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Niall O'Loughlin

## The recorder in 20th-century music

The falling into disuse of the recorder during the 18th century must have been a gradual process. For many years the flute and recorder existed side by side and in numerous works they were specified as acceptable alternatives. Yet by the early Classical period, the flute had completely superseded the recorder, which had become almost a museum piece. The rekindling of interest in the recorder in the last years of the 19th century and the early years of the 20th was similarly gradual. It was initiated by J.C. Bridge, who discovered the Chester recorders,<sup>1</sup> by C. Welch, who made extensive research into the instrument's background,<sup>2</sup> and by Canon Galpin, who learnt how to play the instrument and who encouraged others to do so. The culmination of all this activity was the work of Arnold Dolmetsch who, after discovering the necessary manufacturing techniques, proceeded to make his own instruments.

While the aim of all this work was principally to make it possible to perform early music on the instruments for which it had been written, it was almost inevitable that what had started as an attempt at authenticity would also create a new medium for original 20th-century music. The leading players, at first Dolmetsch himself, then later his son Carl and many others, stimulated the composition of new pieces. Another movement followed with the realization that the recorder could be studied to a modest standard with eminently satisfactory results by school-children. This trend, initiated in England by Edgar Hunt, has produced a large number of capable players interested in exploring recorder music. Similar activity started in Germany and later elsewhere.

At first the new pieces tended to be imitations of the style of the Baroque sonata or suite, and were usually scored for treble recorder and keyboard (normally piano). Typical examples of these are the partita by Franz Reizenstein, with its modern reinterpretations of 17th- and 18th-century dances, a suite by Antony Hopkins, in the normal form of the 18th-century sonata, and two works by Robin Milford, *Three Airs* and a sonatina. These two combine limpid diatonicism with subtle chromatic shifts of harmony that maintain the spirit of Baroque music. The delightful sonatina by Wilfrid Mellers, while more advanced harmonically,

works from much the same premises.

Yet, despite a feeling that the recorder was essentially an instrument only capable of playing 17th- and 18th-century music or 20th-century imitations, its repertory increased considerably. The sonatina for treble recorder and piano by Lennox Berkeley, written in 1940, set a standard of excellence for a new crop of pieces that broke away from the neo-Baroque imitations. Its finely crafted melodies, sometimes poignant counterpoint, and subtle rhythmic flexibility (especially in the finale), make it particularly memorable. The apparent simplicities of the slow movement are precisely conceived in terms of telling harmonies and sonorities, and satisfactory balance between the parts. The sonatinas by Walter Leigh and Stanley Bate, while not equalling Berkeley's achievement, added similar very worthwhile works to the recorder's slender modern repertory.

These works are not really neo-classical in conception; this term can perhaps be appropriately given to a modest three-movement recorder trio by Hindemith written in 1932 for his *Plöner Musiktag* ('Music day at Plön'). Here we have a delightful application of Hindemith's characteristic harmony and melody in an engaging piece of *Gebrauchsmusik*. It is characterized by ingenious counterpoint and the composer's typical chamber-music equality of parts.

The influence of Hindemith on many composers of recorder music has been noteworthy. A number of composers in Germany have fallen under his influence, notably Harald Genzmer, whose sonata, trio and quartet are excellently crafted works. Two composers who studied with Hindemith, the German-born Franz Reizenstein and the Englishman Arnold Cooke, have contributed handsomely to the modern recorder's repertory. The former's partita has already been mentioned; the latter's suite for treble recorder and piano (or harpsichord) has much in common with it, with some stylistic traits derived from the 18th century. But, despite the alternative keyboard specified, the work belongs firmly in the 20th century because of its clear use of Hindemithian harmony and counterpoint. Even more distant from the Baroque ideal is Cooke's concerto for treble recorder and strings of 1957, a substantial, expansive and engaging work that could

almost have been written by Hindemith.

The continuation of this tradition is found in Francis Chagrin's *Preludes for Four* for treble recorder, violin, cello and harpsichord, written in 1972 for the Dolmetsch-Schoenfeld Ensemble. This is an attractive and lively collection of pieces in neo-classical rhythms, with an 'extended' tonality often based on superimposed 3rds. Also worthy of note is the use by Benjamin Britten of a trio of recorders for his *Alpine Suite* of 1956. Despite the work's small scale and the modest technical demands of the music, each of the pieces is superbly characterized in terms of recorder technique. Britten's use of recorders two years later in *Noye's Fludde* is on two levels, the amateur, with massed groups, and the professional, with a taxing solo part for treble, notably as an accompaniment for the dove.

While a lot of the interest in new recorder music is to be found in Germany and England, there is also a good deal in the Netherlands, much of it encouraged by two virtuoso players, Frans Brüggen and the German, Michael Vetter. The Netherlands has also seen the exploration of advanced playing techniques. Vetter has described how he felt that the first works for recorder that really embark on a new path are Jürg Baur's *Incontri* for recorder and piano and *Mutazioni* for solo treble recorder.<sup>3</sup> These led Vetter to look for Dutch composers to write new works for him.

Three composers, Rob du Bois, Louis Andriessen and Will Eisma, who had all written pieces for Brüggen, provided suitable music. Vetter encouraged them to explore new techniques, and they did so enthusiastically. Du Bois' *Spiel und Zwischenspiel*, for example, comprises 25 short movements, quite unlike anything previously written for recorder, and employs very high notes, flageolet tones, chords, varied timbre and what Vetter calls 'differentiated vibration techniques'. Aleatory techniques are involved in the same composer's *Pastoral VII* for solo recorder, while his ensemble piece *Ricercar*, for 2 to 9 recorders, makes extensive use of the new techniques mentioned above, as well as quarter-tones, which are here fully explored for the first time. Some elements of formal planning in *Ricercar* are left to the performer.

Following his acquaintance with *Pastoral VII*, Andriessen produced a recorder version of his *Paintings* for flute and piano, which Vetter attempted with some measure of success (though with the work's extensive freedom in almost all aspects of performance, this version hardly constitutes an arrangement). Eisma's *Wonderen zijn schaars* ('Miracles are rare') for recorder

and piano involves, among other things, rustling, hissing, blowing and humming.

These were not the only attempts to develop an avant-garde recorder technique. In 1966, for Frans Brüggen, Luciano Berio wrote *Gesti*, in which contradictions are set up between lip tension and finger positions, producing strange or even 'absent' sounds. Flutter-tonguing is used extensively in *Gesti* (Britten had used it iconically in *Noye's Fludde*), as are combinations of vocal and instrumental sounds. Perhaps one of the most bizarre pieces of this period, especially for those with an interest in early music, was Mauricio Kagel's *Musik für Renaissance-Instrumente*, dating from 1965-6: chords, glissandos, and notes sung and played simultaneously occur frequently in it.

Another work which provided an opportunity for the free exploration of new techniques was Stockhausen's *Spiral* of 1968, for instrument (or voice) and short-wave radio. This has been recorded by Vetter using an amplified recorder. Nigel Osborne's *Passers By* of 1976 also includes an amplified recorder (most unusually the bass), which is partnered by a cello and set against electronic sounds, including its own sounds ring-modulated. Perhaps appropriately it received its first performance in the Netherlands. Finally, brief mention should be made of a work that demands less in the way of peripheral modern techniques and concentrates more on the problems of the exact synchronization of many complex rhythms. This is *Kathai* (1972), a short work for treble recorder and spinet by the Yugoslav Milan Stibilj. The use of fast elaborate flourishes with numerous large leaps as a matter of course in this work would have been unthinkable only 20 years ago.

This short and very selective survey has attempted to illustrate how a whole field of music has been created as an indirect result of an interest in performing early music on the instruments for which it was written. Today, of course, we take the existence of the recorder completely for granted, although perhaps the works mentioned here are not as well known as comparable pieces for the orchestral wind instruments. Certainly, we are not surprised that even the recorder is used to play avant-garde music. We can only speculate on what the musicians who revived the use of the recorder at the beginning of the century would have thought of some of its present-day uses.

<sup>1</sup> J.C. Bridge, 'The Chester Recorders', *PRMA* 27 (1900-01), pp.109-20

<sup>2</sup> C. Welch, *Six Lectures on the Recorder* (London, 1911)

<sup>3</sup> M. Vetter, 'New Recorder Music from Holland', *Sonorum speculum*, 31 (1967), pp.19-25