Orchestral Excerpt CLASS

By Dennis Bubert

The trombone solos from Ravel's *Boléro* have probably had more written about them in the I.T.A. *Journal* than any other single orchestral trombone excerpt, and not without good reason. First of all, you can be assured that, without exception, *Boléro* will appear on nearly all audition lists for principal trombone, and second, no one is going home from an audition with a signed contract without playing *Boléro* and playing it well. So it's a given, that a column on orchestral trombone repertoire must deal with this critical solo sooner or later, and consider how several prominent principal trombonists handle these passages.

Thanks to Boston Symphony Orchestra principal trombonist Ron Barron and Milt Stevens, principal trombonist of the National Symphony Orchestra, for taking time from their busy schedules to share their thoughts with us. Readers may address any comments or questions on their remarks to me at <djbubert@prodigy net>.

Ravel's *Boléro*

Comments by Milt Stevens, principal trombonist, National Symphony Orchestra

When asked to write about the first trombone solo in Ravel's *Boléro*, I accepted the project willingly. I have enjoyed reading this column, and I am delighted to add my thoughts on *Boléro*. I also will have the opportunity to read the comments written by my colleagues. On occasions when we meet each other backstage at a concert or informally at conventions, we usually talk about good guest conductors or fine wines. Normally, we don't exchange ideas about trombone playing. So, I await this publication to see if we agree or disagree. I also keep in mind that, as with most of life, we continue to be students, in the sense that we keep our minds open to new concepts and are not so entrenched with an idea that we cannot change.

Background

It is significant to note from the outset that Ravel's mother was Spanish, coming from the Basque region, so not coincidentally, several Ravel compositions have a Spanish influence or origin — *L'heure espagnole, Rapsodie espagnole*, and *Boléro*.

Derived from folk dancing in Spain during the late 18th century, the boléro was a dance in triple meter (three beats to the bar), punctuated by triplet rhythms typically played by castanets or tambourines. Ravel was certainly not the only classical Western composer to structure a work that utilized the boléro dance rhythms. There are boléros by Beethoven, Weber and Chopin. The important point is that the dance, whether performed solo or by a couple, is earthy and explicit. Ravel's *Boléro*, premiered at the Paris Opéra in 1928, was written for the ballerina Ida Rubinstein. Rubinstein portrays a Gypsy woman, whose solo dancing on a table in a café rouses passions among the onlookers.

Structure

In order to correctly and appropriately perform the trombone solo at rehearsal No. 10 in *Boléro*, it helps to understand how the work is constructed. Ravel was careful to point out that this piece was "not a composition, but an exercise in orchestration." A letter translated and published in the London *Daily Telegraph* newspaper in 1931 from Ravel states: "Before the first performance, I issued a warning to the effect that what I had written was a piece lasting 17 minutes and consisting wholly of orchestral tissue without music — of one long, very gradual crescendo. There are no contrasts, and there is practically no invention except in the plan and the manner of the execution. The themes are impersonal — folk tunes of the usual Spanish-Arabian kind. Whatever may have been said to the contrary, the orchestral treatment is simple and straightforward throughout, without the slightest attempt at virtuosity. It is a dance whose pace is very steady and uniform, as much in the melody and harmony as the rhythm, which the snare drum beats out all the time. The orchestral crescendo provides the only variation."

After a quiet, *pianissimo* four-bar introduction of the rhythm played by a snare drum and a simple harmonic background played by violas and 'celli, the A theme, first played very quietly (*pianissimo*) by the solo flute, starts on a c-natural, proceeds in a curvaceous, mostly descending manner for 16 measures, and ends an octave below. There is always a two-bar *fill* between the solo presentations, and the sinewy A theme is next given to the clarinet, which plays the tune in a soft piano dynamic.

The B theme, which the trombonist eventually plays later on, is presented twice in succession — first by the bassoon, and then by the E-flat clarinet. Whereas the simple, folk-like A theme covers only the range of an octave plus a step (its top note is a d-natural above the initial c), the B theme starts on a high b-flat, ascends a minor third to d-flat, and works its way gradually lower for 18 measures to a low c. A more emphatic and determined tune, the B theme covers a range of two octaves plus a half step!

For the greater bulk of time for the piece, Ravel scores two A themes, followed by two B themes. Because this is an exercise in crescendo, he gives each successive presentation of a theme to an instrument (or instruments), which is (are) normally and naturally a slight bit louder than the preceding instrument (or instruments). Accordingly, more players join the harmonic texture and the rhythmic lines, aiding the crescendo effect throughout. The only break from this pattern of two A themes succeeded by two B themes occurs at the end of the work, where a single A theme is followed immediately with the final B theme with its extended coda.

Style

My feeling is that trombonists often interpret the *Boléro* solo incorrectly. They make a serious stylistic mistake by using the wrong articulation. All of the preceding presentations of the themes are littered profusely with slur markings. Because all of these woodwinds (plus the trumpet and horn) have keys and valves, the effect is liquid — smooth as cream. The misunderstanding is almost forgivable and concerns the interpretation of the word "sostenuto" in the trombone solo. Even the cheapest music dictionary I could find translates *sostenuto* as sustained. Some go so far as to state "sustaining the tone" or "holding the notes their full duration." Just because we do not see any slur lines above our notes, we should not play the solo in a detached, wooden manner. Let's face it; most trombonists will better match the slurred effect of the preceding themes if they use a legato tongue style. A true "tenuto" style is not out of the question either, but, in my opinion, a detached style is not appropriate for this first presentation of the trombone solo. Even looking at the B theme at rehearsal No. 11 that follows the trombone solo at rehearsal No. 10, one sees slur markings in all nine solo lines! Why should the trombone sound any different?

When the trombonist plays the solo the second time at rehearsal No. 15, all of the other instruments playing the same line are marked with slur and legato lines. Curiously, Ravel's indication below the trombone solo remains the same "sostenuto." For me, this cinches the argument. I believe that legato or a very connected tenuto is the solution, blending with the predominantly smooth woodwind and string lines.

For further proof, consider this: Ravel obviously never encountered Bo Derek or saw the movie, but I ask you,

"How can you play the Boléro solo with sultry shapes and sensuous curves unless you think long and luscious?"

Dynamics

After the relatively peaceful, serene 10 presentations leading up to the entrance of the trombone solo, all too frequently the trombone juts out of the orchestral texture like an assault on the senses. Instead of absorbing the style of the previous two themes, as played by the solo

woodwinds and trumpet and horn in the preceding presentations, the trombone solo comes across as too loud. Sure, it's supposed to be an orchestral crescendo, but this trombone solo occurs only about halfway to the goalpost. The marking is *mezzo-forte*, and I believe that this really means medium loud, not wailing. I would not recommend a *mezzo-piano* dynamic level either. We must keep in mind that the lone trombone player follows the A theme played simultaneously by an oboe, an oboe d'amour, an English horn, and two clarinets.

Whereas the first presentation of the trombone solo is marked *mezzo-forte*, the second one at rehearsal No. 15 has no specific dynamic marking. It is safe to assume, however, that it should now be *forte*, since the woodwinds and strings (who you join) have been at a *forte* level since rehearsal No. 11.

For the third and last presentation at rehearsal No. 17, it is okay to let steam rise from the end of your already heated bell. Ravel allows *fortissimo possible*, and, for once in your life, you aren't likely to see the raised palm of the conductor. Now, this scenario might be not the norm, but I played this solo in Carnegie Hall with the National Symphony less than a month before writing this article, and I had the extraordinary pleasure of competing with six snare drums standing on a riser behind my head! My buddies tell me that 90% of the orchestra is playing the solo line with me, but I really can't hear any of them. Since the NSO has a four-person trombone section, the assistant gets to join the orgy, too. We double the solo this final time.

The Mystery of the Glisses Unraveled

Talk about opening a can of wiggly worms — this subject makes me feel squirmy. There might be endless debate about the manner of executing the glissandos (really portamentos, if you remember your orchestration courses) or indeed how many there are. In the final analysis, no conductor is going to give a thought about how you smear from high b-flat to high d-flat. Whether you touch the b-flat as a grace note before dragging the slide from fifth position to second position, or simply do a *Lassus Trombone* slide, my opinion is that it doesn't matter. Ravel notates the effect the same in the saxophone lines as he does in the trombone line. It appears to be a grace note on b-flat, followed by a portamento line from the b-flat to d-flat. (Ravel was apparently familiar with the saxophone's ability to bend notes almost as completely as a trombone.) The fact that the saxophone is a keyed instrument probably accounts for the grace note indication. My feeling is that the grace note marking fell into the trombone part by default. Unless you are convinced that a grace note is necessary before the *gliss*, you need not be that literal. If it is too treacherous for you to re-articulate the high b-flat as a grace note before ascending to high d-flat, just cover the interval with a smear and be done with it.

Warning! Many trombonists develop a short right arm in the high register. Be it fear or carelessness, the high b-flat in fifth position often sounds too sharp. Sure, that note is supposed to be in a slightly sharp fifth position (because it is the 10th harmonic series tone), but it most definitely should not be in the area of fourth position. Check your pitch by ear in comparison with first position, or, better yet, turn on your tuner.

There is a mystery concerning the number of *glisses* to play in the solo. If your job is secure, and you are feeling particularly cocky, I guess you can get away with many *glisses* in your personal interpretation. Some have suggested that Ravel encouraged copious smears, à la jazz, in the trombone solo, and that I will not dispute. Nevertheless, in an audition, it's too easy to be thrown out for less serious offenses. I would not want to be eliminated because I was too rubber-armed or eccentric.

In the second measure of the solo, there is a clear indication to slide from g-natural to b-flat. This happens in the first two presentations of the trombone solo: at No. 10 and at No. 15. Just for the record, however, none of the other instruments that play this same B theme ever have this smear. To be technical about it, the trombonist does not have this portamento the third time the solo appears at No. 17. If you think that someone is really listening during an audition, please observe this difference.

Now, the question of the number of "glisses" from the high b-flat to d-flat needs to be addressed. There is more ambiguity here, because the saxophones always smear twice. When the trombone solo comes in the second time, the conductor sees two *glisses* in the score, while the hapless trombonist sees just one in the trombone part. The conductor had a feeling that you were a lazy bum long before you hit No. 15 in *Boléro*, but now suspicions have turned to reality. In this case, two *glisses* are better than one, and you will match the soprano saxophone at this spot.

The conductor's score and the trombone part agree for the first time the trombone solo enters at No. 10. Only one *gliss* is indicated, but the conductor has recently heard both of the saxophones render two juicy *glisses* approaching the last two high d-flats at rehearsal Nos. 6 and 7. Play it safe, and perform one *gliss* as in the score; or get bold and play two *glisses*. If questioned on this item of trivia, point out that, in the third presentation of the trombone solo at No. 17, two *glisses* are notated both in the conductor's score and in the trombone part.

My conclusion is that, just as the saxophones always slide to high d-flat twice, the trombonist could follow suit in all three presentations of the solo. Maybe the printer's eyes blinked shut when setting the type for the solo at No. 10. Since the score clearly calls for two sets of *glisses* in two of the trombone solos, I think that he intended there to be two sets of *glisses* in all three of the solos.

Vibrato

Without a doubt, the *Boléro* solo should be heavily laced with vibrato. Ravel does not indicate the word *vibrez* in the score, but this is the kind of melody that begs to shimmer. Furthermore, it would be folly to ask the solo bassoon or oboe d'amour or the saxophones to play their solos "straight" without vibrato. The trombonist adds life to the line, if he/she uses a fine slide vibrato or a flexible lip/jaw

vibrato. If you are the type of player who likes to tune your trombone high, so that you can use slide vibrato in first position, this solo lends itself well to this procedure.

Do you think Ravel might have detested slide vibrato? Well, Ravel wrote a trombone solo in another one of his compositions — *L'Enfante et les Sortilèges* (1925), three years before *Boléro*. This solo, too, is in the upper register of the trombone; in fact, it goes up to high d-natural a number of times. Above the notes appear this direction: *Vibrer avec la coulisse* (vibrato with the slide).

To be honest, I do not re-tune my trombone sharp, and I do not use slide vibrato in first position. (I guess I'm chicken, and feel that I've got enough to worry about.) I do, however, wiggle my wrist on the long notes not in first position. The high d-flats are particularly beautiful with a shimmering slide vibrato. When I play a note in first position, I use a lip/jaw vibrato, matched similar in speed and amplitude to the slide vibrato. Once the solo drops into the low tessitura, I use lip/jaw vibrato exclusively on the held notes.

My advice to trombonists is that you practice and learn to produce a vibrato in at least these two ways — slide or lip/jaw. Early in my career, I was happily playing the *Boléro* with a French conductor, until he stopped and asked me to use vibrato. I knew that I was already using a lip/jaw vibrato; so, I simply made it more pronounced. Much to my surprise, he stopped me again, expressing the same desire. Fortunately, the next time through, first being sure that my slide was superbly lubricated, I delivered the same type of vibrato I had practiced in the famous *Getting Sentimental Over You*.

Tempo

The trombone part does not indicate a tempo, but there is the marking of quarter note = 72 in the conductor's score. It is well documented that Ravel was disgusted with performances that were too quick. Being a perfectionist, he was insistent about many musical matters with those who interpreted his music. Too fast is not good!

I have performed this solo perhaps only once in my career, where the conductor religiously held to the 72 metronome marking. I'll admit that the solo flies by at that speed, and breathing is easier. (I prefer that the first two phrases each be taken in one breath.) My impression is that the solo works better at a slightly slower pace, and this seems to be corroborated by most recordings and live conducted performances. Given a preference, I would set the metronome at 66–69, creating an opportunity for expression and slight rubato.

The uncomfortable tempos are the ones below 66. Do some conductors go that slowly? You bet they do! The very first time I ever had to play the *Boléro* solo with a professional orchestra, the conductor took the piece down to an escargot's pace of 58 beats per minute. I had never practiced the solo with so many breaths! So, a practice method I have used ever since is to start at a breeze-easy 72 beats per minute, dropping the metronome click by click until I am practicing it around 58–60 beats per minute. Now, that develops stamina!

More Practice Methods

Have you ever tried playing the *Boléro* solo higher than written? It's an effective practice tool, but hard on the gray matter between your ears. If you take it up a half step, the key signature becomes seven sharps. Ouch! Likewise, do you remember the first time your teacher gave you the solo to practice, and you couldn't hit the high d-flats? Did you ever try to transpose it to a lower key? If you mentally substitute a bass clef sign for the tenor clef, the first note is only an e-flat, and the highest note is just a g-flat. (Add a flat to the key signature, and it works.)

I would suggest that all tenor trombonists practice this challenging solo in various transpositions and keys, gradually working up to the original key and then beyond. You can hand-copy these yourself or use a music software program on your cumputer. You might start in bass clef with the key of e-flat above the staff, sequencing the solo on every chromatically higher pitch until you reach the starting note, which is a full octave above the initial e-flat (if you dare!). If you can play the solo in all of these 12 keys, you are more than ready for the rigors of *Boléro*.

If any of you have comments or observations for me, please send me an e-mail message at <stevensM@ziplink.net>.

Comments by Ron Barron, principal trombonist, Boston Symphony Orchestra

Since 1928, when Maurice Ravel composed *Boléro*, the trombone solo therein has become perhaps the most famous, or infamous, in the orchestral literature. Discussion of this solo has taken place in no less than four previous I.T.A. *Journal* articles:

Vol. XI No. 4 October 1983 — Joel Elias' interview with Miles Anderson
Vol. 25 No. 4 Fall 1997 — Jay Friedman
Vol. 26 No. 2 Spring 1998 — Jean Douay
Vol. 26 No. 4 Fall 1998 — Chris Buckholz

Additionally, George Broussard did a lengthy interview with Leo Arnaud (trombonist and personal friend of Ravel) which appears in Vol. XIII, Nos. 1 and 2, January and April 1985, and presents his personal view of this work, and the trombone part. Arnaud subsequently was asked to speak about *Boléro* at the 1985 ITW. I ask you to refer to all of the above in addition to this article in order to get as complete a perspective as possible.

Editor's Note: *All of the articles listed above are now available to view or purchase on the I.T.A. Web site at <ita-web.org>.*

So, what more could possibly be said about the *Boléro*? I shall offer my personal experiences of performance and suggest how I ask others to prepare this passage. Though I did have the opportunity to perform it with the Montreal Symphony Orchestra in the summer prior to joining the Boston Symphony, it was my first year as principal trombonist in the Boston Pops that made a "*Bolero*" impact on me. Arthur Fiedler had a large repertoire, but certain works were like signature pieces for him. He also had the habit of scheduling obviously demanding works for new members. I suppose it was his way to make them confident or resign! So, in 1971 the Pops must have done *Boléro* three or more times each week of the spring season. I might not have always played it my best, but I certainly got used to it. In fact, at one Tanglewood performance, I was so relaxed, I forgot to enter! It all seemed rather empty for a half bar or so, until I realized it was time for the trombone solo. Rehearsal No. 10 grew a bit bigger in my eyes after that! I suppose that is no more embarrassing than when my predecessor forgot to un-lock his slide, and after the B-flat opening note, pushed the instrument away from his face, only to then wave at Fiedler and ask him to wait! Of course, that did not happen and the first phrase was therefore missing! Ah the stories. For trombonists, it is like the big fish that got away — one tale after another when it comes to this solo.

In Broussard's interview Arnaud states that Ravel wrote the melody with "a flamingo (flamanca) gypsy woman doing her work" in mind. I must report that my most memorable performance was a Pops TV show with the Spanish dancer José Greco and his lovely, black-gowned, castanet-wielding partner. Their dancing made the music so poignant. This leads to my first point. Being a dance, one's sense of time is critical to performing it. You can't labor over it, but feel it so strongly inside that nothing can change it. When playing at an audition, prepare the time, hear the drum, get the piece going in your mind before beginning to play. After all, it has been going for quite some time before you play in the orchestra. Establishing the time and mood is critical to a successful rendition. In any audition, this is perhaps the most challanging aspect for any player, to change the mood or atmosphere with each excerpt and present a strong sense that one broadly understands the music from which any excerpt comes. We often speak about differences in style, but actually showing it is not an easy feat. Any great music has room for interpretation, and will survive such, so long as it does not get too far away from the generally accepted style. That said, you can play something any way you like, but to get someone to pay you for it, you'll need to stick somewhat to the usual practice. With *Boléro*, Arnaud says that he put in turns, and that the glisses came from someone (probably Lafosse) trying to sound like jazz, when Ravel asked him to "play more like Leo." This may be not unlike Leonard Bernstein asking me to sound more like Tommy Dorsey in a low register solo with a solo tone mute, in our premiere performance of his *Divertimento*. I ended up playing open, with some vibrato, but I doubt if it ever sounded like my image of Tommy Dorsey. You see, players, as well as composers, have a lot to do with estab-

listing performance practice. Lenny seemed pleased, so what can I say? Today, one is expected to use the *glisses*, whether Ravel originally intended them or not. Certainly, Arthur Fiedler expected them to be there! I dare say, that if questioned, most conductors today would expect *glisses* in the trombone solo. Most have likely heard it that way, no matter who started it!

> *"It's not over until it's over!"*

After agreeing that one needs an unshakable feeling of time, and use of *glissandi* in the first two phrases, let me add only that there should be no sense of running out of steam as the tessitura lowers. I once had a string player ask me if it was not the lower range of the solo which was the most demanding, because he heard players get weaker and fade out near the end. This observation surprised me, and made me realize once again that it is not over until it is over! So, in addition to counting accurately as the line descends, keep the intensity going until the solo passage concludes. In fact, in listening to the two recordings which I have done, I would say that I did not keep the dynamic as I am now suggesting. (I expect I will get another chance!) Don't forget! The trombone solo is marked *mezzo-forte*, and should not sound forced, but should not be timid either. It is surrounded by larger tutti scoring and needs to feel strong and directed. It could be said that a solo dynamic mark might well equal a tutti mark one level higher. This is a generalization, but often true. So, play like a soloist, it is your big chance!

Have all the Moorish imagery you can, the sultry, whirling dancer, the mystic of the Basque culture. Can you hear the castanets? Play it for all it is worth! For me, such imagery will go a lot further than any concern for the trombone. Too often, however, it is difficult to remove oneself from the trombone. So, if you must, I refer you to Jay Friedman's article in the Fall 1997 I.T.A. *Journal* regarding *Boléro*. I very much agree with his comments there. In addition, may I suggest backing off a little after the first top D-flat and making a crescendo through the balance of the phrase, robbing a little time from the second C–B-flat 16ths to make the *gliss* longer and therefore hopefully more dramatic. For the balance of the solo passage, follow Jay's advice. If you do not have the issue to which I refer, do not spare the vibrato, do not play with a sloppy slide technique, and build intensity all the way to the end. If you read this and still cannot understand or need more information, contact Jay, or me through my Web site at <www.trombonebarron.com>. Ravel's *Boléro* is a fasinating and captivating composition, and for trombonists it is a challenge and honor to perform. Don't forget that this solo is only a minute or so in time, and music — all music — is too important to let such a short time ruin such a wonderful part of life! Enjoy it! Do you dance?