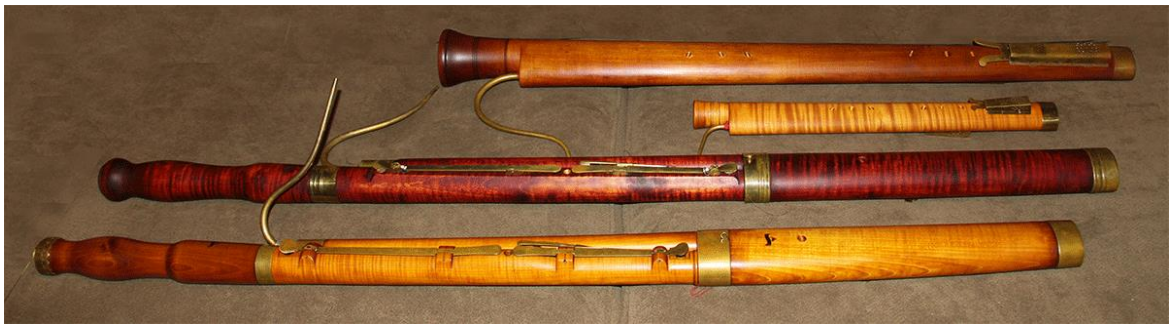
# EARLY BASSOONS

## The Baroque Bassoon

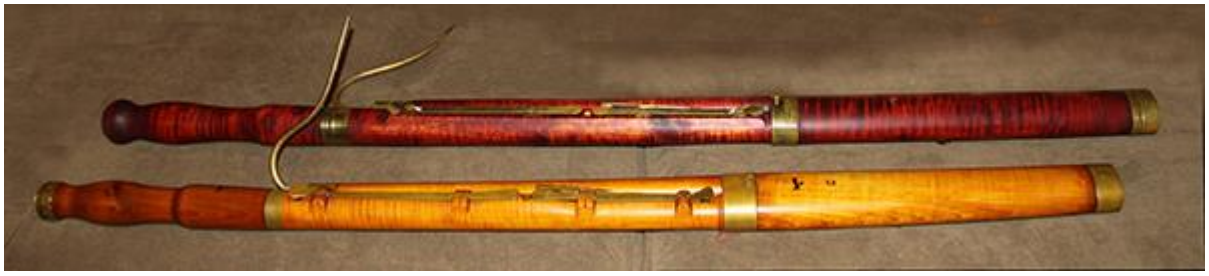


It is difficult to determine with precision when and by whom the baroque bassoon was invented. There is, however, indirect evidence suggesting that the instrument was developed by the Hotteterre family of instrument makers in France in the mid 1600's. They were also responsible for the invention of the baroque oboe (which emerged from the renaissance shawm) as well as important changes to the recorder and transverse flute.

The bassoon at this time functioned as a bass to the newly invented French oboes and by approximately 1700 the use of the bassoon had spread to neighbouring countries, replacing the earlier predecessor, the bass dulcian.

As is the case with the modern bassoon, the baroque bassoon was comprised of four joints with the lower joint (called the boot) being constructed with two tubes that were connected at the bottom. This created a U-shaped bore allowing the player to produce a range of approximately 2 ¾ octaves which was roughly equivalent to the range of the baroque cello. The baroque bassoon was in most cases built with four keys and eight tone holes which allowed the player (with the exception of the lowest two notes), to play chromatically throughout the instrument's range. This was produced by using a combination of cross-fingerings, partially covering tone holes and overblowing octaves. As with the modern bassoon, towards the top of the instrument was a thin metal tube called a bocal in which a double reed was attached which directed the air from the player's mouth into the instrument.

In terms of the sound of the baroque bassoon, this differed from maker to maker. Generally speaking, the sound was fatter, more resistant, more raw and less smooth than the modern bassoon. Players of modern reproductions will observe that unlike a modern bassoon which will sound comparatively thin and constricted in the lower register, the baroque bassoon will broaden out which is especially useful in playing basso continuo parts which was the role in which the instrument primarily played. Furthermore, each note will have its own characteristic which can be altered using cross fingerings, a trait which is useful for the emphasis and articulation required in performing in the style of baroque music.

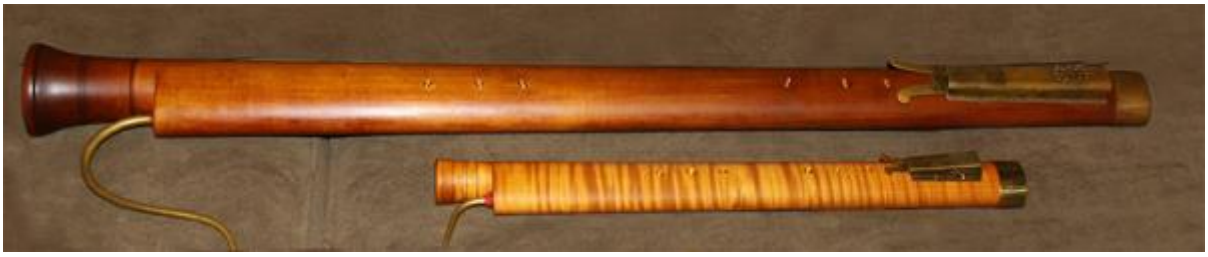


The top instrument is a baroque bassoon by Olivier Cotter after Charles Bizey.

The bottom instrument is a baroque bassoon by Peter de Koningh.

## The Dulcian

As mentioned previously, the baroque bassoon emerged from an earlier instrument called the bass dulcian (called the 'curtal' in England) due to important changes to the instrument being made in France in the mid 1600's. Once again it is difficult to determine the exact origin of the dulcian. However there is evidence of instruments being produced in Italy by the mid 1500's.



The top instrument is a bass dulcian by Barbara Stanley and Graham Lyndon-Jones.

The bottom instrument is an alto dulcian by Martin Pretorius.

Unlike the baroque bassoon, the dulcian was constructed out of a single piece of wood, although often the bell was a separate piece. However, like the baroque bassoon, the bore was joined at the bottom to create a U shape thereby allowing greater portability than the earlier bass shawm. The dulcian also had a reed which was in direct contact with the player's lips which allowed for greater control of the sound (including dynamic control) than the bass shawm in which the reed was enclosed in a cap called a pirouette. This meant that, unlike the bass shawm, the dulcian had the benefit of being able to be played both outdoors for processions as well as indoors for church services. In fact, the name dulcian originates from the fact that the instrument could play sweetly.

The dulcian had eight tone holes but unlike the baroque bassoon, had only two keys. The fingerings were very similar to the baroque bassoon. However, in some cases, fingerings were less complicated which, along with the smaller size of the instrument, meant that it was capable of playing very fast passages. Due to the larger size of the bore however, the lower register of the dulcian was more resistant than the baroque bassoon. Some dulcians were built with a muted perforated bell to address this issue.

As with many instruments emerging during the renaissance, the dulcian was constructed in various sizes ranging from the contrabass through to the soprano. This allowed the instrument to play in small ensembles called 'consorts' performing polyphonic music with other dulcians, or in a 'broken consort' with other instruments such as shawms, cornetti and sackbuts. These various sizes continued to be regularly played until mid 1600 at which stage all sizes except the bass fell out of use.

The use of the dulcian, however, was cosmopolitan throughout the 17$^{th}$ century. There is evidence of it being used throughout Europe from Finland through to the British Isles. Furthermore, with the Spanish conquistadores exploring the New World and the establishment of Catholic churches and missionaries, the Dulcian was in extensive use in both Central and South America.

The regular use of the bass dulcian continued until the early 1700's and co-existed with the baroque bassoon from the early 1600's. In Spain however, the dulcian continued to be played up until the early 20$^{th}$ century.

## Acquiring a Historical Bassoon

One of the misconceptions I hear with respect to playing historical bassoons is the cost of acquiring an instrument. In most cases however, reproductions of historical bassoons are less expensive than their modern equivalents with a number of quality reproductions now being produced throughout Europe and the United States. That said, the wait time for a new instrument can be from between six months and two years. Excellent baroque bassoon reproductions are produced by Guntram Wolf Holzblasinstrumente GmbH, Paul Hailperin, Oliver Cottet, Matthew Dart and Peter de Koningh among others. Makers of excellent dulcian reproductions include Eric Moulder, Martin Praetorius and Vincenzo Onida and others. Many makers can be contacted by way of their websites where enquiries can be made and orders placed.

It is important in particular to ensure that you acquire a historical bassoon of an appropriate pitch. Most baroque ensembles performing music of the late baroque (1685 to 1750) play at A=415 (a semitone lower than modern pitch) and hence, it is critical that you initially acquire a baroque bassoon at that pitch. On occasions, however, baroque ensembles performing music of the late baroque will play at A=392 (a whole tone lower than modern pitch) when performing French repertoire, and hence you may wish to purchase an A=392 baroque bassoon as a second instrument.

With respect to dulcians, most early baroque and late renaissance groups (1550 – 1685) perform at A=440 so it is critical that you either acquire a dulcian which is at this pitch, or alternatively, at the more historically-accurate pitch of A=466, at which many early music groups are also now performing.

In selecting a historical bassoon, my recommendation is to listen to a number of recordings of baroque orchestras and find a sound of a bassoon section that you like. Once you have done this, find out what instruments they are playing on by looking in the programs where the makers of the player's instruments are listed. This often can be discovered by undertaking a simple Google search. Alternatively, you should ask for a recommendation from a professional historical bassoonist.

Occasionally, used historical bassoons are listed for sale via the Early Music Shop Used Instrument Agency (www.earlymusicshop.com), Lazar's Early Music (www.lazarsearlymusic.com) or Musical Chairs (https://www.musicalchairs.info). Although purchasing a used instrument will eliminate the wait time, make sure that you check the condition of the instrument before committing yourself to the purchase. Ensure, for example, that there is no mould or cracks in the bore.

## Playing Historical Bassoons for the First Time

In many respects playing the historical bassoons is more difficult than playing the modern bassoons. However, the colour and texture of early bassoons makes playing these instruments highly rewarding. In particular, the lack of keys, a wider bore, the individual character of each note and each individual instrument can take a while to become accustomed to.

The main problem that modern players have when first playing historical bassoons is suddenly and randomly overblowing octaves and splitting notes. This can be addressed through the method you blow through the instrument. When you play through a historical bassoon, the breathing should be a lot deeper than playing a modern bassoon. I like to use the analogy of trying to blow out the candles from a birthday cake. You should also as much as possible, support the reed from the sides of the mouth. Over time, you will find that the sudden random octave jumps will be gradually eliminated to the point that they rarely ever occur, especially if a large amount of time is spent playing long sustained notes and intervals, firstly in the lower register then progressively moving into the middle and upper registers.

When purchasing a new instrument it is necessary to break the instrument in to avoid cracks to the wood. Each maker will have their own unique instructions in this regard which you should follow carefully. Depending upon the maker, this will ordinarily involve gently playing the instrument in the middle and lower registers for 10-20 minutes a day, then increasing by 10 minutes each week. Then it will be possible to play on the instrument as normal. After a few months, it is possible to play the instrument normally without any time restrictions. If the instrument has not been played for several weeks, it is necessary to break the instrument in by playing for no longer than 30 each day for a few days.

The instrument should be swabbed after use and oiled using a small amount of sweet almond oil every six months. After the first year, more or less, most makers will suggest that you return the instrument to them to be rebored because of the changes to the instrument brought about by the breaking in process.

**Performance Opportunities on Early Bassoon**

Unfortunately performance opportunities for early bassoon are difficult to come by in Australia, especially outside of the larger Australian cities, although my own city, Brisbane, is now the home to a number of period instrument baroque orchestras and chamber ensembles. Early Music Societies of the various Australian states (such as the Early Music Society of Queensland) can often be contacted in order to put you in contact with other members who play other historical instruments at A=415 and A=440, in particular recorder and viol players. Many of these societies also hold performing workshops for players of historical instruments of all standards.

Another possibility is attending some of the many workshops which are held overseas. Canadian period instrument orchestra Tafelmusik for example, hold their annual Baroque Summer Institute in Toronto (See https://www.tafelmusik.org/artist-training/tafelmusik-baroque-summer-institute.

In 2016, I attended the Mezinárodní letní škola staré hudby (International Summer School of Early Music) in Valtice, Czech Republic, which provided the opportunity to perform chamber music by Vivaldi and Purcell's King Arthur in a baroque riding hall, as well as receiving lessons from Hungarian baroque bassoonist, Györgyi Farkas. Also in 2016, I attended the La Pellegrina Summer School which provided the opportunity to perform choral-orchestral works by Brixi and Zelenka in the late medieval Franciscan Monastery at Bechyně, Czech Republic.

**Early Bassoon links**

Dulcian Page by Hans Mons – https://www.dulcians.org/

'The Heckler' Historical Bassoon Page by Andrew Burns – http://www.theheckeler.ca/2012/01/breaking-trail-and-wind-for-classical.html

***Shaun Wigley***