

# ALTO TROMBONE

## 1. Where did the alto trombone come from and why?

The alto trombone came along in the history of the instrument at about the same time as the tenor. No one knows for sure when trombones first appeared; however, we have documentation for trombones dating back into the 1300's. But there is no indication as to the pitch of the instrument at that time. As time went along and the development of music progressed, we begin to know more.

The subject of where the alto trombone came from is a complicated one and has two issues coming into the picture which are factors. These are "sidebars" as one might say. The first "sidebar" is the invention of the printing press. The German, Johannes Gutenberg, is credited with the invention of the printing press around 1440. This device consisted of a box into which narrow metal or wooden pieces were placed with the appropriate item for what was being printed. In the case of printing words for a book like the word "Mary," a metal piece with the letter "M" was placed in the box followed by an "a", then an "r" and "y" to spell Mary. At this point a blank was inserted for space, and then the next word. You perhaps know that the Bible was the first book to be printed. It is important to imagine the box into which these bars were placed because the box had to be a specified size and the bars placed into the box had to be uniform in order for them not to slip around. So what does this mean to the printing of music? The metal (or wooden) bars had to be the same length and width as each other. Consequently, the bars were made to have 5 ledger lines with room enough at the top and the bottom to add one line above or below the staff. So a bar was placed in the box with, for example, a whole note on the second line up from the bottom, the next bar had a quarter note, and the next a half note, and so on. This meant that the notes all were within the staff or not more than once ledger line above or below. Therefore, with the practice of using many different clefs, one could look at a part and immediately know the range of the part and could easily determine which instrument played that range. Tenor trombones could basically play anything with Bass Clef, Tenor Clef, and Alto Clef.

A second "sidebar" was pitch standard and tuning systems at that time. In the case of pitch, an organ, for example in Munich might be tuned to A=430 while an organ in Vienna might be A=450. This did not matter to trombonists because the slide made it possible to adjust. Further, tuning systems had not fully developed as we know them today. They used Pythagorean Tuning, Mean-tone Tuning, and others. Once again this did not matter to the trombonists because they could adjust. In fact, only trombones, strings instruments without frets, and singers were the only ones who could adapt to anything situation.

Now because of both of these issues, I am sure that because the trombones could adjust to the pitch of the situation, people desired to have more pitches of trombones in order to play higher parts along with the lower parts thus creating the need for shorter trombones. Here is no doubt from where the Alto came as well as Soprano down to Contrabasses.

## 2. Did the alto trombone develop as its own instrument" or was it invented because the tenor trombonist of the day couldn't play high notes?

First, I am sure the circumstances around the development were as I explained above. Trombones were highly desired because of their adaptability to pitches and tuning; therefore, have higher pitched trombones was very helpful to many.

However, I think tenor players probably played high, but the concept of having shorter instruments probably was very attractive to many and also easier for some players of other instruments like the cornetto to convert to the Alto.

I want to point out here that Praetorius in his book "Syntagma Musicum" published between 1615-1619 stated that "the sound of the tenor trombone is preferred so long as the play can play the high notes."

(Another comment to make here is that the opinion expressed by Praetorius expressed continued in the history of music for a long time---the solo part for trombone in the Mozart Requiem is in the Tenor part which is the second trombone part, the solos in Rimsky-Korsakoff Russian Easter and Scheherazade are all in the second trombone part. I think this shows that the tenor has always been preferred.)

### 3. What are the reasons for the alto trombones demise?

The demise of the alto goes to several reasons:

- a. People always preferred the tenor as I said above.
- b. As the sound of the orchestra got louder throughout the Romantic Period, the Alto just could not carry above the rest of the orchestra.
- c. Players have always had to fight intonation on the Alto making it not so much fun to play.

### 4. Before the 20th Century, were trombones, in particular the alto trombone, ever truly accepted as a symphonic instrument?

This is a good question and interesting. I think the trombone was fully accepted after Beethoven, but it took some time for composers to develop the knowledge of how to use it. Some really put it work once they discovered the sound---Wagner and Berlioz. But it is interesting to note that Wagner and Berlioz used the trombone in very loud situations; therefore, all their parts are basically for tenor.

### 5. Were the concertos considered serious repertoire or were they a sort of orchestral gimmick?

I am of the opinion that they were serious endeavors. My guess is that there was a player who because somewhat well-known and composers liked to compose for him. I think a famous name in this category was Belke (that may be spelled wrong).