

Serpent

A conical brass instrument in use since the 16th century, the serpent is a descendant of the cornetto and distant precursor of the tuba. The name of the instrument is derived from its curved, snake-like contour. It is usually constructed of wood, covered with leather, and originally equipped with six finger holes rather than valves. Later incarnations of the instrument may have additional keys designed to cover extra, supplementary holes placed outside the normal reach of the fingers.

Serpents are generally built in either C or B flat and have no definitive fingering system. With a timbre similar to a muffled, somewhat unfocused euphonium, intonation on the instrument is rather dubious and often requires the player to adjust one's embouchure to alter the pitch that would be naturally generated by a particular fingering. The range of the serpent varies from instrument to instrument, and from player to player, but characteristically spans approximately two and a half octaves. Should one desire the unique timbre of the serpent in one's orchestration, it should be scored as a singular instrument (not as a section of serpents) and in such a manner that any ambiguous pitches have minimal impact upon the overall intonation of the ensemble.

