Edition Schott

Edgar Hunt

* 1909

The Bass Recorder

A Concise Method for the Bass in F and Great Recorder in C

ED 11221
ISMN 979-0-2201-0887-7

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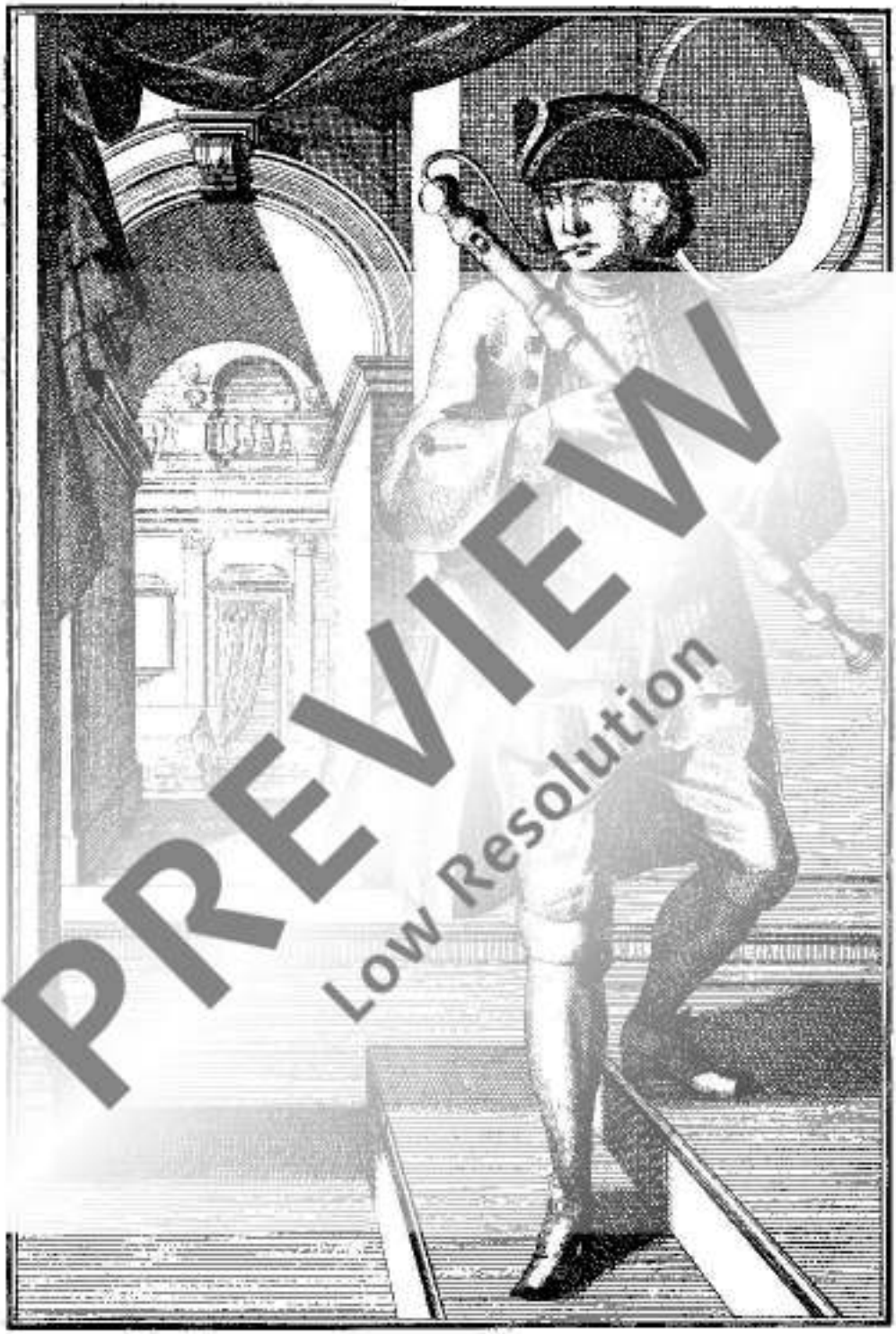


The bass recorder or 'Basson-Flûte' from J. C. Weigel's *Musicalisches Theatrum*, c. 1720

INTRODUCTION

Why a method devoted to the bass recorder? Could it not be said that just as the tenor is an octave below the descant, so stands the bass in relation to the treble and there is no need for a special instruction book. However, there are other considerations that have to be taken into account: differences of notation and playing-position and repertoire, quite apart from the physical needs for good lungs to fill the instrument and a good span to stretch it.

In recent years the great bass has been revived as a practical instrument for the recorder orchestra even though its weight may seem too heavy in the smaller consort. So the present remarks can be stretched to apply to it as well. It is in c, an octave below the tenor, and is generally easier to finger than the bass in f, as its size makes a simple key mechanism, optional with the ordinary bass essential.

Edgar Hunt

Chesham Bois
1974

THE SCOPE OF THIS BOOK

In the following pages it will be assumed that the reader is already familiar with the treble and/or descant recorders so that attention can be devoted to those features which are of particular interest and importance to the bass player. These may be considered under the following headings:

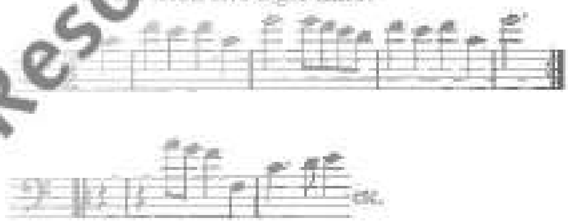
1. Notation
2. Holding the bass
3. Fingering the wider span of the holes
4. Some peculiarities of fingering
5. Repertoire
6. Learning the fingerings in relation to the notation
7. Style in performance
8. The Great Bass in c
9. The Renaissance Bass
10. Historical note

1. NOTATION

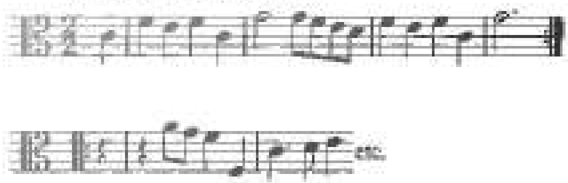
The actual sounds of [illegible] range upwards [illegible] the [illegible] clef [illegible] This was the u[illegible] to the eighte[illegible] abou[illegible] [illegible] To write music at th[illegible] the treble or (b) the bass [illegible] would involve a large numbe[illegible] lines, and cause difficulty in [illegible] alto (c) clef could, of [illegible] but this would not be [illegible] solution, and many potential bass [illegible] might be frightened away! In a few [illegible] the treble staff is used, but the [illegible] solution is undoubtedly that adopted from the sixteenth century onwards, namely, to use the bass staff but write the music an octave lower than the actual sounds (d). This method has the further advantage that, if there should be no bass recorder available, the part can be played by a 'cellist or bassoonist (or other bass instrumentalist). In such a case the player should play the music at the written pitch and not transpose it an octave higher. The recorder quartet constitutes a 4ft. choir. When combined with other 8ft. instrum[illegible] (such as a string quar[illegible] the recorder[illegible] best heard not in uni[illegible] but [illegible] higher. So whe[illegible] 'cell[illegible] group it shou[illegible] an octave lower th[illegible] i.e., as written. [illegible] out in the diff[illegible] above:

(a) In [illegible] at pitch. This method [illegible]

(b) In [illegible] clef – at pitch. The high "d" [illegible] need five leger lines!



(c) In the alto clef – at pitch. A possible, but not popular, solution.



(d) In the bass clef, sounding an octave higher. The most practical solution.

2. HOLDING THE BASS

There are many ways of doing this, but none is really satisfactory unless the instrument is first provided with a thumb-rest incorporating a ring to which an adjustable sling can be attached. The instrument can be held either in front of the player (like Hudgebut's angel – see fig. 7), or diagonally across the player's body, as in the engraving from the *Musicalisches Theatrum* of Joh. Christoph Weigel which forms the frontispiece. The latter is similar to the way in which the bassoon is held, particularly when the player is seated. The weight of the bass is taken by the sling, while the R.H. thumb presses forward to provide a secure hold, with the mouth-piece at the right height. The early players seem to have managed without a sling, but the fingers are not really free unless the weight of the instrument can be taken by one. When the player is seated, the bass could be supported by an adjustable end-pin, comparable to that of a 'cello, for greater comfort. [illegible] was, in fact, done at the beginning of [illegible] eighteenth century, as can [illegible] some of the surviving instruments [illegible] were provided with a [illegible] into the bore at the [illegible] was diverted to an [illegible] the side.

The length [illegible] to the pla[illegible] requ[illegible] he has neither to [illegible] up to the mouth-piece.

[illegible] seventeenth and [illegible] were fitted with a [illegible] took the player's breath [illegible] of the instrument. There [illegible] ways of fitting this: (1) with [illegible] crook which entered the top [illegible] head, or (2) with a shorter [illegible] entering the back of the head. In [illegible] of (1) the player's position was [illegible] behind the instrument, while in (2) the crook could be turned to one side. Many modern basses employ method (2), but when (1) is used, the crook can be jointed so as to swivel round to the most convenient angle.

Some modern basses are constructed so that they can be blown 'direct' like other recorders, without a crook. Such instruments, however, are sometimes provided with a knee joint so as to bring the finger holes to a convenient position. They have a thumb rest and sling and are held like a bass clarinet. Others are straight and are blown through a slot at the back of the head-joint cap.

Whichever type is being played, the function of the R.H. thumb is either to push forward to keep the instrument steady, or to support it (like an [illegible] tenor). In either case, the fingers [illegible] L.H. thumb must be free.

THE SLING

This [illegible] important [illegible] equipment, and, though [illegible] adapt a bass-clarinet, saxophone [illegible] bassoon sling, it is [illegible] difficult to [illegible] own to measure. [illegible] 5 feet of silk cord the [illegible] (about 1/8"), a large [illegible] and a swivel (such as one [illegible]). The cord will eventually [illegible] three times through the bead, [illegible] the [illegible] to a suitable size [illegible] 3/16"). [illegible] estimate the length of [illegible] the crook at the angle you [illegible] for playing, measure the distance [illegible] mouth-piece to thumb-rest ring, [illegible] it and add 18". Take one end of the cord and thread it through the bead, [illegible] through the swivel, again through the bead and swivel, and then a third time through the bead only. If this third time is difficult, place the end *between* the two strands which are already through and pull on them – it should then slide through without difficulty. Finally, tie or splice the two ends together or attach them to the ends of a strip of leather about 10" long and ½" wide. The sling can be adjusted to the right length by means of the double loop which passes through the bead and swivel.

3. FINGERING THE WIDER SPAN OF THE HOLES:

Modern bass recorders can be divided into two classes: (1) those in which the holes are grouped in threes to be in reach of the fingers, and (2) those in which the holes are more evenly spaced, necessitating some form of key mechanism to cover

them. Many of the basses in general use today (such as Dolmetsch) belong to the first class; others, including Küng and Moeck, belong to the second. Ideally, when playing the recorder, the fingers should be held over the holes at right angles to the instrument. This is possible with the descant but, as the distances increase with the larger instruments, so the angles become more acute, until, with a small hand and a bass recorder, the third finger is straightened and the first curled back to span the holes and be ready for action.

In placing the fingers on the instrument, first see that L.H. 3 and R.H. 3 and 4 are comfortable, the foot-joint being turned so that the touch of the key is well placed. Then place the L.H. thumb and 1, and R.H. 1, and finally the middle finger of each hand. When not in use for covering the holes, the fingers should be over them. Lateral movements to reach the hol[illegible] should be avoided. The same principles apply when there is a key mechanism [illegible] in the Küng and Moeck basses and va[illegible] makes of great-bass recorders.

A small hand is not the o[illegible] A hand with a good span [illegible] is often coupled with [illegible] small [illegible] tips that they fall in[illegible] holes. [illegible] a case try rubber finger[illegible]

4. SOME [illegible] FINGE[illegible]

By [illegible] twice [illegible] la[illegible] able [illegible] measurements it [illegible] theory, to make one [illegible] two octaves with [illegible] but the stretch between the fi[illegible] would be much too great, though [illegible] could be added to make [illegible] It is more usual to com[illegible] by drilling some of the holes out [illegible] true acoustical positions and [illegible] to the fingers, adjusting the intonation by altering the sizes of the holes (see Fig. 8). This was the way in which the eighteenth century and earlier makers designed their basses. The complexity of the problems involved will be seen when it is realized that each note hole governs the pitch and quality of more than one note. Varying the size and position of one hole to improve the tuning of a particular note may adversely affect others.

The maker will have done his best to provide a true diatonic scale of open notes but the player must be prepared to 'help' the tuning of cross-fingered notes. In the lower octave these are formed by missing one hole and covering the next two. If the maker has had to make the 'missed' hole larger than usual, covering two may [illegible] enough and the play[illegible] will have [illegible] cover two and a hal[illegible] even [illegible] shade the 'missed' ho[illegible] This [illegible] particularly to [illegible] e' flat. On [illegible] R.H. 1, 2, ½; for [illegible] c'' sharp on the [illegible] hole [illegible] will probably be proporti[illegible] R.H. 1 and 2 w[illegible] be altered [illegible] sharp is generally little fl[illegible] f and g may [illegible] it may be necessary to [illegible] a little. In the second octave [illegible] and b' natural may need [illegible] c'' sharp will almost [illegible] half-covering by R.H. 1. [illegible] using the key will [illegible] a flat d''; on newer [illegible] it may give a useful d'' sharp.

The [illegible] remarks are based on the writer's experience over a number of years, with instruments by many different makers. E[illegible] player needs to get to know his own instrument and yet be adaptable so that he is not defeated by a strange instrument. Most players acquire a flexibility of breath control when playing a treble or other recorder so that there is instant response to the finer points of intonation. When playing the bass, the fingers must be equally responsive as well. Much of this skill is, however, defeated when holes are covered by keys and not fingers and there is then a strong case for a perforated key for R.H. 1, enabling the player to shade the upper c'' sharp.

5. REPERTOIRE:

We must devote this section to original music for the bass recorder. There is not space to list the many arrangements of music, from the middle ages to the present day, which include a part for it. This original music can be divided into

three main groups: (1) ensembles of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in which recorders (flauti) are specified, (2) eighteenth-century chamber music, and (3) modern consorts which include a bass.

Original bass recorder parts in ensembles:

le Sieur Henry le Jeune:
Gavotte pour les Flustes douces from Marin Mersenne's Harmonie Universelle (1636/7)

Antonio Bertali (1605–1669):
Sonatella a 5 Flauti et Organo

J. H. Schmelzer (1623–1680):
Sonata a 7 Flauti

H. I. F. Biber (1644–1704):
Sonata pro Tabula a 10 (5 recorders, 5 strings and continuo)

J. C. Faber (c. 1730):
Parties sur les Fleut dous à 3

To these must be added the man[illegible] consorts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for unspecified instrum[illegible]ts, headed by the *Pavans, Galliards, [illegible]mains* . . . (1599) of Anthony Holbor[illegible] which at least included *M[illegible] Wind[illegible] Instruments* in the title.

A unique chamber w[illegible]k is the Tri[illegible] F major by C. P. E. B[illegible] for b[illegible] recor[illegible], viola and continuo. Th[illegible] tone [illegible] the bass demands th[illegible] the o[illegible] sho[illegible] play with great re[illegible] [illegible]d sub[illegible] [illegible] here the piano [illegible]ay p[illegible]ve su[illegible] to the harpsichord [illegible] ac[illegible] instrument.

Com[illegible] to m[illegible] t[illegible] there is a gro[illegible]ing [illegible] of [illegible] for record[illegible] — d[illegible]ant, t[illegible]le, ten[illegible] [illegible]d bass — including th[illegible]llowing:

Al[illegible] von [illegible]ckerath:	Ambacher Blockflötenquartett
Benj[illegible] Britten:	Scherzo
R[illegible] Doppelbauer:	Divertimento in E minor
Hans Gal:	Quartettino (2 descants, treble and tenor or bass)
Harald Genzmer:	Quartettino
Carl Gerhardt:	Quartett
Walrad Guericke:	Blockflötenquartett
Edmund Rubbra:	Notturno
Gaston Saux:	Quatuor en Fa
Gaston Saux:	Quatuor en Sol

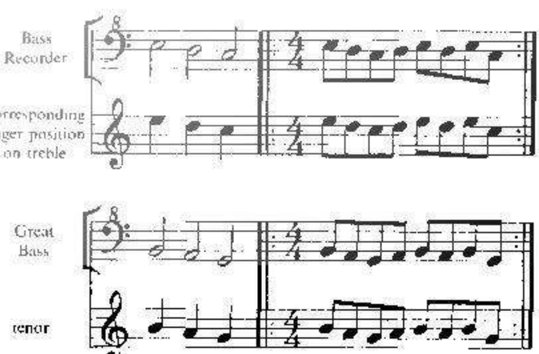
Quartets for bamboo pipes by Rubbra and Vaughan Williams have been arranged for recorder quartet but are not entirely satisfactory, as a part for an alto pipe (which is in A) does not lie happily for the treble recorder to which it has to be assigned. Recorders, strings and a clarinet in C are combined in Bohuslav Martinu's *Pastorals* for 2 descan[illegible] 2 tenor and [illegible] recorders, 2 violins, cla[illegible] and 'cell[illegible]

The first co[illegible]oser t[illegible] exploit [illegible] full range of recor[illegible] [illegible] work was Gaston Saux, w[illegible]se [illegible] *Un beau jour d'[illegible]* (MS) [illegible] score[illegible] sopranino, descant, [illegible] ten[illegible] [illegible] and great bass.

[illegible] LEARNING [illegible] FINGERINGS IN RE[illegible]TION [illegible] THE NOTATION:

A[illegible] fir[illegible] [illegible]ploring the bass and finding out w[illegible] [illegible]els like under the hands, the player [illegible] get used to the new relation[illegible] [illegible]etween notation and fingering and h[illegible] he cannot d[illegible] better than follow [illegible]lan often used when starting the descant and other recorders.

Havin[illegible] fo[illegible]d the positions for hands and fingers [illegible] the player should begin with L.H. th[illegible]mb and 1 for e′. Then add L.H. 2 fo[illegible] d′ and 3 for c′. In the following examples each group of fingerings will be written out for bass recorder and for great bass; and under each will be indicated the corresponding notes, as if for treble and tenor respectively. Remember that the bass and great bass both sound an octave higher than the written notes.



Continuing with the right hand, the player can add 1 and 2 together for a (L.H. remaining in position); then