

IV.

NOTES ON "THREE BASSOONS" IN THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF ANTIQUITIES OF SCOTLAND. BY LYNDESAY G. LANGWILL, C.A.

On inspection, these old instruments are found to be two Bassoons and a "Bass Recorder" or "Bass Flûte Douce." The following description, considered in conjunction with the illustrations showing both the back and the front of the instruments, will enable us to form a fairly accurate estimate of the age of these exhibits.

The Bassoon (Fr. *Basson*, Span. *Bajon*, German *Fagott*, Ital. *Fagotto*) is the modern survival of the German Bass-Pommer of the sixteenth century, having evolved through the intermediary form known as the Dulzian. The distinguishing features of the modern bassoon are (1) the conical tube of 8 feet, doubled back in U-fashion for convenience of handling, (2) the sound-producing medium—a large double-reed, and (3) the bent S-shaped metal "crook" to which the reed is affixed. It was first introduced into the orchestra *circa* 1674 by Lully. By way of comparison, a modern orchestral 20-keyed "Buffet" bassoon (French) is shown alongside the Museum exhibits (fig. 1 (a) and fig. 2 (a)).

While it is unfortunate that we know nothing of the history of these two bassoons, it is possible they were in local use in the City of Edinburgh. Sir John Dalrymple in his scholarly *Musical Memoirs of Scotland* (1849), p. 163, refers to the use of the "double curtle" in "the good town's music" in Edinburgh in 1696, when John Munroe and Malcolm McGibbon were found "complete masters of playing upon the French hautboyes and double curtle." (*Edinburgh Town Council Register*, vol. xl.

¹ *Scotsman*, 1st August 1930.

fol. 223; vol. xxxiii. fol. 97; vol. xxx. fol. 249.) Now the double curtle or curtle—for the word “double” refers merely to lower pitch—was no other than the bassoon of the seventeenth and eighteenth century. An English account and illustration of the “double curtail” appears in Randle Holmes’ MS. “Academy of Armoury,” *circa* 1688 (British Museum), and shows the instrument to be a bassoon of primitive design. References to the curtall—the spelling varies considerably—are frequent in the second half of the seventeenth century—*e.g.* Lord Chamberlain’s Records in 1662, 1663, and 1669. Is it not possible therefore that these two old bassoons were in use by the Waits of Edinburgh during the eighteenth century?

LT. 8.—Bassoon of sycamore (?) wood, brass bound and six brass keys. The “crook” is wanting. The “wing” or tenor “joint” is interesting in having two sections fitted together. The uppermost section, into which the crook would be fitted, used to be made in different lengths, interchangeable to suit requirements of pitch.

The front of this bassoon (fig. 1 (*b*)) shows: in the wing, three finger-holes for the left hand, in the “butt” (lowest section of the instrument), three finger-holes for the right hand, and, in addition, there have been two keys operated by the little finger of the right hand for the notes F and G \sharp . (Unfortunately the key for the latter is now wanting.)

The back view (fig. 2 (*b*)) shows that there have been on the “long joint” (lying adjacent to the “wing”) keys for low B \flat_1 (now wanting) and low D, both operated by the left thumb for which the thumb-hole for low C lies between the keys mentioned. A third key operated by the left thumb is that for E \flat . On the butt is the right thumb-hole for low E and the key lying closely adjacent for F \sharp . On the brass “mount” at the top of the butt is the usual ring to which a swivel from a neck-sling can be attached. The brass “shoe” at the foot of the butt contains the usual cork plug forming the intercommunicating channel between the twin bores in the “U” section of the instrument.

Height of the instrument, 4 feet 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

This bassoon would appear to belong to the second half of the eighteenth century.

LT. 9.—Bassoon of sycamore (?) wood, brass bound, with four brass keys and brass crook. The wing here is of one piece.

The front view (fig. 1 (*c*)) shows: in the wing, three finger-holes for the left hand; in the butt, three finger-holes for the right hand, and, in addition, two keys operated by the little finger of the same hand for the notes F and G \sharp , the former of which in its normal position is an “open” key, while the latter is a “closed” one.

The back view (fig. 2 (*c*)) shows it to be of earlier date than *LT. 8.* On

the long joint we see the keys for low $B\flat_1$ and D (the head of the key in both cases being broken off), and the left thumb-hole for low C lying between the keys mentioned. There is no key for $E\flat$, nor on the butt

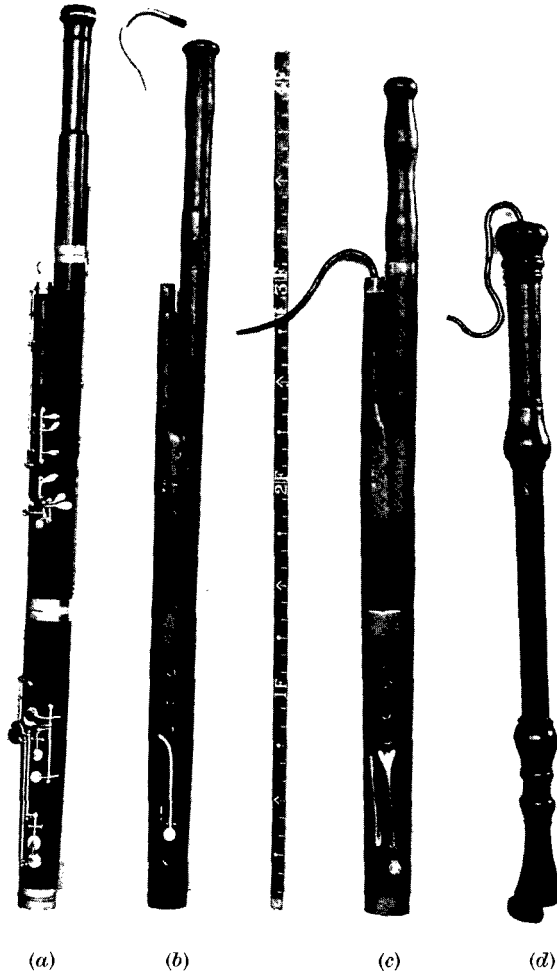


Fig. 1. Three Bassoons (front view) and Bass Recorder (back view).

is there the usual key for $F\sharp$, but merely the right thumb-hole. The same remarks as in *LT.* 8, concerning the brass mount on the butt, the swivel ring, and cork base-plug, apply here. Height of the instrument, 4 feet $\frac{1}{2}$ inch. The top section, termed the "bell" joint, shows outwardly

a pronounced bulbous contour which is typical of bassoons by the celebrated London maker Stanesby Junior (died 1754), at least two of whose bassoons known to the writer are engraved with years 1739 and 1747



Fig. 2. Three Bassoons (back view) and Bass Recorder (front view).

respectively, and have the same four keys as the present exhibit. The stage of development in key equipment also suggests that this bassoon dates from about 1740. A bassoon with the four keys here present is depicted in the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and D'Alembert (Paris, 1751-65),

and in the Museum of the Brussels Conservatoire there is a bassoon stamped "G. de Bruijn, 1730," on which the same four keys are found. (*Catalogue descriptif et analytique du Musée instrumentale du Conservatoire Royal de Musique de Bruxelles*, vol. ii. (1909) No. 997.)

The keys for low E_b and $F\sharp$ on exhibit *LT. 8* appear first towards the end of the eighteenth century, and early in the nineteenth century we invariably find "octave keys" present on the wing joint—these keys, as their name denotes, being designed to facilitate the production of the higher register of the bassoon.

No monograph as yet exists upon the bassoon, with the exception of *Der Fagott* by W. Heckel (Leipzig, 1931), 44 pp., illustrated. The present writer has prepared an English translation, which Herr Heckel hopes to publish shortly.

LT. 10.—Bass Recorder of wood with brass crook and single brass key (fig. 1 (*d*) and fig. 2 (*d*)). This is rather a rare specimen of the recorder family—now obsolete, although admirable work has been accomplished in its resuscitation by the celebrated and talented Dolmetsch family. Bass recorders were not made after about 1730, but are now being made in quantities on the Continent where recorder quartets have become the vogue. The recorder of Shakespearean times, beloved of Samuel Pepys, was characterized by its weak but sweet and soft tone, and acoustically it belongs to the whistle variety of sounding tubes, with inverted conical bore—in the present case the diameter of the bore diminishes as follows:—

At the plug immediately above the notch or fipple . . .	$1\frac{7}{16}$ inch.
At the top of the middle joint	$1\frac{1}{4}$ "
At the foot of the middle joint	1 "

and the bore is slightly widened at the bell.

The word "Recorder" arises from the use of the verb "to record" in Elizabethan times in the sense "to sing" or "to warble," specially for the singing of birds and thence to human music-making. Chaucer uses the term "doucet" and distinguishes it from "rede" ("House of Fame," II. 1220/1). The distinguishing feature of the recorders is thus the whistle notch or "fipple" against which the breath is deflected and divided, thereby setting the air-column in vibration. In the bass recorder, the total length, $39\frac{9}{16}$ inches, would render manipulation of the finger-holes difficult were the player to blow directly into the upper end. Accordingly, a short S-shaped crook—not unlike that of the bassoon—was fitted, the present specimen having a brass crook of $\frac{1}{4}$ inch internal diameter, bent, however, into a more pronounced S-shape than usual. The crook, it must be noted, does not compose

part of the vibrating air-column which, of course, commences *below* the notch or fipple. The bore of the recorder constitutes a truncated inverted cone with six finger-holes in front and a thumb-hole, for the left thumb, behind. The bass recorder has also a single "open" brass key, which, when closed by the little finger of the right hand, gives an additional low note, termed the "bell" note, since the sound so produced emanates from the "bell" or lower orifice of the instrument—in this specimen unfortunately worm-eaten. In the recorder, the bell is so shaped merely for ornament, for the bore penetrating it remains uniform to the end. It is remarkable to observe the stretch of fingers required for such an instrument. The interval between the middle of the first and second, and the middle of the second and third holes of each group of three is $1\frac{3}{4}$ inch—quite a considerable stretch. The thumb-hole is $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in diameter. This instrument dates probably from about 1700. The recorder, and indeed the whole family of *flûtes-a-bec*, was displaced by the German flutes (*flûtes traversières*) about the time of Händel, and the only surviving representative is the humble "penny-whistle" and the rarer "English flageolet."¹

¹ Welch, C., "The Literature of the Recorder," *Proceedings, Musical Association*, 1897-8; London, 1898. Welch, C., "Hamlet and the Recorder," *Proceedings, Musical Association*, 1901-2; London, 1902. Welch, C., *Six Lectures on the Recorder*; London, 1911. Bridge, J. C., "The Chester Recorders," *Proceedings, Musical Association*, 1900-1; London, 1901. Galpin, Rev. Canon F. W., *Old English Instruments of Music*, 3rd ed., 1932, for the earlier history of the Recorder.