

Serpent
(untitled)

unbekannt
probably 19.Jh.

Serpent, vermutlich 19. Jh.
Herstellung: unbekannt, IT
Material/Technik: Holz; Leder; Messing
104.7 x 40.4 cm
Donation: Hug & Cie., Musikinstrumente, Zürich, CH
Eigentum: Museum für Gestaltung Zürich / ZHdK



The historical wind instrument called the serpent because of its snake-like form is a fascinating phenomenon within the rich tradition of European instruments. This piece from Italy is a prime example of the difficulties researchers encounter with specific instrument types and with classifying instruments in general.

The serpent is a musical instrument that is not easy to play: producing the correct intonation and stability of sound requires great skill. The unusual-looking piece is commonly categorized as a bass instrument belonging to the cornett family, but not everyone agrees with this classification of the serpent as a bass cornett. Both the cornett and the serpent are horns with fingerholes and a cup-shaped mouthpiece, and though of wood would have to be included among the brass instruments according to common classification systems. The instrument with its serpentine curves is very difficult to fabricate, involving construction steps similar to those for an alphorn—except that no tree grows in this four-curved shape. This means that several pieces of hardwood must be glued together, the tube cut in half and hollowed out, and then the pieces glued back

together again. To seal the instrument in order to achieve the desired sound, it is covered in goat leather or parchment. With its approximately two meters in length, the serpent was for a long time the only bass instrument loud enough to fill larger rooms. In addition to church music, the serpent also played a role in military music from the mid-eighteenth century. After two transitional instruments, the bass horn and the ophicleide, the newly developed tuba took over the function once held by the serpent. There is some doubt about whether the instrument in the collection actually dates from the sixteenth century. (Adrian Steger, Franziska Müller-Reissmann)

<https://www.eguide.ch/en/objekt/ohne-titel-13/>