

# DIRK A

by Peter Chester

BTS events always teach you something new about the trombone and its music, and the National event in Cardiff in May 2012 lived up to this tradition. Certainly, for those who heard Dirk Amrein for the first time, experiencing his skills and repertoire left many open-mouthed in amazement. Dirk, whose home is in Germany, has made an international name for himself as a specialist in what might be called avant-garde or contemporary music for the trombone (and other brass instruments - he is multi-talented in that respect) and he has had several pieces written especially for him. They all require a particularly high level of varied techniques, from the straight-forward pure trombone sound, through complex mute work, multiphonics, singing, recited words, to even 'preparing' a trombone with the addition of cymbals on the slide! To tell us more about his work and his music, Dirk very kindly agreed to answer a few questions.

**PC:** How did you get started as a trombone player?

**DA:** I started actually on a German tenor horn but around age 13 I started to learn the trombone because I wanted to be a musician and with a tenor horn it does not lead to the same career opportunities. My first experience was in a semi-professional band playing at weekends for festivals, parties and so on, so I started to earn some money early. In that band we played all kinds of music and I had to sight-read everything.

**PC:** What were the early influences on your playing?  
**DA:** When I was about 16 I went to a lot of free jazz concerts and I had a number of musical heroes of those days, players like Albert Mangelsdorff, David Taylor, Ray Anderson, Jiggs Whigham and Bart van Lier. I had no classical heroes at that time - they came later. I heard a lot of interesting music but what I enjoyed

most was that it is all personal - their own styles. However, I was also influenced by all kinds of instrumentalists. From Miles Davis it was his artistry, from Stan Getz the use of vibrato, and from a lot of world-class drummers and bassists, the rhythm. I just tried to catch them all in concerts and listen. Listening to the best musicians is the best way to develop a good understanding of presenting and feeling the music. I like listening to all kinds of music - it depends on my mood - but I am definitely more on the jazz, funk, rock area than the classical.

**PC:** Did you have any formal training and who were the influential teachers?

**DA:** I don't think I was influenced by specific players, but all the teachers I had and the masterclasses I attended had an influence on me. I never wanted to copy anything, though. For me a real artist has to present something that is very personal, artistically speaking. As for formal training, I would like to mention Malte Burba and his ideas on brass playing. He has a very interesting website ([www.burba.de](http://www.burba.de)) and some of his work is also on YouTube (<http://youtube/GR4cNsQ6Hj4>). His methods have helped build up the skills needed to change instruments quickly, and not be too addicted to the trombone.

**PC:** Can you tell us a little about the musical circles you move in at the moment?

**DA:** At the moment I'd say those circles were very broad. There's lots of contemporary music, but also New Orleans jazz, big band and Balkan music, much of it with bass trombone and a helicon. I also conduct a brass band, which gives me a lot of pleasure as the band is doing all kinds of music. I also like to play baroque music on original instruments and I have a collection of instruments I still have to explore. Recently I have been working on the Mozart Horn concertos on a rare bass flugel horn built in Basel in

the 1920s.

It's an amazing instrument with a beautiful sound. Look at the picture and you can hear it on YouTube (<http://youtube/qJf5qSIBdv4>)

**PC:** Have there been important orchestras or ensembles in the development of your career?

**DA:** The Gustav Mahler Youth Orchestra was the first really big thing. I played in the German youth orchestra but GMJO gave me a lot of pleasure. I met lots of brass players from other countries there, especially England, where the sound of the trombone is always of a high standard. As one of the founders of Ensemble Phoenix in Basel, I have performed a lot of contemporary music with it, with some very challenging in pieces composed deliberately to stretch my abilities. I once played a piece written for soprano trombone and bass trumpet; the composer, Johannes Harneit, was fascinated to have the trombone play higher than the trumpet. The piece uses more than five octaves and requires changing instruments very quickly. It was actually a small opera,





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called *Der Idiot* (no need to translate!). Another group gave a second performance of it a few years after we had premiered it, but they needed two players to perform it all!

**PC:** What has been in your musical diary recently? And in the next few months?

**DA:** Before coming to Cardiff, I spent a few days in Bristol doing recordings with my friend Marc Yeats. We spent a huge amount of time working on a remarkable solo piece with two bass drums called *Prorrhesis*, which sets new challenges in playing. We also recorded *Ethos* which was written for the BTS event 2012 and premiered in Cardiff. On the second day I did some recordings for my own pleasure, like *The Up and Down Man* and *Trombonist from Hell*. We also did a small opera which was written for me with the title *Tromb(o) n per(a) Dirk*. Earlier this year I did a world first performance in the Ukraine, in the Kiev and Odessa Festival, of a piece called *About the Kingfisher and the Rat*, composed by Thomas Lauck, and written for trombone, piano and several many side instruments. Recently I also played a solo on a cornet for the first time in my life, right before a trombone piece. That was also by Thomas Lauck, and was called

*Kurzbiografie* (it is also on YouTube). In July 2012 I toured South East Asia with my duo partner Jürg Henneberger as 'Duo Amrein/Henneberger', and in September we went going to Brazil. In these tours we premièred pieces from Chung Shih Hoh (Singapore), Neo Naiwen (Malaysia), Luiz Casteloes (Brazil), Fred Carrilho (Brazil) and Denny Euprasert (Thailand).

**PC:** What led you to the avant-garde music you play and what are its attractions and challenges?

**DA:** I studied in Basel, which was a good place for contemporary music and it still is, but at that time no trombone player was willing to spend time working on such pieces. So I had the challenge to do all that, which helped me work on techniques others don't have and it also put me in contact with a lot of interesting players and composers. It certainly helped my ability to sight-read!

One attraction of contemporary music, especially solo music, is that you can show all colours and timbres of the trombone. You're not counting 100 bars and then playing three notes, which does happen at times and seemed to me very boring. I'm not so patient and my mind has to be fully occupied by the music I play. For example, I find it impossible to read a book for relaxation when I am working on some new music. I like to be totally focussed. Another attraction of contemporary music I have now is the pleasure of working with a lot of composers all around the world who want to explore the trombone and the possibilities for the musicians who play it. Every composer has a different imagination for the instrument and it's potential. I try to satisfy all this, which is a big challenge.

**PC:** How do you prepare such pieces as you played in Cardiff, pieces like *The Up and Down Man* or *The Trombonist from Hell*? - do you start with the composer? The techniques? The notes on the page? The challenge in a solo recital of contemporary music is first the huge register and then

the multitasking - the acting, singing, shouting, speaking - almost any effect that is possible on or with a trombone. That is what can make a solo recital on a brass instrument so exciting as it is like a concert by a whole group.

*The Up and Down Man* is one of my personal favourites and the BTS event was the place to present it. It is actually recorded by Albert Mangelsdorff, so I started with his interpretation. *Trombonist from Hell* is an enormous challenge and has not been played by someone else so far. It's had more than 80,000 hits on YouTube since I played it for the first time, which is kind of astonishing as it is very serious music. When I first started on it I had a computer version - I just had to do the work on it which, for *Trombonist from Hell*, is a lot.

As you can see from the score it is rhythmically it is quite complex, there's no time to breathe, no time to relax and the tempo is so fast that you cannot follow it with your eyes. It is an extremely energetic piece and any pause or break would spoil its sense and musical meaning. So it's just a matter of working away it, section by section, until the pieces fit.

**PC:** You have taken the trombone in new directions - are there other projects you are working on at present, or other directions you could see trombone music going?

**DA:** Yes there are still many things to come. I have a new work on the bass trombone for example, *Orare*, which will be quite a shock. I think the trombone is the most versatile instrument next to the voice, so multiphonics will surely open the world of sound for the trombone. They should be used much more in contemporary music and not be so limited - they are so far from the so-called classical contemporary composers. Adding voice, sounds, texts and videos makes the performance much more interesting. I have also started to improvise freely with an artist to create artworks. I am very pleased to see that the young people enjoy this opening of the trombone world.