Playing the Wagner Tuba

A Handbook for Hornists

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Preface

The Wagner tuba has long fascinated me. As a professional, I have enjoyed opportunities to perform on the Wagner tuba with groups including the Rochester Philharmonic, the Indianapolis Symphony, and the Phoenix Symphony, and I personally look forward to each new opportunity to perform on the Wagner tuba.

This is not the usual reaction of many other horn players, however. The Wagner tuba can be an instrument of mystery; it is rumored to be difficult to master, and especially to play well (the parts are oddly notated, the intonation is very challenging, etc.).

While it is tradition that Wagner tuba parts are assigned to talented, smart horn players whom management believes will figure out how to play the instrument, there is a better way than word of mouth and trial by fire. This publication attempts to bridge this gap and is an expansion upon the materials I have regularly presented to advanced horn performance students at the college level.

One general grammatical note should be made at the outset. It is common in English to call one or more Wagner tubas “tuben” or even to refer to several instruments as “tubens.” However, “tuben” is the plural form of the word “tuba” in German, and for that reason the word “tuben” should be avoided in English when referring to a single instrument, and “tubens” should always be avoided.

It is my hope that through this volume, more horn players will learn to play the Wagner tuba well, perhaps enticing more composers to write for this beautiful instrument.

John Ericson
A Brief Introduction to the Wagner Tuba

The Wagner tuba is a distinct member of the brass family and is performed by horn players. The bore of the Wagner tuba is midway between that of the horn and the tuba and the instrument utilizes a horn mouthpiece. This tuba is constructed in an oval shaped traditional German euphonium pattern in two pitch lengths (tenor in B♭ and bass in F); the bell emerges at a slight angle to the right, and four valves are operated by the fingers of the left hand. Because of its relationship to the horn, the Wagner tuba is sometimes referred to as a “horn tuba.”

B♭ Tenor and F Bass Wagner Tubas (Mirafone)

According to “Bayreuth tradition,” Wagner conceived the sound of this tuba as being solemn, dignified, and heroic. Most other composers who have utilized the Wagner tuba have adopted this tonal ideal as well, writing most often for a quartet of instruments generally utilizing the lower range, often in four-part harmony.

If assigned to play Wagner tuba, the first step is to acquire the instrument and music as early as possible. Problems you may face include reading an odd notation in a bad key signature, odd fingerings, strange intonation, mutes, and doubling. In professional situations, management will frequently pay for an extra sectional rehearsal.
Richard Wagner

Although scholarship has shown that the idea for an instrument of this general type is not original to Wagner, Wagner assured continued use and longevity through his compositions. Wagner’s desire was for a new tonal color distinct from that of the horn, trombone, and tuba. Wagner used a quartet of these small tubas extensively in the Ring cycle of operas (Das Rheingold, Siegfried, Die Walküre, and Götterdämmerung, premiered in 1869, 1870, 1876, and 1876, respectively), with the fifth and seventh horns doubling on the tenor in B♭ and the sixth and eighth horns doubling on the bass in F.

Wagner used three different notational systems for the Wagner tuba. In Das Rheingold, completed in 1854, he notates the tenor and bass tubas the same as for horns in B♭ alto and in F, using old notation for bass clef as on the horn. In the prelude to Götterdämmerung, completed in 1874, he notates the tubas in the same manner but one octave too high, that is, in B♭ basso and in F basso. In the remainder of Götterdämmerung, Die Walküre (completed in 1856) and Siegfried (completed in 1871), he notates the tenor tubas in E♭ and the bass tubas in B♭ basso. His note in the score asks for the parts to be written out as for Das Rheingold but this was not implemented.

From the angle of performance, it is easiest to read the parts as transpositions to F.

There are many passages that could be highlighted among the works of Wagner for the Wagner tuba. Here follows a popular orchestral selection from act three of Götterdämmerung, which exhibits Wagner’s second notation system, presented in the original notation and transposed to F.
Anton Bruckner

Other composers followed Wagner’s lead by utilizing the Wagner tuba in their works. The first significant and most performed works employing extended quartet passages are by Bruckner; he called for a quartet of Wagner tubas in his Symphonies No. 7, 8, and 9 (1883, 1890, and 1896). He wrote for tenors in B♭ and basses in F in the same system of notation used by Wagner in Das Rheingold or the prelude to Götterdämmerung, depending on the edition. Also note that Bruckner requested the first and second to play tenor tuba and the third and fourth to play bass. This arrangement is common in composers other than Wagner.

Bruckner’s Seventh Symphony is an ideal model for part writing for Wagner tuba. The range is very idiomatic; the challenges are primarily ones of being accustomed to the instrument and reading the notated parts.

The following section presents the complete Wagner tuba parts for Bruckner’s Symphony No. 7, along with alternate transposed parts to F for the B♭ tenors. Try to use the B♭ parts if you can; they are mental challenges that can be won with practice, much like reading horn in H in the works of Brahms.