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BASSOON IN THE BAROQUE ERA

Emily Spradley



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Bassoon in the Baroque Era
by
Emily Spradley

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements of
the CSU Honors Program

for Honors in the degree of
Music in Music Education,
Schwab School of Music,
Columbus State University

Thesis Advisor AMartin Date 5/7/09
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CSU Honors Program Director James M. Hill Date 5/7/09

Bassoon in the Baroque Era

HONS 4002 Thesis and Lecture Recital

Emily Spradley

Good afternoon! Welcome to my lecture recital. I hope you will enjoy learning about the bassoon in the Baroque era. This lecture focuses on the origins and developments of the Baroque bassoon, elements of Baroque style found in music for bassoon, and the application of those elements through Antonio Vivaldi's composition for bassoon, Concerto in G minor, Op. No. 23.

In the 1901 edition of his book, *The Holy Cross and Other Tales*, Eugene Field states:

If you have never beheld or heard a bassoon you are to understand that it is an instrument of wood, of considerable more length than breadth, provided with numerous stops and keys, and capable of producing an infinite variety of tones, ranging from the depth of lugubriousness to the highest pitch of vivacity (198).

The legacy of the bassoon goes back over four hundred years, beginning with the precursor to the bassoon, the dulcian. The earliest written reference to the dulcian is from the early sixteenth century; it is thought that the dulcian originated around that time (Jansen 14). The original dulcian was made of one piece of wood, had few keys, and had a wide, conical bore. Its name derived from the Latin root *dulc*, meaning soft and sweet, and is thought to refer to the subdued tone quality of the dulcian, which contrasted to the louder tones of the shawms and pommers (Oxford 4). Shawms were double-reed instruments similar to oboes that developed into families during the rise of instrumental playing in the early

sixteenth century; the lowest pitched of which were called pommers. These families had different sizes of the same instrument, with adaptations depending on the individual instruments, and made it possible to perform with an extended range within the family.

Similar to the shawm, the dulcian was part of a family of dulcians. In his treatise on instrumental music entitled *Syntagma musicum* (1619), Praetorius described a consort consisting of five different sizes of dulcians. If you would please view the first powerpoint slide, you will see pictures of these dulcians. Refer to the above picture for the range of these instruments. Number 7, on the right-hand side of the picture, shows the discanfagott, which had a range of G3 to C5. Number 6 illustrates the alt-fagott, which was keyless and whose range is uncertain extending up from D3. The fagott piccolo or singel corthol is pictured in Number 5 and had a range of G2 to G4. The choristfagott or doppel corthol, which had a range of C2 to G4, is pictured in Numbers 3 and 4. Number 3 shows the unmuted choristfagott, and Number 4 shows the muted instrument. Number 2 depicts the doppelfagott. There were two varieties of the doppelfagott: the quartfagott, which had a range of G1 to A3, and a quintfagott, which had a range of F1 to G3. The dulcian pictured is the quartfagott (Langwill 23). The range of the modern bassoon is from B-flat 1 to approximately F5, though the necessity for playing the F is rare. The choristfagott, or fagotto chorista, is the member of the family that became most used, and perhaps is the most specific predecessor to the bassoon within the dulcian family.

The dulcian was made of one piece of wood about one meter tall through which a tube ran, doubled upon itself like a hairpin. A crook was inserted into the playing end, and a reed was affixed to the crook. On the other end, wider due to the conical bore, was a flared bell. Sometimes this end had a perforated cap that acted as a mute, changing the tone and pitch of the instrument. The choristfagott could therefore be either type: muted or unmuted. The fagotto chorista had eight holes and two keys, and could comfortably play from C2 to D4. The upper notes of the instrument were achieved by overblowing the octave. Above D4, E, F, and G could be played. However, they could not be as freely overblown as the notes leading up to them (Langwill 24).

The transition between the dulcian and Baroque bassoon cannot be attributed to any particular year; in fact, the years or periods of each overlapped in such a way that, for a short time, they coexisted and were probably used interchangeably and perhaps simultaneously. The modern bassoon is made of four separate pieces of wood, has a befuddling number of keys, and has a slightly conical bore. The initial changes included the separation of the long joint and wing joint (the bottom, U-shaped joint was still in one piece), the addition of a bell joint and of another key to the preexisting two keys of the dulcian, and switching to a narrower bore. Will Jansen writes that “switching to the narrow[er conical] bore gave the instrument a much more beautiful tone: perhaps suddenly, it became an instrument worthy of further development” (16). The next slide of the powerpoint contains a sketching from *The Bassoon and the Contrabassoon* by Lyndesay

Langwill that compares the bores of the dulcian and the bassoon. Note the narrower bore of the bassoon in comparison.

It is thought that the gradual shift from the solid, widely conical dulcian to the four-piece, narrower-bored bassoon began in the mid- to late- seventeenth century (14). You can compare the dulcian and Baroque bassoon in the next powerpoint slide; the first picture shows different sizes of dulcians and the second picture illustrates an early Baroque bassoon. The instruments in these pictures are newly made models of the original instruments. Written references to the early bassoon may be found in the early 1680s, including its use in the instrumentation of Lully's opera *Proserpine* in 1680. It was first described and illustrated in England by James Talbot, who gathered information from professional English and French bassoon players in London (Oxford 9).

Perhaps the best historical evidence to the evolution and development of the early bassoon is pictorial. One example is a German woodcut and engraving of a drawing from Johann Weigel's *Abbildung der Gemein-Nützlichen Haupt-Stände*, dating from 1698 (Langwill 28). You will find this drawing on the next slide. The woodcut shows a bassoon- and dulcian-maker boring (or hollowing out) finger holes into a dulcian. Also pictured are a second dulcian and a three-keyed bassoon. This lends substantial evidence to the idea of an extended transitional period between the dulcian and bassoon.

Der Fagottspieler, an unsigned Dutch painting thought to be by Harmen Hals (1611-1669), shows an example of an early bassoon. This painting may be viewed on the current slide. The bassoon in this painting has "turned moldings on

the upper joints that served both as decoration and mounts for the keys” (Oxford 8). There is a bell joint and extra key that extended the range of the instrument to the B-flat. Also in the painting, the tenor or wing joint has the obvious thickness needed to drill the finger-holes obliquely to fit the fingers. The addition of the bell joint extended the length of tubing of the instrument. This changed the lowest note of the instrument from C to B-flat, which is still the lowest note of the typical modern bassoon today. It is thought that one of the reasons for the bassoon’s evolution was the demand to match the range of the *basse de violon* of the day, which could play down to B-flat (Oxford 8). Adding the bell joint solved the problem by extending the range to match.

It is impossible to name an exact date for the creation of the first bassoon, but historical evidence points to its emergence in the late 1600s. A well-preserved bassoon in the Schlossmuseum in Sondershausen dates to 1699, and resembles the bassoon in *Der Fagottspieler* (Oxford 8). This early bassoon had three keys. The F key, located on the boot joint, was of a “swallow-tail” design. Locate the next slide to see a photograph of the “swallow-tail” key. Interestingly, this design allowed for the instrument to be played both left-handed and right-handed. The swallow-tail design of the key extended the key to be reachable from either position. In Weigel’s *Musikalisches Theatrum*, dated between 1715 and 1735, there is an engraving of a left-handed bassoon player, whose instrument is of the same model as the one pictured in Weigel’s *Abbildung der Gemein-Nützlichen Haupt-Stände*. Beneath the engraving, the following wise words were stated:

“When the organ, the regal, and the harpsichord are inadequate, and even the lowest notes of the double bass, then for the best bass my preference is for the bassoon, such notes are produced from it, by strongly expelled breath and deft hand, that they rouse the listener to wonder and instill joy in his spirit, hitherto unmoved” (Langwill 29).

The addition of the G-sharp key as a fourth key to the bassoon stabilized the holding position of the instrument as right-handed, since it was only reachable on one side of the swallow-tail F key. The four-keyed instrument remained the model for standard use through the rest of the century (Oxford 9).

Two other notable aspects of the early bassoons are the crook, or bocal, and the reed. They are generally similar to modern ones; however, both were remarkably larger and could somewhat be compared in size to those of the contrabassoon today. The reed in particular differed from the modern reed. Besides being a third longer than the modern reed, the early reed was gouged and scraped differently and had different banding and proportions. For example, while modern reeds are bound with wire bands, the early reeds were bound with waxed thread. One huge difference, though not necessarily visible on immediate investigation of the reed, are the scraping patterns. The scraping patterns of the early reed are in the shape of a U or V, similar to the modern French reed. However, the more common German reed of today is an inversion of that pattern, thinner toward the edges of the blades and with a defined spine down the middle of the reed for support. The early reed was thinner in the middle, so the strength of the blades was in the rails or blade edges.

Over the years, the bassoon has had intermittent periods of advancement in its development. By 1800, the bassoon had gained a fifth and sixth key; this was the instrument that was used in the premiere performance of Beethoven's Symphony No. 1 in 1800 (Langwill 48). The greatest period of improvement was around 1800 to 1870. At the end of that time, the early German Heckel and the French Buffet bassoons had emerged (Jansen 32). Today, it is clear that the modern bassoon has come a long way from its dulcian ancestor.

The transient period of the dulcian to the bassoon was consequently concurrent with the transient period of the Renaissance to the Baroque era in music. The Baroque period spans from 1600 to the mid-18th century. By the end of the period, numerous developments were being made to the instrument. During this time, the bassoon underwent many developments that made the instrument more pleasing to the ear, and had a three-octave range and a versatility that gave composers more flexibility in their writing. Jansen notes that "composers, particularly during the 18th century, have written profusely and varied [for the bassoon]: from excellent and most impressive parts in orchestral scores via an enormous amount of woodwind ensemble music to hundreds of bassoon solo concertos" (13). Antonio Vivaldi wrote thirty-seven bassoon concertos alone, some of which are still considered very difficult to play today on a modern bassoon.

The music of the Baroque era characterized itself through the expression of emotions, through musical contrast, and through embellishment. One goal of many composers of this era was to arouse or express emotions in the listener,

often referred to as the doctrine of the affections. This was done using specific techniques to evoke the proper effect. In *A History of Western Music*, Burkholder states, "It was widely believed that experiencing a range of affections through music could bring the humors into better balance, promoting physical and psychological health" (296). Examples of these affections that were portrayed are excitement, sadness, joy, fear, love, and anger.

Musical contrast is found throughout the music of the Baroque period, juxtaposed to the "smooth polyphony, flowing lines, and homogenous textures" of the Renaissance (Sadie 1). In performance, contrast could be found in dynamics, in solo and tutti passages, and in varying tempos within multiple movements of a piece as well as within the individual movements. Not all, or even many, of these contrasts were necessarily notated in the written music, however. Today, the term "performance practice" refers to the attempts of a modern performer to play music in its original intended style. From gathering information on typical performance practices of the Baroque style, a musician may perform Baroque music with stylistic dynamics, vibrato, pitch, tempo, rhythms, phrasing, articulations, and the addition of notes (also known as embellishment or ornamentation) –all of which may not be clear by simply reading the written music.

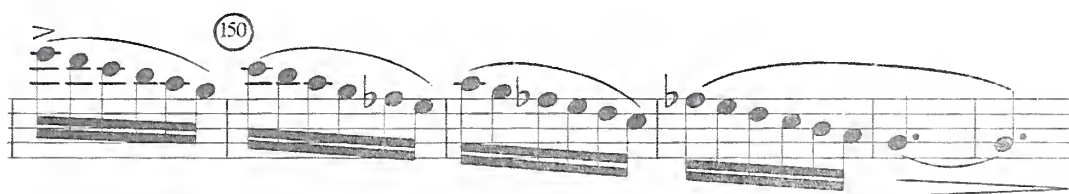
Embellishment, or ornamentation, was at the center of Baroque musical expression. It was common and expected that performers attach embellishments to the written music, whether written out ahead of time or, more commonly, improvised. These could be trills, turns, mordents, appoggiaturas, scales, or arpeggios, and they were added for emphasis at important places in the melody,

for elaboration on long notes, or for highlighting a chord or progression in the harmony (Burkholder 304). In some solos, both instrumental and vocal, an improvised cadenza would occur following an important cadence. More often today, these cadenzas are written, but the original practice was to improvise these solos.

One Baroque composer who allowed for this sort of ornamentation, and who had written in ornamentation as well, was Antonio Vivaldi. His music reflected the affections, and contrasted between both sections and movements of pieces, evident in many of his scores. He anticipated early Classical style with occasional crescendos and decrescendos (Oxford 2). The typical Baroque dynamics were subito markings; that is, abrupt changes in the dynamic level. Vivaldi's music was one of the first instances during the Baroque period of the gradual loud and soft changes that were evident in the Classical period.

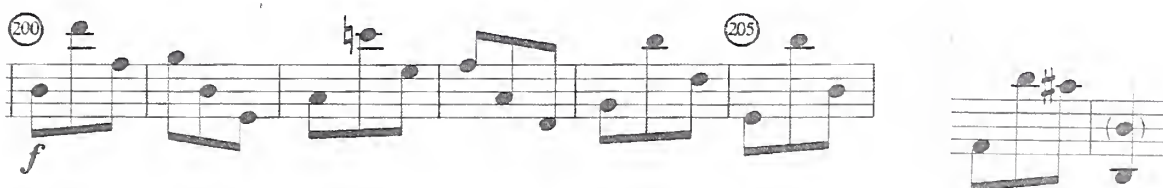
There are numerous other notable elements present in Vivaldi's compositional style. Programmatic elements may be found in some of his works. Different solo instruments and groups of instruments represent individual characters to depict a scene. Among the most noteworthy of Vivaldi's musical elements, especially relevant to his bassoon concertos, are his use of syncopation, his flexibility with the sixth and seventh degrees within the minor scale, and his freedom with interchanging the major and minor modes (Oxford 1). All three elements are present in the third and final movement of Vivaldi's Bassoon Concerto in G minor.

We will now look at excerpts from Vivaldi's Bassoon Concerto in G minor Op. No. 23 in order to illustrate specific characteristics of Baroque music and of Vivaldi's compositional style. In the first movement, we can identify the two predominant technical styles of Vivaldi's composition: scalar and disjunct material. The scalar lines are simply melodic lines built on a scale that follow the harmonic progression of the accompaniment. Here is an example of a scalar passage, which you may follow along with in the first example of the powerpoint slide. mm.149-154



Vivaldi also used disjunct phrases in his composition; namely, broken lines between octaves. For example, I will play an excerpt from the first movement, listed as the second picture in the slide.

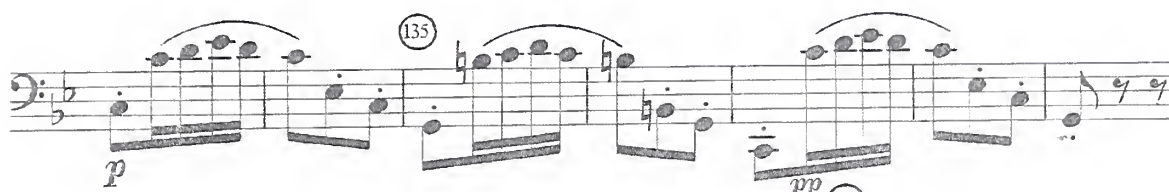
mm.200-207



Though this particular concerto does not have rapid disjunct phrases, many of Vivaldi's bassoon concertos did have fast passages of this kind of material. This was (and is) in many ways more difficult than performing the scalar passages due to the rapid change of throat, tongue, and lip positions to form the correct embouchure in each octave.

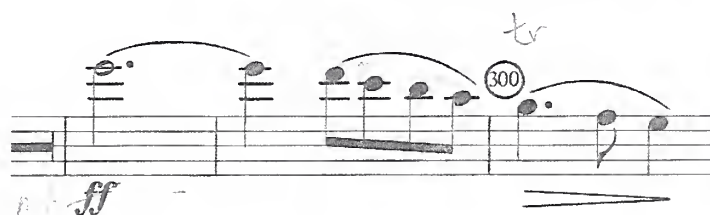
Vivaldi also frequently combined these two techniques, which was a great way of highlighting the harmonic progression. The third picture of the slide shows an example of this:

mm.133-139

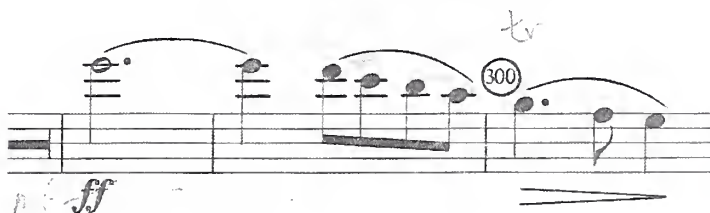


In the second movement, there are opportunities for embellishment to color notes or phrases. Here is the opening phrase of the bassoon melody, found in the first excerpt on the next slide, without any embellishment:

mm.298-300



Here is the same phrase again, with added embellishment:



In addition to adding embellishment as part of performance practice, ornamentation could be written into the music as well. The following picture on the powerpoint slide shows the following written embellished phrase:

mm.302-304



In the third movement of the concerto, Vivaldi uses different rhythmic ideas to create contrast. This is especially evident in his use of syncopation. The following passage, located on the next slide, is a prime example of this technique.

mm.387-390



Vivaldi wrote thirty-seven concertos for the bassoon, exceeded in number only by his violin concertos. Most, if not all of them, are dated between 1720 and 1740. A couple of these concertos were dedications, but most of the concertos are thought to have been composed for the girls at the orphanage Pio Ospedale della Pietà in Venice, where Vivaldi taught for thirty-six years from 1704. The girls at the orphanage may have been the earliest female bassoonists (Langwill 79). The State orphanage initially hired Vivaldi as a violin teacher, but he also composed, conducted, and otherwise taught during his tenure. In fact, Vivaldi was asked in 1723 by the governors at Pietà to compose two concertos a month for

extra remuneration. This was an offer that Vivaldi accepted and maintained for several years (Burkholder 422).

Vivaldi's concertos suggest that standards in Italy were particularly high for performance (Oxford 18). He composed approximately five hundred concertos, and established the three-movement model, complete with musical elements and form, that would inspire others to follow in his steps. Vivaldi's influence on the concerto was so effective that older, more conventional composers such as Albinoni and Dall'Abaco changed their style to model after Vivaldi's (Oxford 1).

The bassoon gained popularity in the Baroque era, particularly through works by composers such as Antonio Vivaldi. His concertos for bassoon exhibit many of the musical features attributed to him as a composer and to the Baroque style. This was a transient time for the bassoon. The dulcian was fading into history as the bassoon rose to the forefront of the low woodwinds. Composers of the Baroque began to write versatile, beautiful music for the bassoon as it became more widespread. Vivaldi in particular challenged the bassoon with his many concertos, demanding technical prowess and flexibility in style, and established the concerto form as a model for other composers. The Vivaldi bassoon concertos remain an important part of the Baroque bassoon repertoire today.

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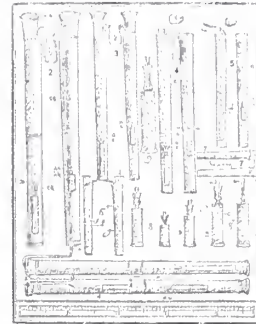
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Bassoon in the Baroque Era

Picture references

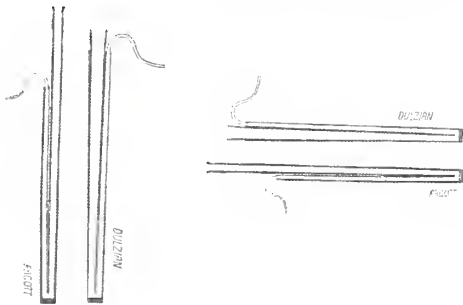
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Instrumental ranges
Source Langpoll *The Bassoon and Contrabassoon* (1971)

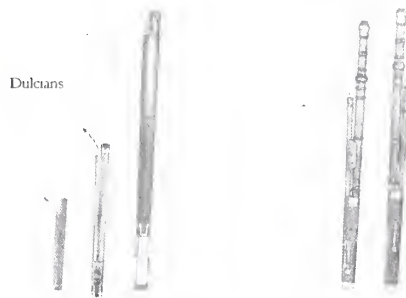


Sizes of dulcians from Praetorius' treatise on instrumental music, *Synagoga musica* (1619)
Source Langpoll *The Bassoon and Contrabassoon* (1971)

Comparing bores of dulcian and bassoon (fagott)
Source Langpoll *The Bassoon and Contrabassoon* (1971)

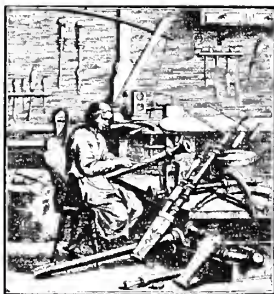


Early Baroque bassoon



Source: Motta, *History of the Bassoon*

German woodcut and engraving from Johann Weigel's *Abbildung der Gemein-Nutzlichen Haupt-Stände* (1698)



Source Langpoll *The Bassoon and Contrabassoon* (1971)

Der Fagottspieler, unsigned Dutch painting of early bassoon, mid- to late-17th century



Source Langpoll *The Bassoon and Contrabassoon* (1971)

Swallow-tail design for F key
in the bottom hand (right OR left)



Mont. Hans Bann - 1. Serie - Lohstapler

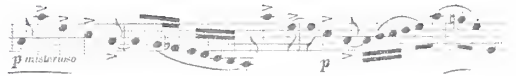
mm 149-154



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mm 133-139

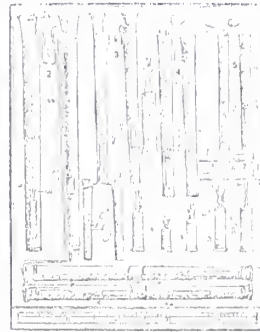


Bassoon in the Baroque Era

Picture references

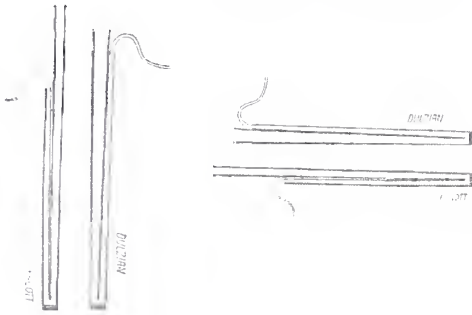
Emily Spradley

Instrumental ranges
source: Lappell, *The Bassoon and Contrabassoon*, 1971



Sizes of dulcians from Praetorius' treatise on instrumental music, *Syntagma musicum* (1619)
source: Lappell, *The Bassoon and Contrabassoon*, 1971

Comparing bores of dulcian and bassoon (fagott)
Source: Lappell, *The Bassoon and Contrabassoon*, 1971



Early Baroque bassoon

Dulcians



Source: M. de Montigny, *Revue de la Musique*, 1910

German woodcut and engraving from Johann Weigel's
Abbildung der Gemäin-Nützlichen Haupt-Stände (1698)



Source: Lappell, *The Bassoon and Contrabassoon*, 1971

Der Bassoonpfeifer, unsigned Dutch painting of early bassoon, mid- to late 17th century



Source: Lappell, *The Bassoon and Contrabassoon*, 1971

Swallow-tail design for F key
in the bottom hand (right OR left)



Museo, Hans. *Baroque d'Amore et L'arte degli*

mm. 149-151



mm. 200-207



mm. 133-139



