

## A Newly Discovered Correspondence of Vincent Bach

Edward H. Tarr

In the *ITG Journal* of December 1994,<sup>1</sup> André Smith published an extensive article on the early career of Vincent Bach, who had been born in Baden near Vienna on 24 March 1890 and died in New York on 8 January 1976. While living in Austria he toured extensively as a cornet soloist, as far away as Russia and Great Britain, in 1910 also obtaining a diploma in mechanical engineering. As is well known, he arrived in the United States in September 1914. In 1919 he set up a small shop in New York City, first to make mouthpieces. In 1922 he moved to a new location where he had ten employees, and two years later he started to make complete brass instruments, initially trumpets and cornets. From 1928 to 1952, in still another location, he had fifty employees and added trombones to his offerings. In 1953 he established a factory in Mount Vernon, New York. In September 1961 he sold his business to the H. & A. Selmer Company, who moved it to Elkhart, Indiana four years later.<sup>2</sup>

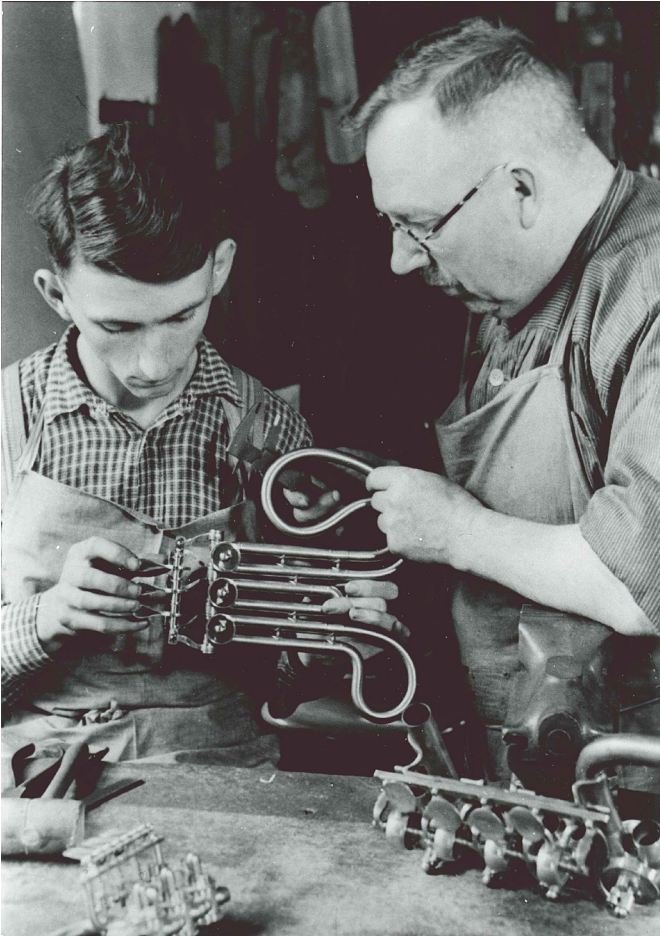
Bach's wife Esther (1900–82), whom he had married in 1925, was supportive of his manufacturing and business activities. Her diaries are full of references to his performances as a cornet soloist (often with herself at the piano) and to his business activities. Smith's article included enlightening excerpts from these diaries from 1927 through 1935.<sup>3</sup>

From late August to early September 1934, the Bachs must have been in Europe. Their initial stop must have been Moscow, where Vincent deposited a trumpet and a trombone for testing by Prof. Mikhail Innokentyevich Tabakov, the first trumpeter of the Bolshoy opera house.<sup>4</sup> They also visited the city of Markneukirchen in Saxony, internationally renowned for its musical instrument making.<sup>5</sup> In the diary excerpts transmitted by Smith, there is a gap between 14 August and 15 October.

Three letters written by Vincent Bach during this gap survive. They were addressed to the Markneukirchen brass instrument maker and rotary-valve specialist Martin Albert Carl Peter (1882–1945). In these letters, Bach ordered rotary valves for horns, quick-change valves for trumpets, and thumb valves for bass trombones. At that time he was apparently not in a position to manufacture such components himself.

Martin Peter came from Johannegeorgenstadt, a Saxon town about one hundred miles from Markneukirchen. The reputation of the latter city for musical instrument making—comparable with that of Elkhart, Indiana, in the United States—led him to move there in 1894 to start an apprenticeship with the brass instrument maker August Richard Weller, which he finished three years later. After working for his teacher and for various other Markneukirchen firms as a journeyman, in 1909 he made a decision that was to have important consequences for him: he learned to make rotary valves. In 1911, having obtained his trade license in both instrument and rotary-valve making, he founded his own firm. At the time of this writing the firm is thus one hundred years old! In 1924 he bought a house of his own; even today the workshop is on the ground floor,

with living quarters above. Today it is occupied by his grandson Martin Peter Jr. and his wife Christa. Peter Sr. quickly gained an international reputation as a maker of rotary valves, later of brass instruments, particularly trumpets. Exportation of rotary valves to the USA was by no means unusual in the early twentieth century, since many American instrument makers and orchestral brass players were of European origin. It was normal for them to order components and even entire instruments from the Old World. As long as American companies, such as that of Bach, made instruments with rotary valves, they ordered them from Markneukirchen (see further below). Carl Geyer (1880–1973), the



**Figure 1:** Martin Peter Sr. (on the right) with journeyman Gerhard Krauss, who later became mayor of Landwüst (now deceased), working on a rotary-valve assembly for a horn, ca. 1936–38. Photo by Erich Schneider of Adorf, Vogtland; provided by Enrico Weller, Markneukirchen. Courtesy of Martin Peter Jr.

renowned Chicago horn maker, who like Martin Peter came from Johanngeorgenstadt and also trained in Markneukirchen before moving to the United States in 1904, continued to order horn valves from his friend Peter during his entire life. Their abundant exchange of letters shall be the subject of a future article.

Martin Peter's eldest son Curt Albert Peter (1904–75) took over the firm in 1946 upon his return home from military service. He was joined in 1952 by his younger brother Gerhard Horst Peter (1919–2004). Both sons continued their father's double specialization.

The same is true of grandson Martin Peter Jr. (b. 1938), who is still active. In 1952–55 he first learned to make rotary valves, then in 1955–58, brass instruments. In 1958 he worked for Karl Knoth, a noted trumpet maker, before entering the family business in 1959 and obtaining his trade license in 1960, fifty-one years ago. In 1964, during the Socialist regime, most firms like that of the Peter brothers with its twelve workers were absorbed into larger ones, such as Sinfonia. In 1972 Sinfonia became completely state-owned under the name VEB Blechblas- und Signalinstrumentenfabrik (People's Own Brass and Signal Instrument Factory). Peter Jr. was able to circumvent such nationalization in 1964 by establishing his own one-man firm, which was too small to be incorporated into the large one. In 1971 he ceased the production of horns, continuing to make rotary-valved trumpets in all pitches from B $\flat$  to piccolo B $\flat$ . In 1976, after a gruelling examination, he



**Figure 2:** Martin Peter Jr. and his wife Christa in their workshop, 1997.  
Photo by Enrico Weller, courtesy of Martin Peter Jr.



Let Vincent Bach speak for himself. Here follow translations of his letters to Peter Sr., three in all. (A fourth written during this period does not survive.)

[1] 7 September 1934. Written by hand on stationery of North German Lloyd steamship line from Bremen, on the ship named *Bremen*. [See facsimile of both sides, Figure 3.]

Dear Mr. Peter

Concerning the horn valves that I ordered from you, I want also to request you to add two dozen quick-change valves for trumpet to the sample shipment. They should be of nickel and [have] an inside diameter of 11.75 mm, with a spring under the pointer—[ed. note: here there is a sketch]—so that it does not leave its position by itself. Please add screws at the end of the position[s], so that the pointer cannot be turned farther; also next to the screws [add] the initials A (when it is turned to A) and B when turned to B $\flat$ —as in the previous sketch.

We could also use 6 more such quick-change valves with bent ears as [in] the following sketch, so that the tubing leads down to a line [corresponding] approximately [to] the lower [edge] of the valve caps. [sketch]

For these please use thick tubing that does not wear down easily. I also emphasize that the valves must be as airtight as possible.

Awaiting your shipment soon, I remain

With the highest respect

Your

Vincent Bach

621 E. 216<sup>th</sup> Str.

New York City

[2] 11 October 1934. Typed on stationery of the Vincent Bach Corporation, Musical Instruments and Mouthpieces, 216th St. & Bronx Blvd., New York, U. S. A.

to Mr. Martin Peter

Kirchsteig 437<sup>9</sup>

Markneukirchen i[n] S[axony]

Dear Mr. Peter

During my stay in Markneukirchen I gave you a sample order for horn valves—as well as for quick-change valves for trumpet (measuring 11.75 mm) and for thumb valves for bass trombone.

[It is] especially the thumb valves that I need as soon as possible, since we recently received larger orders for these bass trombones. When you send me the samples [that I] ordered, please include a note on which you indicate precisely which model it is, [respectively,] so that with future orders I receive exactly the same.

I need these bass trombone thumb valves in three dimensions—perhaps you can send me several of each dimension right away.

Narrow bore: 14.3 mm

Medium bore: 14.8 mm

Large bore: 15.1 mm

Please be sure that the inner diameter is not narrower and thereby hinders a free air passage.

In case you can provide these with brazed changes, I would prefer them—also with nickel housings. As far as I remember, you had such thumb valves with [a] nickel key (not with leather strips), and these I would like to have with a short distance between the two positions when the valve is activated. Please also send me pictures of rotary valves of C and B $\flat$  trumpets (with indications of their dimensions) that are most in use in Germany.

Awaiting your shipment soon, I greet you  
most heartily

Your

Vincent Bach [signature]

VINCENT BACH CORPORATION

Pres[ident]

VB/E

[3] 4 November 1934. Letter, now lost.

[4] 5 November 1934. Written by hand on stationery of the Vincent Bach Corporation, as above.

Dear Mr. Peter

Enclosed [please find] the sketch that should have been enclosed in yesterday's letter.

Best greetings

Bach

On the reverse side there is a sketch made on 14 October 1934 [see facsimile, Figure 4]. Here follows the English translation, line for line.

THUMB VALVE FOR BASS TROMBONE IN B $\flat$   
MADE OF NICKEL WITH BRAZED CHANGE

Tube thickness 0.65 mm or thicker

Wing in normal position  
(straight air passage)

Wing provided with threads in American inches  
into which the following screw fits

[Here there is the sketch of the screw, with dimensions]

Dimensions:	14.3 mm	} INSIDE DIAMETER THROUGH THE CHANGE NOT NARROWER
	14.8 mm	
	15.1 mm	

THE CHANGE SHOULD BE MADE<sup>10</sup> AS AIRTIGHT AS POSSIBLE  
EVEN THOUGH THE VALVE TURNS WITH DIFFICULTY

VINCENT BACH CORP.  
NEW YORK  
Vincent Bach [signature]  
OCT 14. 1934

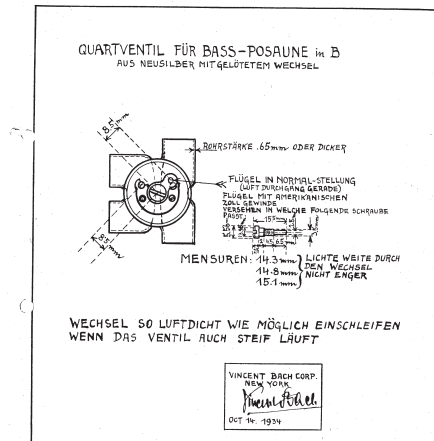


Figure 4: Letter no. 4, from 5 November 1934, reverse side with detailed sketch.

These letters disprove Smith's statement that valve assemblies purchased from Bach's lifelong friend E. K. Blessing are "the only known component[s] of Bach's trumpets that he acquired complete from outside."<sup>11</sup> It is not correct that "Bach eventually dispensed with sub-contracting altogether and made all of the components of his instruments." Bach continued to subcontract for components of his instruments as need and opportunities arose. A few instances can be documented. It is known that he ordered 375 valve sets in the late 1930s from an unknown manufacturer and a similar number from the Frank Company in the mid 1950s. All of these valve sets were used on his Mercury instruments. While the number of Mercury components (bells, valve sets) made by other manufacturers is large, these valve sets represent only about thirty percent of the total used on Mercury instruments. The rest were made at the Bach plant.<sup>12</sup>

Bach researcher Roy Hempley reports having gone through most of Bach's archives currently owned by Conn-Selmer, Inc., and finding mention of a wide range of items manufactured by other companies, including brass made in France and Germany. Most of these items appear in small quantities, meaning that Bach probably found them of little enduring use to his business.<sup>13</sup>

In addition, Smith states that "the first known reference of Bach's interest in a bass trombone" dates from a diary entry of 16 October 1934.<sup>14</sup> However, the first of Bach's surviving letters to Peter shows that his interest must be dated at least five weeks earlier, if not more. These and other letters testify to the numerous stimulating business exchanges between Markneukirchen and other countries before the outbreak of World War II.

*Edward H. Tarr is a pioneer in the reintroduction of historical brass instruments and has made over 100 LP and CD recordings on Baroque trumpet, Romantic trumpet in low F, and cornetto, while not neglecting the modern instrument. He is an advisor to several musical instrument makers (R. Egger in Basel and Yamaha) and has produced scholarly editions of several trumpet concerti. For The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, first and second editions (London 1980 and 2001), he wrote more than seventy articles. His book, The Trumpet (Chandler AZ: Hickman Music Editions, 2008), is now in its third edition.*

*Tarr taught from 1972 to 2001 at the Basel Academy of Music (Musikhochschule and Schola Cantorum Basiliensis) and was director of the Bad Säckingen Trumpet Museum from 1985 to 2004. He presently holds a professorship in the Karlsruhe College of Music (Musikhochschule). He has been a duo partner with organist-pianist Irmtraud Tarr since 1980.*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> "The Life and Work of Vincent Bach (*née* Vincenz Schrottenbach) 1890–1976[:] The Early Years to World War II," *International Trumpet Guild Journal* 19, no. 2 (December 1994): 4–35. Its title contains an unfortunate misspelling that is repeated throughout the article: Schrottenbach's first name was not "Vincenz," but rather "Vinzenz," the common German spelling, as can easily be seen from his signature on the rail pass reproduced at the top left of page 10. (To be sure, spelling was



not standardized then, and the version with “c” can sometimes be found in other contemporary documents.) Readers conversant with French will also notice that *née* is the feminine form; *né* would be correct. A second essay by Smith, “The Life and Work of Vincent Bach (1890–1976): 1941–1976 (and Beyond),” appeared in *idem*, 19, no. 3 (February 1995): 4–34. In the present article all references to Smith’s article on “The Life and Work” denote the one from 1994.

<sup>2</sup> See *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn., ed. Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell (New York / London: Macmillan, 2001), s.v. “Bach, Vincent,” by Edward H. Tarr.

<sup>3</sup> Smith, “Life and Work,” 19–30. Smith, who had access to the diaries, did not mention their location in his article. In footnote 2 on p. 31 he mentions that his two essays on Bach were supplemented by “an extensive collection of memorabilia in the possession of his family and other interested persons;” and several photographs in his article bear the name of their location, “Bach Family Collection.” This collection is not in the possession of the Bachs’ daughter, Nancy Jallade, but rather has been with Smith himself since 1994.

<sup>4</sup> The Bachs’ visit to Russia was explained in Gary Gardner Fladmoe’s Ed.D. dissertation, *The Contributions to Brass Instrument Manufacturing of Vincent Bach, Carl Geyer, and Renold Schilke* (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1975): 51, derived from Bach’s autobiography, *Musicus vacabundus* (currently unavailable), 118–19. Bach had been made aware of the presence in the United States of a Russian delegation seeking top grade brass instruments. “Since the Russians had already departed on their return to Russia, Bach determined that he would follow them and show them his instruments. It would also provide him with the chance to return to Baden and introduce Esther to his mother and other relatives.” It was not until more than a year later that, to his great surprise, he received an order for thirty-six trumpets and trombones from Russia. The Russian episode is missing from Smith, “Life and Work.”

<sup>5</sup> In *ibid.*, 31, Smith states that the Bachs visited Austria in 1934 and 1937. Markneukirchen, however, is not in Austria; it is in the Vogtland region of Germany, only two or three kilometers from the Czech border. The nearest large cities are Dresden in Saxony and Graslitz in Czechia.

<sup>6</sup> Biographical information on Martin Peter Sr. and Jr. was kindly provided by Martin Peter Jr. during the preparation of this article (January and February 2011). See also Enrico Weller, “‘Ich lebe halt für die Zylindertrompete’: Traditionen des vogtländischen Zylindermaschinen und -trompetenbaus in der Werkstatt Martin Peter, Markneukirchen,” *Instrumentenbau-Zeitschrift* 7–8 (1997): 7–13.

<sup>7</sup> For further information concerning the firm, its history, and its offerings, please refer to the website [www.peter-trompeten.de](http://www.peter-trompeten.de).

<sup>8</sup> In addition, the main book of correspondence to and from Peter and his immediate successors between 1935 and 1964 contains letters from no fewer than ninety-four German firms. Today both groups of letters, domestic and foreign, are deposited in the Markneukirchen Musical Instrument Museum.

<sup>9</sup> Bach used the old house number, 437. In 1930 the city assigned new numbers, street for street, thus the number 5, which is valid still today.

<sup>10</sup> *Einschleifen* = “ground” or “polished.”

<sup>11</sup> Smith, “Life and Work,” 30.

<sup>12</sup> Concerning the 375 valve sets in the late 1930s, see Roy Hempley and Doug Lehrer, “Bach’s Rotary Valve Trumpets,” a chapter in Conn-Selmer Inc.’s important website, [www.bachbrass.com/bachology](http://www.bachbrass.com/bachology). I learned about the valve sets from the Frank Co. in an e-mail from Hempley (4 March 2011). Hempley and I were brought together by David Hickman, who is preparing a biographical article on Vincent Bach for his book *Trumpet Greats* (Chandler, Arizona: Hickman Music Editions).

<sup>13</sup> Hempley, e-mails (4 and 6 March 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Smith, “Life and Work,” 29.

