

About Pitch (Part 2)

The following examples give further implications of consequence of context. They are known from either instruments that survive or documented sources, including composer's manuscripts of their compositions.

In England during the reign of Elizabeth I, accepted standard domestic pitch was about 3 semitones lower than it is today. If we were to play or sing from the original notation of the period, we would in effect be singing or playing the notes at a much higher pitch than the composer originally intended them to be heard. This can be established by examining the domestic keyboard instruments of the day (the *virginals*) and deriving a 'stringing schedule' whereby the density and tension of each string, according to its required length, can be worked out. To confuse things, the pitch at which English church choirs sang was more than two semitones higher than it is today. A discrepancy of about 5 semitones (which did not involve any transposition!), therefore, between what happened at home and what happened at church!

A similar situation existed in Germany where a high pitch (*Chorton*) existed for church music. JJ Quantz, whose remarkable instruction book for playing the flute tells us abundantly more than its title promises, alerts us to the fact that this *Chorton* had found favour in Germany for 'some centuries', and that the organs that had been around for sometime proved this. (JS Bach's organs at Weimar and Leipzig were at a scarily high $a' = c480\text{Hz!}$)

Quantz helpfully goes on to say that most other bowed and blown instruments had also conformed to this high pitch standard but that the French, who apart from spreading their sense of etiquette across Europe, had improved the functioning of woodwind instruments, adopting a lower pitch ($a' = 410\text{Hz}$). As a result, this chamber pitch (*Kammerton*) came to be used for blown instruments.

If one takes a look at Bach's choral works, one will see how he scores his vocal parts, string instruments and organ at the *Chorton* (string instruments could use thinner strings to achieve this high pitch) and the other instruments at the *Kammerton*. Thus, we may find in some cantata that string instruments and organ play in the key of A or Bb major, whilst the wind and brass play in the key of C (again, nothing to do with transposing instruments). The exact amount of discrepancy between the notated parts depended upon the organ and church in which the performance took place. In view of the several pitches used by Bach, it is impossible to suggest any general rule as to the pitch at which his music should be performed today.

With respect to Handel, however, we can be a little more precise. Both his pitch pipe and tuning fork (invented by John Shore, London, 1711) still exist - at $a' = 422.5\text{ Hz}$. It may be concluded that Handel's pitch was in general use as the high pitch and something like the French low pitch was the common standard for wind instruments.

During the following century, as performance spaces became larger, and the fashion for a brighter sound with better projection was desired, a single pitch system become the norm whereby anything from $a' = 415\text{Hz}$ to $a' = 435\text{Hz}$ could be found, depending on context: time and place. How fortunate we are now that standardisation has taken place, meaning that wherever a musician travels or plays, he or she can have a reasonable expectation of agreement on pitch. The present standard of $a' = 440$ vibrations per second (Hertz) was set as recently as 1955 by the International Organisation for Standardisation.

Just to keep the perplexity ongoing, however, current day Historically Informed Performers generally play Baroque music at $a' = 415\text{Hz}$ and Classical Era music at $a' = 430\text{Hz}$.

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NEWS Salut!

February 2010

Welcome to Salut's 15th year



2010 celebrates Salut Baroque's 15th year of presenting subscription series concerts in Canberra and Sydney and the recent release of our 7th CD, "*Italians Abroad*". Salut! is proud to have made an important contribution over this period to Early Music in Australia and provided the opportunity for Australia's finest performers to present baroque music. A very special thanks to all of you – our subscribers, donors and supporters for your concert attendance, encouragement and support as we celebrate 15 years of presenting "The Best of Baroque". We look forward to seeing you at our concerts this year.

Our concert theme for 2010 is "**Inspirations: Travellers Abroad**", exploring the richness of baroque music by resourceful composers and musicians who travelled far and wide to seek out new musical styles. We also wish to thank artsACT and the Australia Council for the Arts for their continuing support for this series.



The Baroque Oboe

We are delighted to welcome back Jane Downer for our February concert. Jane will be performing the beautiful Albinoni Concerto in D minor for oboe Op. 9, No. 2, as well as playing music by Schickhardt on both oboe and recorder. In the following article, Jane explains the development of the Baroque Oboe and its contribution to baroque music.

THE BAROQUE OBOE: In the medieval and renaissance periods, double-reed wind instruments such as curtals, shawms and crumhorns possessed a declamatory character suitable for outdoor use. Designed chiefly for ceremonial purposes, they also functioned in a liturgical capacity to reinforce choral lines. As the 17th century progressed, stringed instruments attained a degree of refinement suitable for domestic music-making which was lacking amongst the winds. Developments were initiated most conspicuously at the court of King Louis XIV of France, whose outdoor musical events were often accompanied by Les Grandes Hautbois du Roi. A design of oboe acceptable for indoor recreation was initially met by the Hotterre, Philidor and Chedeville families of woodwind players, with further centres of woodwind instrument-making becoming established elsewhere in Europe. Thus the refined form of the french wooden “hautbois” (the name referring to its high pitch) was developed from the treble shawm, a one-piece, wide-bored instrument with irregularly-spaced finger holes and a coarse sound. Lully wrote for this new oboe in the 1650s, while the shawm (also termed “hautbois”, confusingly!) continued to execute its habitual role.

Baroque oboes were most commonly crafted from boxwood, although fruit woods such as pear, cherry and maple were also used, with some oboes constructed out of ebony and ivory and highly decorated. The instrument’s distinctive sound arose from a narrower bore and undercutting of smaller tone holes. Made in three joints, it had three keys: an extension key for the bottom (middle) C, and a D# / Eb key, duplicated, as the left and right hands were interchangeable in those days. It had a compass of two octaves and more accurately-arranged finger holes with some twin holes to assist the production of certain chromatic notes. A generally more refined standard of workmanship gave it a wider dynamic range and greater expressive power. The system of cross fingerings (covering of holes beneath an open one, as on the recorder) provided variety in tonal colour, a characterful contrasting of light and shade which was thought well of in the Baroque era. According to the oboe instruction book, *The Sprightly Companion*, published in England in 1695, the hautbois “with a good Reed” (naturally!) has “Inimitable charming Sweetness of Sound”.

It was adopted for both military and orchestral purposes, becoming the most important wind instrument throughout the course of the 18th century. During this time, the oboe’s appearance remained virtually unchanged, although there were significant advances in the music for which it was used, as composers exploited the virtuosity of leading contemporary players and challenged their technical limitations. Chromatic keys started to be added at the whim of individual players. The Classical period saw a narrower bore, higher pitch and the gradual addition of keys which allowed greater technical facility and the ability to play in more remote tonalities. By the 1830s, growing orchestral forces necessitated a higher degree of mechanical complexity, and a considerable change in the sound of the

woodwind section as a whole. Comparatively, the 20th century represents a period of stagnation in European wind organology. Today, a keyed “Viennese” oboe which retains the essential bore and tonal characteristics of the early oboe is still used in Vienna and some parts of Europe.

JS Bach, in particular, wrote extensively for the oboe and larger members of the oboe family in nearly all his church cantatas. The **oboe d’amore** traces its ancestry to the alto Pommer or shawm. Only slightly longer than the ordinary oboe (sounding a minor 3rd lower), it is distinguished by a bulbous-shaped bell and a mellower tone. Bach often used the d’amore as an obbligato instrument to accompany soprano arias. Other composers associated with Leipzig in the early 1700s, including Fasch and Telemann, also wrote music for the oboe d’amore and oboe da caccia. The design of these instruments was the possible result of a collaboration between Bach and JH Eichentopf, a well-known wind instrument maker working in Leipzig.

Different types of tenor oboe in a variety of shapes also survive from the Baroque era. The **Vox humana**, a long, straight tenor in F, had a brief existence primarily in England and Italy, before it was supplanted by the English Horn. The **taille de hautbois** was another straight-tubed instrument used in oboe bands to play the inner lines of polyphonic compositions. Bach sometimes employed a third oboe or taille to double the viola parts in his cantatas.

The **oboe da caccia**, meaning “hunting oboe”, differs from the other oboes due to its construction and curious design. Possibly the adaptation of a brass instrument, cuts were made in the wooden body so that it could be bent into a semicircular shape over steam. The incisions were then filled and the curved section was covered with leather to both disguise and seal the gaps. The instrument terminates in a large flared bell made of either brass or wood, similar to the bell of a french horn. It produces a soft-toned, plaintive sound and Bach often used it with boy sopranos, flutes or recorders. The distinctive qualities of the oboe da caccia are also reflected in the aria texts with which Bach associates the instrument. In the Passions the da caccia accompanies expressions of grief and anguish, as well as steadfast faith. Classical models of this instrument tended to be angled rather than curved. It is from this bent specimen that the cor anglais (a corruption of cor anglé), or English Horn gets its name, with the bell scaled down to the size of an egg.

An interest in authentic performance practice which began in the last century resulted in replicas of old instruments being made. And so it is that the baroque oboe d’amore and oboe da caccia are better known around the world today than during Bach’s time. This century, performers have demonstrated how beautiful these historic instruments can sound, thus invalidating Vaughan Williams’ description in 1954 of the “coarse tone and asthmatic phrasing of Bach’s oboe”!

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