving towards the close of an exceptionally busy year.

Indeed, 2005 has been abuzz with music, from ballet productions with full orchestra, to a handful of opera productions and even some shows – in short, there has been ample work for any orchestral player worth his salt – a much more positive picture compared to the classical music scene just a number of years ago.

I am also lucky, as two works on the evening's bill, though contrasting in nature, couldn't more adequately illustrate how brass instruments contribute to the overall orchestral sound. On the programme: Franz von Suppe's *Light Cavalry Overture* and Chausson's *Symphony in B flat Major*.

But first, a refresher course from Alex in orchestration reveals that the standard orchestra features three trombones: two tenors and a bass. I quickly learn that Alex, in fact, plays the bass trombone, an instrument just slightly larger than the tenor trombone (the most widely used instrument in the trombone family).

Alex comes from a musical family and grew up in the windy city of Port Elizabeth. His father played trumpet for the Moravian church band, an institution with a particularly rich brass band history, and so, surrounded by big band sounds, learning a brass instrument was an inevitable interest. Although Alex first started with the trumpet, he very quickly switched to the trombone, and more particularly the bass trombone.

This, he explains, had more to do with physiology than anything else. Tone production is achieved through the embouchure (the way the mouth is shaped and altered to produce tone). Individual differences in teeth structure, lip shape and size, and jaw shape are all factors that affect the embouchure, and Alex soon found that the he was best suited to the bass trombone (with a slightly larger mouthpiece). He comments that most players switch to the bass trombone much later in their career, and while many play both the tenor and bass instruments, he is rather unique in the sense that he only plays the bass.

Alex started taking lessons at the University of Port Elizabeth under Eric Albertyn at the age of ten. In fact, the university had a number of very able brass players on the faculty that helped establish a very strong brass playing tradition in the city.

During his high school career he was selected to play in the Sasol National Youth Orchestra, and coming from a brass band tradition, it was an exciting new experience to play within the orchestral setting. He singles out working under conductor Gerard Korsten as a highlight, and was also able to travel with the orchestra to Russia for performances in Moscow.

After matriculating, his professional career got off to a rather unfortunate start... He laughingly admits that after being contracted

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to play in the then NSO in early 1999, and subsequently relocating to Gauteng, he was duly informed that all contracts had been cancelled on his very first day on the job! The tide has turned, however, and now he enjoys a busy career as a freelance musician, regularly performing with the JPO, COSA, the JMI Orchestra, and even enjoying a couple of jazz jam sessions on the side.

He has also developed a teaching career and with his own students, he stresses that good tone production is the key to brass playing. While technique and breathing can all be taught, good tone is something you must be able to hear, internalise and re-reproduce. A point crucial to his own development as a player was to continuously listen to as many symphonic recordings as possible, particularly focussing on the brass section, and he encourages his students to do the same.

One soon picks up that the great orchestras like the Berlin Phil or Chicago Symphony Orchestra each have their own brass sound, he explains. In fact, many countries have their own playing style: the British style, for example, is more robust with less vibrato, while the American style can be described as brighter and more virtuousic.

Armed with all this information I sit back to enjoy the concert. Von Suppe's overture is a boisterous display of the elements we most often associate with brass: bright fanfares, march-like rhythms and lots of pomp and circumstance. The Chausson on the other hand, is a supreme example of big romantic orchestral sounds, with the luscious swells in the music, powered by the brass. Unusually the work closes with brass chorale. Alex explains that this type of ending is particularly demanding, as brass players' lips are quite strained at the end of an evening's concert, and the softer passages demand greater control than opening full throttle to end in a crash of sound, as most symphonies do.

A couple of days after our conversation, the Proteas beat New Zealand at St George's in PE in a nail-biting finish. Listening to the brass band in the background (in which he himself often played while still at school), I am reminded that sport, aside from music, is his other major passion! When not playing music, you'll probably find him watching his favourite teams playing soccer, rugby or cricket. Now, if we could only get the same big crowds to come to the JPO's

THE TROMBONE

The name trombone is derived from the Italian word tromba (trumpet) – and literally means big trumpet. The trombone first made its appearance in the fifteenth century when the need arose for a member of the brass family to play the lower bass notes in an ensemble context. The trombone comes in a variety of sizes, from soprano, alto to tenor and bass, but it is the tenor trombone that we most often associate with the instrument.

Interestingly, the modern trombone has changed very little in basic shape from its medieval ancestor and is certainly the most recognisable of the brass instruments because of its distinctive slide mechanism. In fact, in France and England the instrument was first known as 'sackbut', which literally meant push/pull. As only a restricted series of notes is available from a set length of tubing, the introduction of the slide made it possible to vary the length of tube, therefore making a new series of notes available. The slide mechanism also gives the instrument its unique ability to 'slide' from one note to the next, a technique explored and made popular by jazz players.

There are seven different slide positions, and by manipulating the various positions, the player is able to produce the full chromatic spectrum of notes. For the action of the instrument to work reliably, it is important that the friction between the slide and the inner tube is kept to a minimum. In the modern trombone special plating techniques are used to enable the slide to move smoothly.

The tone of the trombone is also quite noticeably different to that of the trumpet, less brilliant, and perhaps can be described as more solemn and dignified. Although the instrument was from its earliest day called upon to play in the town and court bands, it travelled a long road to finally become an integral part of the symphony orchestra. The instrument was only occasionally used by Bach and Handel, and only much later in the operas (not symphonies) of Mozart were the instruments given real prominence. Because of its dramatic and arresting tone quality, composers also often used it in the 'inferno' scenes of operas, with the instrument associated with the supernatural.

During the 1800s, after a period of faded popularity, the trombone again came into prominence, particularly in the role it played in the revival of military music of the time. But it was not until Beethoven used the instrument to great effect in the finale to his *Fifth Symphony* that the instrument finally found a home in the symphony orchestra. By the 1850s, particularly in the works of Berlioz and Wagner the instrument had become part of the standard