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A History of the Bassoon

Marilyn Rauch
Ouachita Baptist University

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The earliest ancestor of the bassoon was the bass pommer, bombard, or bass shawm. The instrument was long and perfectly straight with a metal crook fitted in the small end.

In the early part of the sixteenth century, Canon Alfranio was making instruments called phagotum, in which a long tube was bent back on itself several times. This idea, when applied to the bombard, produced the curtal - the direct ancestor of the bassoon. The phagotum itself was no relation to the bassoon, it being a form of bagpipe, but in it, Afranio was responsible for the idea used in bassoon construction. This instrument is where the bassoon got the name(French) - fagotte.

The sixteenth century was the first century to leave a written record of musical instruments. In the middle of this century a famous instrument maker, Schnitzer of Nuremburg, was an expert on curtals. During the last half of that century and into the seventeenth, the bassoon was modernized. Originally, both channels of the curtal were bored out of one large piece of wood with a crook and a bell at the top. In the seventeenth century, this large piece construction was confined to a single low joint on the instrument. Two separate tubes were then inserted in this joint. With a bell and crook, that is exactly the same construction as the modern bassoon. The man responsible for the shift from curtal to bassoon was Jean Hotteterre, leader of one of the most important groups of instrument makers in the seventeenth century. They were the first to reduce the construction of the bassoon to joints instead of one large piece. One bad element in their instruments was the uneven profile of the bore. This was probably a reflection of the bagpipe, which Hotteterre played.

In the seventeenth century, the change took place from curtal to basson and was made by Hotteterre. He was responsible for the modernization of most of the woodwind instruments.

Through the eighteenth century, the bassoon had four keys. Gradually, the keys were added until the prsent form appeared. The reed became smaller and more refined. This created a more pleasing tone.

Today, there are two forms of bassoons - the French and the German, the latter being much more satisfatory to the average player. The French basson has shown the least change of the woodwind family since Beethoven.

The German bassoon was the result of two men, Carl Almanraeder and Johann Adam Heckel. By the time of Beethoven, the bassoon had a beautiful tone but many technical difficulties which were conquered only by years of experience. There problems were frustrating to the beginner and to the bandmaster, like Almanraeder, trying to teach the beginner. He experimented and overcame many of these handicaps, but sacrificed the tone quality. The manufacturing firm of Heckel rescued the tone quality managing to keep Almanraeder's innovations at the same time. They made the bore a truer cone and perfected every manufacturing detail.

The French bassoon did not make these changes. It has remained practically the same since Beethoven. It was standard in Europe until within the last fifty years when the German bassoon began to gain popularity.

Both types have good characteristics. For the artist, the Frnech bassoon offers a more acceptable tone. The German has been accused of

becoming monotonous and woody sounding. However, the German does produce a fine tone and that tone is easier to achieve. It is more consistent. The French is still with the flaws and is more sensitive to deficiencies of the reed.

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