# Guildford Society of Recorder Players

# Playing Day May 2021 with Professor Ian Wilson.

**Ornamentation**

**Baroque Era**

Ornamentation - of many forms - was integral to the Baroque age and appearances - and Ian linked and explained the related musical aspects, ie, ornamentation, to us clearly. He thus described two main types of ornamentation which, in turn were also linked to the interests of the relevant countries, as well as something about the theorists and protagonists around them

1. Passaggi - this was an Italian form of ornamentation that was highly popular. It basically involved filling in often simple, melodic lines with additional melodic fragments. The extra notes might include divisions and variations, eg, Van Eyck’s works, but also included ways of adding in different notes and small leaps that were essentially scalic in type. The UK loved Italian composers at the time.
2. Graces. - this principally French method of ornamentation often included specific ornaments such as trills, flattement, turns, port de voix, coulement, etc. They were primarily note-centric ornaments. We are familiar with many. The port de voix was popular and can sound lovely - it involves a sort of reverse trill, with the trill starting on the note *below*the main note to play, so that it resolves onto the note. Musicians of the time, such as Hotteterre, wrote out their theories. It is interesting that it is often thought that trills during the Baroque Era always start on the upper note, but research suggests this is not necessarily the case.
3. The Rough Guide for playing trills is; the Wilson Wig Theory, ie, look at the head-ware of the composer we are playing in a picture or two and......do they have a wig? If so, then start the trill on the *upper note* for the trill, such as Handel, Mozart, etc. If however, your chosen composer did *not*have a wig, eg, William Byrd, Monteverdi, then start the trill *on the note itself and not above.*

**Pre-Baroque, - Renaissance Era**

Was there no ornamentation before the Baroque period? In fact, yes, there was. Music occurred more in divisions and tended to be quite measured in structure. A few embellishments were added to it - though only relatively few notes. All instruments in a consort were expected to embellish, as well, not just the top lines. Players would also imitate each other so developing musical conversations.

**Post-Baroque - into the Romantic Era**

As time progresses then later there was increasingly a reaction against lavish ornamentation. Instruments were developing technically and there was more experimentation with the sounds. One of the composers, eg, Mendelssohn, was so anti-ornamentation that he deliberately wrote out the necessary cadenza within the score for the relevant instruments in some of his music.

**Concert**

Bird song was popular with early music composers. Instruments were used in such a way as to try and imitate birds and animals, for entertainment.  For example, some techniques included repeated notes, acciaccaturas, trills and scales/runs.  The linnet, one popular bird that was referred to in music and literature, was actually the greenfinch, as we now know it.  Many “nightingales”, as referred to in the early days, were actually blackcaps.   That birds could imitate was noted in early music and literature.

Ian started with Van Eyck’s The English Nightingale, and then moved on to two Ramages (warblings) from Boismortier and then extracts from the Bird Fancier’s Delight, published in 1717 which described how you could teach captive birds, such as bullfinches, Skylarks and Starlings to imitate the sound of the recorder! Players would capture birds and would “teach them in the dark” playing a tune over and over again until the bird learned it.

We continued with Hunting the Wren, played on a Norwegian sea flute, then Van Eyck variations on John Dowland’s Lachrimae Pavan and Hans-Martin Linde’s Music for a Bird. Finally, we heard Columba Aspexit by Hildegard of BIngen. Throughout Ian combined readings and music with information about the different recorders he was playing.

**The History of the Recorder**

**The Middle Ages**

Medieval society was very hierarchical aas well as categorised and this included music. Instruments capable of producing a fanfare were of relatively high value, at the top of the status chain of musicians. Quieter instrumentalists could accompany some of the noble songs of chivalry that were popular at the time, whereas those instruments that were not harmony -producing and/or not loud - such as recorders - were at the bottom of the musical hierarchy. Furthermore musicians were low in any hierarchy of the time, so the recorders were at the bottom of one of the lower hierarchies of the time. An illustration of this was the picture produced in the mid-1500s by Lucas Cranach of the Mocking of Christ, where someone pushes a recorder to Christ’s mouth to blow.

The types of instruments played tended to be the sopranino, G alto plus F alto as tools were not available to produce different instruments, such that even a tenor recorder would be unusual, with the more spaced out holes difficult to reach. Some recorders had a semi-tone hole at the bottom but they did not have a double hole such as those we use now.

**The Renaissance Era**

The recorder was generally a consort instrument in this period and they gradually started to make larger instruments. Only then were tenors and bases being made as better tools were developed for instrument makers. Note the tenor and alto look the same at this time - one was simply larger than the other. The norm for any basses in this period was basses in G (not F, as now). A fontanella disguised the key mechanism lower down the instrument with the all-around holed cap on the recorder which was employed to make reaching lower holes easier whilst maintaining the attractive appearance of the instrument.

Of interest is that whereas now right or left hand recorders are different (as reflected in the hole spacing on the recorder), during the Renaissance period this was not the case. Recorders were made to be “ambidextrous”, in fact, with just two holes at the bottom so that whichever was not needed to obtain the lower note, was filled in with wax. Interestingly, if there were right and left handed-players, this could have contributed to symmetry in the way the players stood and played, so having the two holes would not have concerned performers then. And having the holes down the instrument shaped for comfort for the hands was not introduced until later.

Not at all boring......

Whereas most wind instruments flare out at the bottom, one of the aspects of our recorders is that they have a tapered bore which narrows more at the bottom. In the Renaissance period the recorder bore was not as tapered as it is nowadays. This fact during the Renaissance Era led to the lovely, rich and strong lower notes that instruments then produced- as noted by makers such as Tom Prescott in the US who has reproduced some of these. Obtaining the higher notes, however, was more difficult, so trying to obtain top C on a Ganassi instrument was not easy. One of the reasons that performers put their knee up to the bottom of the recorder is precisely because this action narrows the bore of the instrument...thereby making the top notes more reachable. So there we have it...now we know why we have to do that for top F# on the treble instrument, for example. A ring of wax on the lower interior of the recorder could also have helped (or you could stay quiet and rely on your neighbour to do the note if you’re not doing a solo - JN).

Progress during this period continued and by the 1670s recorders were being made more with tapered bores. One of the influential families in this regard was the French Hotteterre family, who composed and devised musical theories as well as making instruments. They maintained the known flared-out shape of the bottom of the instrument, whilst narrowing the bore, by shaping the excess wood at the bottom of the instrument. Instruments were made with wood and ivory and French musicians were popular in the UK, with music by composers such as Dieupart, Paisable, and Merci, being well-known.

**The Baroque Era**

Given the well-travelling frequency of the higher notes on recorders, these instruments were useful in consorts at the top end of the spectrum where they could at least be heard against other instruments. So they are useful in some of the music, eg, Bach’s Brandenberg Concertos Nos. 2 and 4. Although recorders became stronger in production of higher notes at the time, this was at the expense of the lovely rich lower notes. So some might argue that the Baroque era cemented the demise of the recorder. However, since different sizes of recorders were being made, this allowed for different recorders to be playing in different registers. The 4th flute, so called, was the most common size of recorder - even more popular than the descant - and played music equivalent to the oboe in other woodwind instruments.

Pitch was another aspect which was changing as time progressed. Pitch had varied a lot - and was to continue to do so right up until into the 20th century - partly because there was little need for it to be standardised across regions or countries until then. Baroque pitch is generally thought to be 415 hz (and A on the piano is 440). Whereas french baroque pitch was about 392 hertz, English baroque pitch was about 405 ...ie. a whole semi-tone lower than 415 though many have suggested that recorders that play at this pitch sound amazingly “right”. So a Stanesby, for example, might really “sing” at this pitch.

One interesting occurrence regarding pitch is that in a violin-centric society, pitch overall tends to be a little higher, with the drama of the strings. In society where this is not the case, the pitch tends to be a bit lower (as during the Baroque Era). So traverse flutes and french baroque pitch tended to be lower.

**The Modern Era**

Pitch was not standardised until the nineteenth century and pitch in Victorian UK was about a semi-tone higher. It was pretty late on into the twentieth century, with the advent of Henry Wood and the Proms concerts, that the need for standardised pitch became evident in order for international players and singers to be able to perform together. This was when 440 hz was accepted. Europe tends to be about 442 and in the US pitch tends to be around 442 or 444. China and Japan are also going up in pitch.

Instrument making has changed. Wider bore instruments are becoming more popular. Some different dimensions within the recorder have been made and some like Paezold recorders, with the way the air circulates inside the top, have a mechanism like an organ-pipe with rich low notes. Other recorder makers have experimented with different aspects of the recorder, with one using metal for the windway. Still others are making instruments with more keys that enable longer instruments such as tenors and basses to have rich, stronger notes than previously. A modern F major treble sounds as a Baroque E key and a tenor recorder in D is equivalent to a french Baroque voice flute. The wide range of recorders and recorder sizes now available is also reflected in the music written for the instrument.

**Zoom Playing**

After a break for tea, Ian gave us some tongue-twisters to prepare us for tonguing and double-tonguing. As he said, double-tonguing can seem difficult because it’s a special technique that we have to ‘do’ and ‘get right’. However, we can fool ourselves into double-tonguing without even realising it by saying, for example, “Kick a cake, go kick a cake!”

More tongue twisters included “Ten to two, the time to do two tiny tattoos”; “Tiny Dotty Teddy” and “Take a ticket to Kentucky”.

Ian displayed and demonstrated some scalic warm-up , including a scale of trills over two octavesnd then we were ready to tackle Schmelzer’s *Sonata a 7 flauti.* We’d been sent the Tenor I part (on its own) in advan ace, but Ian also displayed the full score, with the Tenor I line highlighted. We played with a recording of the whole piece, minus the Tenor I part: it was wonderful to have the feeling of playing in an ensemble again, although the counting was rather tricky! We played it through twice, and Ian encouraged us to read the music both ways - playing from just our own part, and playing from the full score - and notice the pros and cons.

After a few final questions and answers, followed by ‘Zoom goodbyes’, the day came to an end. The whole day was so enjoyable and informative, making full use of technology, yet still user friendly, with so much interest and variety of activities, that one almost forgot we were not together in person.

*Jean Nunn,* *Ann James and Jill Day*