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# THE RECORDER OR ENGLISH FLUTE

BY CARL F. DOLMETSCH

My aim in this article will be to look ahead rather than back into the recorder's early history, and to treat of it as a living instrument—the only view which makes a thing worth while for me. I shall therefore avoid the many well-known and oft-quoted references from early writings, in which field there are others far better qualified to work.

The recorder, a delightful and traditionally English wood-wind instrument, is of simple appearance. It is made in three sections, having no keys except in the case of the larger instruments where the distances between the holes are too great for the hand. There are eight holes, seven of which are in the front, while the eighth is at the back and controlled by the left thumb. On the best modern instruments the two lowest holes are divided, *i.e.* two little holes side by side, a device which produces clearer chromatics in the lower register. The English flute, to give the recorder its other name, has a full chromatic range of two octaves and one note, although skilled players can extend this range by another half octave with the use of special fingerings. It will be obvious from the foregoing that this instrument can be played in any key, though like most instruments it is more comfortable in some than in others. The three sections which are made to fit into one another have adjustable cork-lined joints, whereby the total length of the instrument can be increased at the upper end should it become necessary to lower the pitch of a warm recorder to be in tune with accompanying instruments. The inside bore of the mouthpiece is parallel, while that of the middle and end sections is mainly conical, but with very subtle deviations which require absolute accuracy in manufacture if the consequent intonation of the finished instrument is to be correct. It is here that the majority of would-be recorder-makers come to grief, for no amount of patience and care in tuning the holes will save an instrument whose bore is inaccurate.

Absolute purity and expressive qualities of tone are two of the recorder's chief attractions. On cursory examination, the instrument's organ-pipe principle of tone-production may conceal, by

its *apparent* simplicity, the dynamic latitude and subtle shadings of tone-colour obtainable ; the effective mastery of these resources constitutes one of the finest aspects of recorder technique. Their presence, though obvious enough to those actually listening to an accomplished performer, is often overlooked by the partially initiated, or by players who have not mastered the intricacies. There is, of course, the discouraging type of listener who only hears what agrees with his preconceived ideas (perhaps based upon what he has read), but it is not for him that this article is written. It would therefore be as fatal a mistake to assume that recorder tone is just "ready-made" as to suggest that the only secret of piano-forte tone-production is to strike the keys indiscriminately (which could be achieved without lessons !), or that it would be sufficient for a novice to draw his violin bow across the strings to equal the superb results obtained by a master violinist.

An enterprising beginner, in trying to increase the volume of sound, generally overblows, or he may attempt a *pianissimo* by merely underblowing, while he frequently forgets the essential tonguing. Such incomplete methods inevitably result in faulty intonation and lack of clarity in high notes, followed by the player's possible loss of faith and, more serious still, the giving of a bad name to the innocent recorder. It should therefore be understood that variations in breath-pressure *must* be compensated by corresponding adjustments in finger work. This involves in certain cases the use of special fingerings, as with some trills, plus judicious shading of holes and partial lifting of the fingers according to requirements. I need hardly say that to have a good ear and, further, to use it is as indispensable to the recorder star as to the accomplished string player. It is only by observing these perfectly attainable essentials that the volume of tone can be successfully controlled.

The tone, despite its mellowness, is possessed of remarkable carrying powers, a characteristic which enables it to meet the demands of both concert-hall and music-room. There is a telling warmth in *cantabile* passages, while the instantaneous response to quick tonguing is unexcelled, lending to staccato a piquancy and freshness to delight the ear.

The recorder family, or "whole consort", consists of five main members :

SOPRANINO :	Fundamental note second F above middle C
DESCANT :	Fundamental note first C above middle C.
TREBLE :	Fundamental note first F above middle C.
TENOR :	Fundamental note middle C
BASS :	Fundamental note first F below middle C.

In addition there are a few intermediate sizes, notably those in D (tenors and descants) and in G (trebles and small basses). Such English writers as Robert Woodcock and William Babell composed concertos for solo recorder(s) in D<sup>(1)</sup> with strings, while J. S. Bach's well-known Brandenburg Concerto No. 4, in G major, includes two treble recorders in G (*flauti d'echo*) which share the honours of the work with the solo violin; the accompanying instruments consist of string quartet, violone (double bass viol) and continuo part for the harpsichord. The above-mentioned works have been performed with the correct instruments many times at the Haslemere Festivals.

The discovery and performance at Haslemere and elsewhere of sonatas, consorts, concertos and *obbligati*, composed by such famous masters as Bach, Handel, Purcell, Telemann, Loeillet and many an Elizabethan established for the English flute its rightful place in the world of music; not as an antiquarian curiosity, nor yet as a substitute for any modern instrument, but as a living means of musical expression. Does not an instrument for which these unquestioned masters wrote some of their finest works merit the attention of the artist and composer of to-day? This view was clearly expressed by J. A. Westrup when writing from Haslemere in 'The Daily Telegraph and Morning Post' on July 19th 1938: "These winning instruments are unjustly neglected to-day. A composer who would write a quartet for them, instead of wringing painful novelty from trumpet or violin, could earn no small gratitude."

It was the then conspicuous lack of contemporary recorder music which prompted me to give a lead in February 1939, when I wrote and performed my Theme and Variations for solo recorder and harpsichord at Wigmore Hall. Nine months later the situation had radically changed, as may be seen from the following notice which appeared in 'The Daily Telegraph and Morning Post' after I had played at a studio concert of the London Contemporary Music Centre in June 1939. Mr. Westrup wrote:

The recorder has hitherto been associated with the revival of music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At the London Contemporary Music Centre's studio meeting on Saturday afternoon we learnt how it could serve the composer of to-day.

The result was encouraging. Provided that an instrument is mechanically perfect—as the modern recorder is—there is clearly no reason why it should be confined to the music of the past. . . .

Not all the composers represented in Saturday's programme had thoroughly grasped either the character or the technique of

<sup>(1)</sup> The "6th flute", so called because it was pitched a sixth above the treble recorder in F, which appears to have been the standard.

the instrument. But the concert as a whole proved a serious intention to establish and justify the relationship between this seductive instrument and the music of our time. The most successful of the works for treble recorder was Lennox Berkeley's *Sonatina*. Its apparent simplicity concealed a neat and attractive invention and the solo instrument sounded completely at home with the material.

It was the general appreciation at this private hearing, coupled with my personal enjoyment and esteem of Mr. Berkeley's *Sonatina*,<sup>(2)</sup> which decided me to give the work its first public performance at my second full-length London recorder recital at Wigmore Hall on November 18th 1939.

Acknowledgments and thanks are due to Manuel Jacobs, himself a recorder player and composer for that instrument, for his enterprise in personally bringing to the notice of ten composers of the younger British school the tempting resources offered by this English flute. As a result of his efforts, ten new sonatinas (the Lennox Berkeley among them) were written, and the entire set would no doubt have appeared in print by now had not the war intervened.

The foregoing will substantiate the view that an instrument like the recorder, which can live on its own merits irrespective of age, will surely be given a future besides a distinguished past and present. Some of the many living composers who have already succumbed to its charm are Hindemith, Benjamin Britten, Stanley Bate and Alan Rawsthorne. The recorder enthusiast has something new to turn to, and should feel confident of more to come.

Quite apart from its immense scope as a solo instrument, or in ensemble with instruments of other families, the recorder is highly effective when played in consort with members of its own family. The blend is complete and delightful, the parts being clear to follow, while the inner voices in particular are never in danger of being lost. A comparatively small number of early works for consorts of two to seven recorders have survived, plus a host of beautiful and suitable arrangements of music for the performance of which the composers gave no clear directions with regard to media ; to these may be added a number of modern works, and unlimited scope for the future.

The recorder's mellowness of timbre is apt to mislead listeners by giving the impression that the instrument is playing an octave below its actual pitch, and it often requires a test with tuning-fork or keyboard instrument to convince the less familiar that the funda-

<sup>(2)</sup> This work has since been published by Messrs. Schott & Co., of London.

mental note of, say, a descant recorder is not middle C, but is in fact the octave above. So much is this the case that a recorder can even be scored to take a second part below a voice or violin, when the actual notes emitted are above those of the instrument it accompanies. This probably accounts for one's being able to listen with pleasure to the little sopranino recorder whose range of over two octaves begins at F on the top line of the treble clef, while the same notes from almost any other melodic instrument would be considered shrill and piercing.

The literature itself reveals (when played with the correct interpretation, cadenzas and ornamentation based on contemporary evidence) that the highest degree of technical skill was and is required for adequate performance. Although virtuosity should never be worshipped as an end in itself, it is an essential part of the true artist's equipment, and the comparative ease with which thousands of beginners arrive at the playing of simple tunes in a remarkably short time may lead one to underestimate the rich rewards the recorder will yield in the hands of an accomplished artist. This unfortunate tendency to measure the full scope of the instrument's resources by the results so far obtained by the greater mass of recorder players frequently leads to an expression of opinions and comments unflattering to the instrument, some of which I have heard from the lips of well-known musicians in charge of concerts at competitive festivals, teachers' courses, and in connection with provincial amateur music societies. For instance: "Of course one can't expect the recorders to be in tune", or "the recorders are bound to fail in these rapid passages" and "how could such a thing be played by a simple pipe without keys?". It has, however, often been my privilege, and no doubt that of my colleagues—notably Edgar Hunt—to make these perfectly open-minded musicians modify their views on such occasions, but alas, how many more are still allowed to escape unenlightened! It is hard that the splendid efforts of a majority, many of whom are amateurs in the truest sense, playing for their own enjoyment without thought of professional ambitions, should be responsible for so summary a judgment, when it is probably their last wish that a standard be determined by their present achievements, representing but a fraction of their aspirations. The truth is that the recorder's meteoric revival has as yet allowed insufficient time for many peak performers to develop and to demonstrate their instrument far and wide. There is nevertheless a great deal of promising material, particularly in the younger ranks, from which our stars will in good time emerge, if opinion will only be patient and not commit an error

tantamount to labelling the full resources of the violin with the standard attained by the average school orchestra.

It is now evident that the modern revival of the recorder, perhaps even more than that of the harpsichord, is an accomplished fact. At intervals during the last 150 years old instruments were taken out of museums and collections by antiquarians who played upon them without a proper and indispensable study of the correct fingering as set out in treatises which survive, and then wondered how their forebears could have endured such "bad intonation". Until Arnold Dolmetsch made his first researches into this subject in 1903, no one had studied the real technique and music of the instrument with more than antiquarian interest. It was here, as in everything he did, that Arnold Dolmetsch showed himself to be more than an antiquarian, for he viewed the recorder as a live potentiality far beyond that of a mere museum piece, and realizing that good things are often put by, only to be rediscovered with astonishment at their having ever been forgotten, he set about making recorders, not copies of old ones, but made to his own designs which none the less conformed to the basic principles of the instrument.

It was in 1918-19 that he produced the first modern recorders, and in 1925 the first full consort of recorders with bass was heard at the Haslemere Festival. From this sprang the tremendous enthusiasm which spread from here to Germany, and subsequently all over the world. Unfortunately a certain amount of confusion was caused by the Germans when they sought to simplify recorder fingering before they had thoroughly understood it. At first glance it appeared to them that if one could lift the fingers consecutively when playing the main diatonic scale it would be infinitely simpler than having to bother with cross-fingerings. By introducing this apparent simplification they at once robbed their earlier modern recorders of the complete chromatic scale, while the intonation of what remained was far from perfect. It was this which led to what is now known as the "German system" of fingering, a purely modern and regrettable development. We must, however, acknowledge one great service at least rendered to the recorder by the Germans, for in commercializing the instrument they managed to turn out a really low-priced article which, though far from satisfying the permanent requirements of discriminating players, was at least cheap enough to enable the multitudes to try their hand without incurring great expense. The obvious and logical step for those whose success revealed the shortcomings of their instrument was to aspire to a first-class recorder of English manufacture, costing

something like seven guineas as against seven shillings. No instrument can with justice be called a recorder if it does not conform to the traditional English fingering, which was, incidentally, the one recognized all over Europe until 1750–60. Realizing their mistake rather late in the day, a number of German firms responded to the appeals from this side for a very cheap recorder with English fingering by producing inexpensive models based as nearly as possible on the measurements of a number of Dolmetsch instruments obtained quite openly for that purpose. The result was encouraging, and although mass-produced inexpensive instruments could never be expected and were not meant to equal their English hand-made models, it brought a real recorder within the means of all, from council-school child to Eton boy. The war has, of course, put a stop to the importation of these instruments, but a few British firms are now doing what should have been done long ago—producing really cheap instruments. The cheapest of them are moulded from plastic materials, and although they cannot with truth be said to equal those in wood, they are serviceable and fill a much-felt need. As always, the more successful and ambitious eventually acquire a first-class and unavoidably expensive hand-made instrument.

A welcome sign of the recorder's popularity is manifest in the Society of Recorder Players, which was formed in October 1937, with my late father Arnold Dolmetsch as its first president. The society was bound to come into existence, for the idea of forming such an organization had occurred to several groups of people independently. When they heard of each other's intentions they decided to join forces, realizing that their united efforts would achieve far greater results. The outcome of this coalition is clear when it is seen that the musical directorship is shared by Edgar Hunt and myself, and that Mr. and Mrs. C. M. Champion, so well-known to thousands of recorder players, are respectively chairman and honorary secretary. The committee is no less representative.

The principal aims of the Society are as follows :

To create a centre where all interested can meet, and where reliable information on all recorder matters and activities is obtainable.

To raise the general standard of playing by organizing at general meetings combined playing in which all can take part, led by the hon. musical directors, and the holding of teachers' tests or examinations in order that those wishing to teach may be qualified to do so.

To assist in the formation of local groups by putting members in touch with one another.

To publish recorder music both old and new, and also suitable



arrangements, and to issue a yearly bulletin, 'The Recorder News', reporting on activities of the Society and its members, and also those of recorder players abroad.

To hold an annual concert of music for or including recorders.

Few men in their lifetime are allowed to see their labours bear fruit : Arnold Dolmetsch, pioneer of the recorder revival, was one of these rare exceptions. Since his earliest experiments in playing and subsequently making recorders the movement has gathered impetus and strength expressing itself in many ways of which the chief have been outlined. It should be a source of inspiration to enthusiasts that the rising generation of composers and players take a serious view of the recorder's place in the world of music and are setting out to re-establish and maintain the traditional supremacy in both instruments and players which England always enjoyed.