

RETURN TO THE NATURAL TRUMPET

Mike Diprose

A gentle revolution is slowly occurring in sections of the baroque music community which are keen to investigate what could become another excuse to re-record a considerable amount of repertoire (the fragile state of the record industry notwithstanding). Along with the emergence of the holeless natural trumpet come, in sympathy, other subtle but significant (and not wholly welcome) developments in historically informed performance practice.

Some of you may have missed *Partial Success* in February's edition of *EMR*. I reported on the rediscovery, by JF Madeuf and others, of the 'lost art' of playing the trumpet in clarino (high) register in the original way – without latter-day alterations such as vent holes to assist tuning. This instrument was referred to as the 'holeless nat'. Aside from the perilous task of playing it, the issue of temperament (and a current dearth of skilled players) was identified as being the main obstacle to the assimilation of the holeless nat into modern early-music performance. Although, especially in England, audiences seldom hear holeless nats, the revolution is nevertheless seeping into our consciousness through the bells of a few forward-thinking baroque (not hand-horn) horn players. Names supplied on request!

It would appear that a difference of opinion similar to the English 4-hole/German 3-hole trumpet systems exists in the horn world. British players mainly use holes, though accept their inauthenticity, and are at odds with players on the continent, who tend to use hand technique in their bells, for which there is also, during the baroque era, no supporting evidence. No pictures of horn players from these times depict them hand stopping and there is no mention of it in contemporary literature. So holeless playing could be a way of finally uniting Europe! I'm off to the EU for a grant...

'Like playing golf on stilts, or violin music, at pitch, on a cello' would be an accurate comparison for the challenges faced by whoever dares to learn the holeless nat. Needless to say, the odd note can get a bit *surrounded* (in the words of Crispian Steele-Perkins). A French verb for *mistake* is *se tromper* and children in Poland, after erring in some way still say 'Jestem Tromba' or 'I'm a big trumpet' (diminutive *Trobka*). You do the math! It's called character! I'd challenge anyone to find a musician after a performance who would honestly admit that he or she hadn't made some slight error. For me, this is part of the appeal of playing such a difficult instrument in public – to imagine part of an informed audience's anticipation as a cultured, but morbid fascination, similar to how a boy feels at his first dog fight (or fox hunt, depending on his breeding). Needless to say, part of the skill of playing this instrument in ensemble (used to this day by orchestral modern-horn players) is what you might call discrete selection.

During my studies at the Schola Cantorum in Basel in the

last year, in an environment keen to investigate change, we have rehearsed and performed frequently with oboists who, using original fingering patterns and sympathetic ears, blend and tune effortlessly with holeless nats. Expanding on the work of Bruce Haynes in his book *The Eloquent Oboe*, oboist Johanne Maitre, a student at the Schola, has compiled fingering charts from 12 contemporary sources 1689-1770. It would appear that, to cede to the widespread use of the Valotti temperament (publ. 1779), baroque oboists and other wind players are currently using patterns and some hole positions from the 19th century.

Amongst string players, there is also a shift towards the use of unwound gut strings. Catherine Martin and Oliver Webber (Oliver also makes them) are two violinists in Britain playing almost exclusively on unwound gut. It transpires that, contrary to what one might think, a violin strung with thick, Italian-style strings (at greater tension) made from this material, is louder than a modern violin strung with whatever it is that they use nowadays. So no balance problems there! Although a violin strung with French-style thinner gut strings will be a bit quieter, the repertoire usually requires many players on each part.

The challenge for next semester is to investigate the application of different temperaments by willing violinists and violists. An interesting trumpet-related subject, since their open strings (tuned in pure fifths) are in accordance with a D trumpet's notes – a coincidence? Except the bottom G that is, but violins are never required to play this note with a trumpet. One of the violinists at the Schola has also played a great deal of Renaissance music and is familiar with the quarter-comma-mean-tone temperament used for such repertoire. She was quick to adjust her ears and fingers to our current favourite – Silbermann (sixth-comma mean tone).

When asked how he composed his music, Stravinsky famously said: 'with an eraser'. There are many subtle alterations musicians can make to accommodate the character of the holeless nat. For instance, continuo players, when modulating to the dominant (e.g. an E or E \flat chord in the key of D), if the trumpet has a G \sharp , which is naturally flat, simply omit this note from the voicing on the keyboard, avoiding a clash. The third (B) can also be left out of a sub-dominant G chord, when necessary. These and many other little gems can be found by studying orchestral scores, particularly the works of Bach which include trumpets. Harmony is, after all, mainly about creating tension and release. The greater the tension...

You may by now be wondering why all this fuss about holeless trumpets in the first place? There are two reasons: 1) At the time, the trumpet was a very important instrument, both for its vital military role as means of signalling (trumpeters also carried out the delivery of diplomatic

communiqués) and as an 'instrument of joy' ('Sound the Trumpet' from Purcell's *Come ye Sons of Art*), bringing that extra something to rousing choruses and (mainly) happy arias, and a general sense of celebration. Imagine Handel's Hallelujah Chorus without! Incidentally, trumpeters were also by far the highest-paid musicians in these times.

2) Composers actually wrote music for these instruments and I'm quite sure that it was written to sound good. The holeless nat has certain limitations by modern standards, but they are what they are. We are doing now what would have been done then – working together to achieve the best possible results. This is a fantastic opportunity to build on the work and experience of our predecessors and get that little bit closer to what might have been.

The youngest member of Madeuf's course at the Schola is 34. One could easily argue that players don't have enough experience even to contemplate taking on the holeless nat until then. This need not be the case. We need players who are very talented, patient, charismatic, young and truly fearless beyond the usual machismo of the young shavers found in music colleges. Someone with enough money not to need the work, and enough confidence and PR skills to form a group or two and take this all-too-human instrument to a paying public and make them return (having bought the CDs).

Speaking of which, the French orchestra Le Concert Spirituel, under the inspired guidance of Hervé Niquet, released in 2002 a CD of those perennial favourites Handel's *Water Music* and *Music for the Royal Fireworks* (Glossa GCD 921 606) featuring nine holeless nats and nine holeless French horns – *cave caem!* The CD makes very interesting listening, and it's nice to know that things are moving forward. Ironic that the French, with an historically less great trumpet tradition than the English and particularly the Germans, should now be leading the world in this field! Some of the great players in the Concert Spirituel have a job in the Musique de la Gardiens de la Paix, where they perform frequently on holeless nats.

Since being based in Basel, I have been lucky enough to work with Le Concert Spirituel playing this and other programmes, and it really is a thoroughly enjoyable experience. Situated on the borders of three countries, Basel is an incredible place: multicultural, quite spiritual and liberal. It is oozing with history and culture – a veritable hub of many things; affluent, but with a sense of money well spent.

To study at the Schola isn't as expensive as one might think. The fees here are a fraction of those of the colleges in the UK, rent is much cheaper than London and, being a small town, one can easily walk or travel by bicycle. These savings far outweigh the higher price of food and that most essential of essentials, booze. All is not lost, though, as Basel is on the French and German borders and but a short stagger by tram. The Schola is now registered with the Learning Skills Council in the UK, which means that interest-free, deferred-payment (for the duration of the course) career development loans are now available to us Brits (www.lsc.gov.uk or 0870 900 6800).

Temperaments

Harpichordist Bridget Cunningham, amongst others, has spent much time on this subject. The best one we have found so far is Silbermann, or 6th Comma mean tone, starting from D for trumpet in D (with a slightly lowered B) and, predictably, C for trumpet in C, although much of the Italian C trumpet repertoire was written at high pitch (A=465), which translates to trumpet in D at A= 415.

Temperament need not be quite so fixed, though. Recent study of Bach's scores has identified the strange squiggles on some of them as tuning instructions. Different works can use different temperaments, depending on the keys of inner movements. Of course, the many notes which the trumpet doesn't play can be tuned to wherever sounds best.

Instruments: where can I buy one?

Makers of good holeless trumpets are quite rare and their products are subject to personal tastes of players. The first model one should buy is an Ebe II or III or Haas copy, followed by a Bull and then a renaissance coned-bell. Unless one can acquire a second hand (and later) model by the retired Canadian master Robert Barclay, one can approach:

Graham Nicholson: +31 625 060 09; Graham.Nicholson@inter.nl.net

Matthew Parker: +44 (0) 1938 630 606; matthewp@gzn.co.uk

Blechblas-Instrumentenbau Egger: +41(0)61 681 41 33

info@eggerinstruments.ch

David Edwards: david.edwards13@dnf.nl.com

More information available at www.earlybrass.com/nattrump.htm

Let's hope that the early music world gradually embraces these changes and doesn't fall into a complacency of procedure to which our pioneers were offering an alternative. Viva la musica!

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