

# Evolution of the Bugle

Evolution of the North American Competition Bugle 1950 through 1967

## Slip-Slide Techniques of the Re-introduction of the Rotor

Beginning sometime in the mid to late 1950s, performers began to practice of polishing the tuning slides on their bugles and manipulating them like trombone slides in order to change the pitch of the bugle. The result was a clever method that lowered the bugle's pitch by a half or full step, thus enabling the bugle access to many notes never before available on these instruments. Drum corps performance pioneers such as French horn bugle soloist Pepe Nataro and baritone bugle soloist John Simpson exploited "slip-slide" techniques before stunned audiences during the 1950s. This practice must have seemed innocent enough to performers and spectators, but this curious performance technique would set in motion the desire for the chromatic bugle and forever change the drum corps activity.

Despite the success, the "slip-slide" technique was difficult to master for most players and did not easily facilitate quick pitch changes. Around 1957, new bugles were made available with the option of a factory-installed secondary "slip-slide" or rotor valve. The Legion eventually authorized the use of a rotor valve in response to the "slip-slide" phenomenon and to permit musicians to accomplish the same effect more efficiently.

Secondary rotor valves were also devised for "G" bugles that lowered the instrument's tone by a half-step, full-step, or even a step-and-a-half. It's unclear which manufacturer actually introduced the secondary rotor valve. Since experimentation among corps during this time period was rampant, it's likely that this introduction occurred simultaneously among numerous manufacturers and amateur designers.

## *“G-D/Slip-Slide” Bugle Fingering Chart*

“P” = Piston, “S2” = Slide in 2nd Position, “S3” = Slide in 3rd Position, “O” Open  
(Slide defaults to 1st position unless otherwise indicated)

The chart consists of three staves of music. Each staff has a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The notes and their corresponding fingering symbols are as follows:

- Staff 1:** G4 (P/S3), A4 (P/S2), B4 (P), C5 (S3), B4 (S2), A4 (O), G4 (P/S2), F4 (P), E4 (S3), D4 (S2), C4 (O).
- Staff 2:** D4 (P/S3), C4 (P/S2), B3 (P), A3 (O), G3 (P/S2), F3 (P), E3 (S2), D3 (O), C3 (P), B2 (S2), A2 (O).
- Staff 3:** G2 (P/S2), F2 (P), E2 (P/S2), D2 (P), C2 (O), B1 (P/S2), A1 (O), G1 (P), F1 (O), E1 (P), D1 (O).

Photographic evidence from the period suggests many corps opted to utilize bugles with only a primary piston during the early 1960s. Despite the fact that many corps utilized "slip-slides" as a secondary "valve" for their bugles, most corps utilizing an additional valve were choosing rotor assemblies for their instruments by the mid-1960s. These rotors were cleverly designed into the removable tuning slides and were actuated by the left thumb or forefinger. Due to the design characteristic, drum corps could purchase replacement tuning slides with integrated rotor valve assemblies to easily upgrade their current instruments. This allowed corps to remain competitive at minimal cost.

Through the 1960s, there was a great diversity among the configurations utilized by corps. Until the next major rule change in 1968, bugles were available in North America with a dizzying variety of options. "G-D" bugles were available with a piston only, with a piston and "slip-slide," or with a piston and an "F#" rotor, an "F" full-step rotor, or even a step-and-a-half "F-flat" rotor! Since each type of secondary valve required a different fingering system for the instrument, one can only imagine the

amount of confusion experienced by novice brass players attending their first drum corps rehearsal!

Rotors would remain an integral component of the competition bugle until it was phased out in 1976. Traditionally, the rotor valve has many advantages over the piston valve such as increased durability and dependability. The rotor is a closed system that is much less vulnerable to the dust and airborne debris associated with outdoor performances and rehearsals. However, the rotors developed for the drum corps activity were generally of poorer quality and required painstaking maintenance. Had a higher quality rotor been devised for corps, it seems likely the piston valve could have been supplanted by the rotor and could have remained the preference for manufacturers.

### **Introduction of the Contrabass, Mellophone, and Euphonium Bugles**



*Reilly Raiders* introduce a contrabass bugle (left) in their program in 1962, as featured in this photo from the September 12, 1962 issue of *Drum Corps News*.

It is generally believed that the contrabass bugle was first fabricated in 1959 by Whaley Royce Company, Ltd. of Toronto. However, it has also been suggested that Getzen salesman Sandy Sandberg invented the contrabass bugle. This double "G" contrabass was pitched an octave below the bass baritone bugle and was made exclusively for the *Geneva Appleknockers*. According to the 1967 Whaley Royce instrument catalog, the contrabass bugles was "on the market before drum corps were ready for it."

However, the instrument was "re-introduced" five years later and enthusiastically accepted. Some Canadian corps briefly experimented with a contrabass bugle in the key of "C."

The introduction of the contrabass was not without controversy. Resistance from the drum corps "purist" and the American Legion threatened the future of the new horn. Correctly sensing the activity would be harmed by the movement to "black ball" the contrabass, Don Angelica, Musical Director for the *Garfield Cadets* and the *Hawthorne Caballeros* offered a compelling and successful plea to readers in the December 8, 1962 issue of *Drum Corps News* (excerpted here):

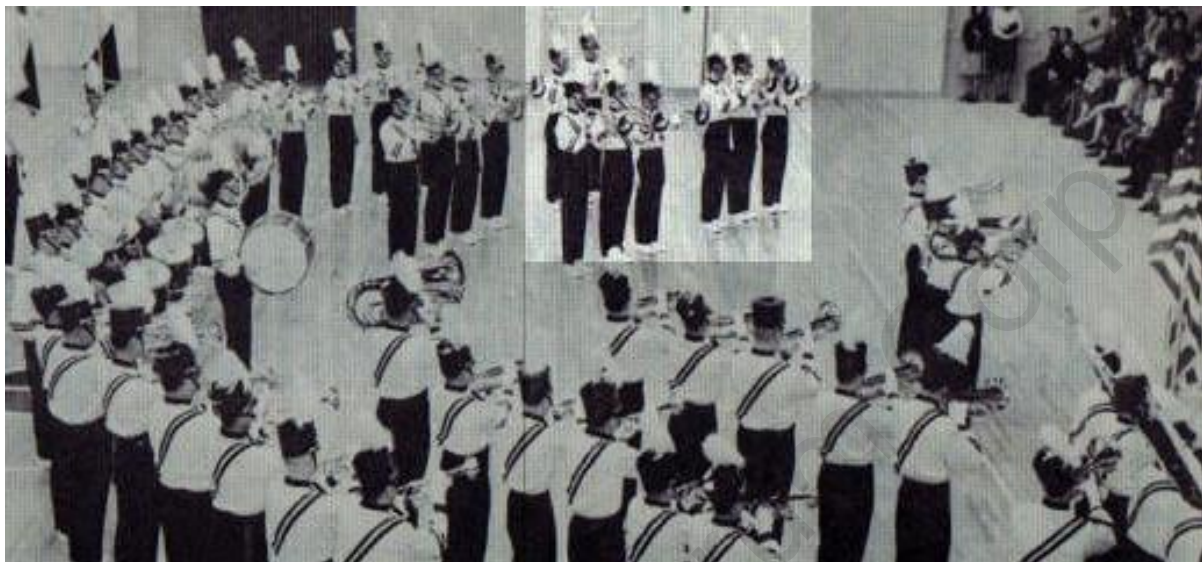
*To those critics who feel that this is a step away from drum corps instrumentation I say let us lock up the slides, let us get rid of the French horn and the bass bugle and let us return to the music played 25 years ago. This is certainly not an effort to make a band of the drum and bugle corps, it is an effort to further the musical values of the bugle line, it is an effort to raise the quality of musical arrangements, it is an effort to solve the problem of poor intonation in the low register, and most important an effort which will I am sure, provide a more musical drum corps show.*

*To those who say it is an awkward looking instrument let me state that I have seen some people make a soprano horn look awkward, and I am quite sure those who have seen Garfield and Hawthorne with the contra will not accuse them of looking awkward, if anything it adds a new effectiveness to the visual picture of the show. It is in my opinion, if handled properly, an aristocratic instrument which is not only a musical asset but also a visual one*

In 1957, the C.G. Conn Company created the first mass marketed bell-front mellophones in North America. Called the [mellophonium](#), the instrument maintained the characteristic round shape of the mellophone and was somewhat similar to the custom-made bell front instruments built by the C.G. Conn Company for jazz artist [Don Elliott](#) a few years prior. The [Stan Kenton Orchestra](#) also prominently featured a four-man section utilizing stock Conn mellophoniums between October, 1960 and December, 1963. Due to the success of the mellophonium in marching bands, it was inevitable that the concept would be utilized by drum and bugle corps.

Whaley Royce Company's "Imperial Mellophone" was first developed and designed by Dominic Delra, the music director of the *Interstatesmen* of Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Delra created a prototype and had the Whaley Royce Company fabricate copies in the fall of 1963. The *Interstatesmen* purchased six mellophone bugles and used them for the first time in Canada in Quebec City in February 1964. However, photo evidence from *Drum Corps News* appears to show mellophone bugles being incorporated into an exhibition performance by the *Interstatesmen* in 1963. The three mellophone

buglers in the photo have been identified as Joe Benoit, Ray Benoit, and Al Richards. By the summer of 1964, the Whaley Royce mellophones were being added to the French horn sections of the *Springfield Marksmen* (see below) and the *Belleville Black Knights*.



*The Interstatesmen drum and bugle corps in 1963 were the first corps to utilize production model Whaley Royce manufactured mellophone bugles. The highlighted portion of the photo above shows three mellophone bugles and three French horn buglers. The Toronto Optimist field tested prototypes by Whaley Royce prior to units being fabricated for Delra. Photo from Drum Corps News.*





*Part of the Springfield Marksmen's inaugural mellophone section performing with their new Whaley-Royce mellophone bugles on July 11, 1964 as featured in Drum Corps News. Photo reprinted from NanciD's drum corps [blog](#).*

At about the same time a production mellophone bugle was being distributed, the euphonium bugle was also being created at Whaley Royce in Toronto. Pitched in the same octave as the bass baritone, the euphonium was a much larger and imposing instrument. The euphonium's intended purpose was to add a darker tone quality to the bugle choir's low brass section. Some corps were pleased enough with the instrument to replace their entire baritone section with them--much to the horror of the performers designated to perform with these "widow makers."

By the mid-1960s, the bugle choir had grown to encompass three octaves with four voices of instrumentation.



*At the top of this image is a very rare prototype G-D piccolo soprano bugle by Getzen (S/N 1). This instrument hung on Don Getzen's office wall for years. It is pictured above a WFL Tenor bugle (for sizing reference). Click image for an enlargement. From the collection of Frank Dorrite*

Data Source:

<http://www.middlehornleader.com/Evolution%20of%20the%20Bugle%20--%20Section%203.htm>