

THE METROZOIC ERA

Metro State's past, present and future



VINTAGE BRASS MELODIES FROM UNIQUE "KEYED SERPENTS"

By Chris Lawson ('02)

Sue Ellison, an affiliate faculty member of music, doesn't really follow the norm.

"I have an addiction to instruments," jokes Ellison, who at one time had roughly 250 pieces in her collection. "I tend to not be a normal person with normal interests. If I hear of an instrument that's unique, something that I'm not acquainted with, I have to have it. That's exactly what happened with the ophicleide."

The ophi-what?

According to Virgil Hughes, an 85-year-old businessman and music aficionado, the ophicleide (Greek for "keyed serpent") family is "a series of keyed brass instruments developed before the invention of the piston valve that you see on a modern trumpet." Hughes, who compares the keys to those found on a saxophone, says there are three sizes in the family: the smallest is the keyed bugle, the intermediate is the quinticlavé and the largest is the ophicleide.

Four years ago, while visiting Hughes in his west Denver music shop, Ellison heard him play a scale on the ophicleide, a once-celebrated but now essentially obsolete music maker. She was hooked on the somewhat disharmonious, but strangely entrancing, melodies the piece produced. She purchased one a short time later from a company in Philadelphia for \$3,500—a price she considers "a bargain."

"They have another one (currently) listed for \$5,000," notes Ellison. "Which is a lot of money for a very bad instrument. Although the one I bought is really one of the best in the band."

Which leads us to the band: The Denver Ophicleide Association is a group of nine music enthusiasts made up mostly of professional musicians, teachers, business owners and even a physician. Hughes, one of the association's founders, is also a member of the Metro State Community Concert Band thanks to the College's Metro Meritus program, which allows those 60 or older to take courses for free on a non-credit, space-available basis (www.mscd.edu/cil).

The group performed a medley that included "Dixie" and "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" at a May 5 concert on campus at the King Center. While it was a formal performance, Ellison and Hughes both joke that it's less about playing and more about dabbling with the instrument that keeps it fun.

The biggest challenge, according to Ellison, is getting the instrument's intonation to sound pleasant.

"Each ophicleide is unique in its fingering," says Ellison. "You don't know what the fingering is going to be until you experiment and find the best possible note on your personal ophicleide."

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Online Extra

Listen as Virgil Hughes discusses the ophicleide and hear music from the May 5 concert at www.mscd.edu/metromazine/multimedia

The Denver Ophicleide Association: (l to r) Sue Ellison, Margaret Devere, Virgil Hughes, Gary Goodnight and Norman Hughes. Not shown, Rich Cope and Gerald Endsley.