

Old oboes, new problems

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Two periods of time have seen remarkable developments in the life history of the oboe—the late eighteenth century and the last twenty years. In both periods, the ideals of rationalism played a part, albeit in different ways. Around 1800, aesthetic shifts resulting from the influence of rationalism caused the characteristic playing qualities of the oboe to be seen as problematic. In recent years, the rationalised modern world has compromised the historical integrity of the same old oboes while attempting to revive them. The problem facing the ‘old oboe’ today is one of turning historical sentimentality into historical empathy.

The late eighteenth century is characterised by the concept of rationalism, which permeated the fabric of industrial society. The changes sustained in the design of the oboe in the period 1770–1830, and in the usage of musical notation, may plausibly be read as a reflection of rationalist ideals. Indications of the advent of rationalism may be found at least from the middle of the eighteenth century in the writings and philosophical aims of the French *Encyclopédistes*, and, for example, in Voltaire’s *Essay on the General History of Manners* of 1754. This work in particular ‘is concerned with progress, which he... conceived as essentially the advancement of the human race in and towards complete rationality, and hence towards perfection’.¹ Rationalist ideals are also evident in the encyclopedic work of Nicolas Framery, whose schematic table of musicology of 1770 remains significant today. Vincent Duckles comments that Framery’s scheme is ‘thoroughly rationalistic...comprehensive, symmetrical and essentially static’.² The central distinguishing feature of the ‘enlightened’ mentality is that the human condition is taken to be fundamentally positive, not flawed by the state of mortality itself. If disorder and chaos could be swept aside, human nature would realise unlimited potential. However, modern critics such as Gordon Wright tend to point out the folly of these ideals: ‘the *philosophes* scoffed at people who believed in miracles, yet they built their whole system on faith

in the miracle of human perfectibility’.³

For the genre of the woodwind treatise, the course of the eighteenth century demonstrates a shift from a pluralist to a rationalist mindset. At the outset of the century, this type of publication is loosely defined, as is exemplified by the variations in title, each alluding to individual aims and purposes for publication: for example, *Traité de la ...*, *L’art du ...*, *La véritable manière ...*, *Principes de la ...*. The titles often allude to simplification for amateurs, clear and easy explanation and to capturing the art of music. Such treatises usually aimed to appeal to as wide a public as possible in the interests of financial profit. It is obvious that no single concept of the ‘woodwind treatise’ was yet in existence. By 1800 the newly formed Paris Conservatoire provided the genre with a formal conceptual coherence: a specific audience of students in need of systematic education. With this newly found focus providing a means of defining the genre, the designations *Méthode* and *Raisonnée* became virtually obligatory in treatise titles around 1800. The new genre characteristically defined itself as a systematic and integral method of playing an instrument, a concept that continues largely unchanged through to the present day.

The influence of rationalist ideals is perceptible in the treatment of technique in woodwind treatises over the course of the eighteenth century, as for example, in relation to articulation. Despite the increased complexity in the marking of slurs and detached notes, the notation of articulation in the late eighteenth century was a simplification of earlier implicit syllabic articulation. As articulatory notation became more visually explicit in the late eighteenth-century, shadings of articulation actually became less varied, to the point where, at the century’s close, allusion was made to them as a matter of course in most treatises, but actual instruction in their usage was considered superfluous. Specifically, the markedly unequal style of tonguing advocated in early French treatises fell from favour. The earliest voice of dissent was that

of Michel Corrette, who stated in his *Méthode* of 1735 that 'formerly the two syllables *tu, ru* were used to express the attacks of the tongue. But the present virtuosos, who do not teach by *tu, ru* regard these as being absurd and only serve to hinder the student'.⁴ This statement, which is typical of the rationalist intellectual climate, asserts that the old system unduly compromises the potential of the student, therefore necessitating the adoption of a new system such as that advocated by the author.

None of the later eighteenth-century treatises discuss the application of articulation in a way that approaches the earlier systems of J.P. Freillon Poncein (1700), Jacques Hotteterre (1707) or Johann Quantz (1752). The last detailed system of syllabic articulation is provided by Johann Georg Tromlitz in 1791 and is arguably anachronistic for the period.⁵ The trend towards rational simplicity in articulation is noted by James Grush who states that 'as the century progressed, the tradition of phonetic tonguings continued to wane and the use of the slur became more varied and important'.⁶ However, the awareness of a range of articulation beyond the simple realisation of conventional written notation is evident in treatises of the classical period, although information about their physical production is usually omitted. Amand Vanderhagen's *Méthode nouvelle et raisonnée pour la Clarinette* of 1785 states that 'there are still other tongue strokes, but as they can only derive from those I have spoken of, teachers will acquaint pupils with them'.⁷

Other allusions to the existence of an infinite variety of articulation are made by François Garnier (c. 1800) and by Josef Sellner (1825). In his *Méthode pour le hautbois*, Garnier writes

There exists only one tongue stroke, since there is only one manner of articulating sound on a wind instrument, but this articulation may be strong or weak, clean or soft, according to the character of the music.⁸

Similarly, Sellner describes degrees of articulation and actually suggests the means of physically producing them. It should be noted, however, that this later treatise seems to herald a new era in the genre of the woodwind treatise, and belongs to the more progressive Viennese rather than French oboe playing tradition.

It is necessary to place it [the tongue] directly on the opening of the reed. The air held by this operation makes something like the syllable. [*sic*] **II**, from which it results that the tongue

released behind the reed makes a sharp crying note, if one says **DI** in place of **II** the sound becomes weaker, one can also articulate sounds without the tongue and with the lips alone.⁹

So, although the notation of articulation became more explicit and rationalised, there is no suggestion that woodwind phrasing became any less nuanced in performance in the late eighteenth century. Quite simply, the means of providing instruction about articulation in treatises changed from the explicit to the implicit, while the reverse is true for the notation of articulation in music.

In keeping with the spirit of rationalism, various proposals for reforming notation were heard throughout the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries at the French Royal Academy of Sciences. These included proposals from Sauveur in 1697, Jean-François Demoz in 1726 and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in 1742,¹⁰ although it should also be noted that Rousseau's proposals were only as sophisticated as his limited grasp of composition.¹¹ Each aimed to rationalise the use of staves, especially in the spatial representation of pitch. Despite contemporary awareness of the limits of articulatory notation, and variations in notational usage between individual composers and the authors of treatises, no mention was ever made of attempting to notate degrees of articulation or other expression in greater detail. This would seem to further indicate that articulation and the nuances of expression were now perceived to be firmly in the realm of performance and therefore beyond the concerns of the Academy, as well as beyond the role of the treatise.¹²

Further indication that performance was affected by rationalist ideals in different ways to written notation is provided by Dene Barnett's research into the notation of eighteenth-century orchestral music. He suggests that non-uniform notation may at times demonstrate a conscious reflection of prevalent performance practice by composers.¹³ Examples of non-uniform notation are also common in treatises of the period, as for example in the music appended to the oboe treatises of Johann Christian Fischer and of Vanderhagen. Fischer's *New and Complete Instructions for the Oboe* (c. 1810)¹⁴ is not a high quality publication, nor is it free of printing errors; Vanderhagen's treatise however, was more carefully produced. A clear example of non-uniform notation occurs in the first duet sonata from Vanderhagen's treatise.¹⁵ In four separate and similar instances, the lower part lacks

articulation markings, while the rest of the sonata is notated accurately and consistently.



Example 1: Amand Vanderhagen, *Moderato*, bars 18-19.



Example 2: Vanderhagen, *Moderato*, bar 41.



Example 3: Vanderhagen, *Lent*, bars 6-8.



Example 4: Vanderhagen, *Rondo Allegro*, bars 5-8.

So while notation in general was increasingly prescribed and made explicit during the eighteenth century, such non-uniform anomalies may indicate that the culture of performance was slower to adopt a mindset of rational uniformity.

With the directive power of the slur ever increasing, the oboe adapted to suit its new aesthetic demands. After a century of static design and unbroken popularity, its old idiosyncrasies came to be perceived as new problems.

Certainly, keys are associated with the Industrial Revolution. But the technology necessary for large numbers of keys was already in place by the early eighteenth century. Musettes like the one illustrated in Jacques Hotteterre's *Méthode pour la musette* of 1737 had 13 keys as standard equipment Despite this, keys were rarely used on woodwinds until the end of the eighteenth century, and then only when they were absolutely necessary The primary purpose of additional keys was not to advance pure technique, but to adapt instruments to the new demands of early nineteenth-century music.¹⁶

The important changes made were not the superficial adding of keys, for the technology for doing this had been available for over one hundred and fifty years,¹⁷ but a fundamental revision of the instrument's response. The new concern was not ease of finger movement, for oboists had managed well enough with cross-fingerings for one hundred years, but equality of tone and the ability to slur neatly. In fact, some performers in the period around 1800, notably August-Gustave Vogt and Antoine Sallentin, professors at the Paris Conservatoire, resisted the introduction of keys and feared the loss of control over performance variables.¹⁸ J. Wragg's *Improved Flute Preceptor* (1818) asserts the value of new keys by answering common misgivings about them.¹⁹ From this we can deduce that it was popularly felt that keys, unlike fingers, were susceptible to mechanical failure, resulting in performers being compromised by factors beyond their control. However, conservative musicians were ultimately unable to withstand the force of rationalism; this era 'was on the threshold of a period of inventions which left no excuse for tolerating any difficulty for which a theoretical solution could be found'.²⁰

The influence of rationalism in this period is more discernible in the tone-quality and response of the instrument than in the superficial adding of

keywork. The construction of eighteenth-century oboes is fundamentally different from the modern instrument in regard to air column resistance. The generation of sound on an oboe is dependent upon the pressure and speed of a column of air. With the modern instrument the resistance of this air column must be built into the reed itself to a large extent, as the large tone holes on the instrument's bore negate the accumulation of pressure. Old oboes, however, were constructed with smaller tone holes, and so a considerably larger and more flexible reed could be used. This allows more freedom in articulation and nuance,²¹ but makes inaccurate finger movements more discernible to the ear, especially on account of the cross-fingerings required.²² Cross-fingerings create a more veiled tone on some notes such as b', in contrast to other bright notes. It is this 'irrationality' of design that allows a marked contrast of character in different tonalities and which fell from grace in the new aesthetic. Evidence from Vanderhagen is indicative of contemporaneous concern to eliminate the audible connections between notes:

It is the different tongue strokes that make up the expression, but great care must be taken to make the tongue and fingers strike together.²³

In addition, the concept of neatness, *nette*, and its desirability in music, constantly recurs in treatises published around 1800, as in François Devienne's *Nouvelle méthode* (1794), where the author voices typical objection to the use of double-tonguing on the flute.

It only produces a disagreeable rolling sound in the ear; in this case it is impossible to have neatness of execution and it constrains whoever uses it to be able neither to provide nuance in their passages nor give any expression.²⁴

Rationalism and the ideals of the Enlightenment resulted in the displacement of the oboe in favour of the clarinet on the grounds of aesthetic inadequacy, and decreed its transformation in the early nineteenth century. But to regard the metamorphosis of the oboe as technological cause and effect, or as simplistic progress, belittles the validity of the prior eighteenth-century aesthetic. Clearly, it was the force of intellectual ideals and newly redefined aesthetics that played the greater role in this transformation.

In considering the aesthetic changes that took place in this age of rationalism, can we assume that the current revival of pre-rationalist instruments

such as eighteenth-century oboes signifies a return to a pluralist mindset? Yes, in that we now allow a multiplicity of sonorities to be legitimate concepts of the sound of 'the oboe'—baroque, classical, even romantic historical instruments, along with the modern Lorée tradition and avant-garde extended techniques—all of which have co-existed for at least 20 years.

However, an apparent danger in this situation is that our seemingly pluralist actions may not be supported by truly pluralist intentions. Leaders of the historical oboe revival in the 1960s such as Bruce Haynes and Michel Piguet have recently addressed this issue. Haynes questions those aspects of modern historical oboe performance which are more expedient than historically informed, such as the use of arbitrary universal 'Baroque' pitches, when no concept of rationalised uniformity of pitch existed in the eighteenth century. This results in today's situation where makers produce instruments after only a handful of historical instruments that worked well at a' = 415, or which could be easily scaled-down to this pitch.²⁵

Another historical anomaly is the discrepancy between modern practice and old fingerings. If modern performers of historical oboes were to utilise the fingerings notated in fingering charts throughout the eighteenth century, modern audiences would need to challenge their assumed notions of leading notes—particularly c'' and f', which are usually very low even by modern standards of unequal temperaments. The fingering for other notes is simple to the point of crude—b'' is unreliable at best with the simple fingering, which in general is now never used. However, without eighteenth-century sound recordings, we cannot be sure that such fingerings were utilised by professional players. This is one situation in which modern musicians have been forced to discount written evidence as it appears in historical treatises as being intended originally for an amateur audience. Certainly, the world of oboe playing is characteristically empirical, and even in this age of electronic information, most information of value is communicated orally. There is no reason to doubt that this situation was any different in the eighteenth century in regard to printed information.

Michel Piguet is responsible for another historical anomaly, the two-piece staple. Most baroque oboists today utilise a modern cor anglais staple—

the brass tube onto which the cane is tied, inserted over a base-staple or bocal. Piguet began using a two-piece staple system in the early 1980s to facilitate experimentation with relative intonation and to eliminate the variant created by differences between individual handmade staples. While this has enabled a great deal of empirical research to take place in the last ten years, the vast majority of performers are now dependent on the control and time-saving afforded by two-piece staples, and never play on historically accurate handmade one-piece staples. In fact, some performers now utilise three-piece staples. Piguet is now calling for a return to one-piece staples, which differ mainly in tone and harmonic response, in reaction to this trend. Certainly, we seem to have lost sight of the eighteenth-century concept of individuality and non-uniformity, in the interests of twentieth-century expediency.

Another small historical anomaly, the use of nylon thread in the reed binding process, is also symptomatic of the malaise of modern expediency. Significant research on some of the earliest surviving reeds has been carried out by Geoffrey Burgess.²⁶ He explains that the type of thread used has a direct bearing on the amount of pressure able to be exerted when tying the cane to the staple. As this pressure determines the form of the finished reed to some extent, and affects its responsiveness, the type of thread employed is not inconsequential in determining the final sound of an oboe. By failing to experiment with the natural fibres available to eighteenth-century oboists—linen and silk—most modern players of historical instruments unnecessarily compromise the historical accuracy of their endeavours.²⁷ In a subject filled with so many unknown and unknowable variables, it is at least unwise to ignore the known. As Robert Donington states in regard to historical treatises, 'no-one becomes any the more musical for remaining ignorant of the evidence'.²⁸

In light of the philosophical beating handed out to 'authenticity' in the past five years, and our continued failure to truly utilise the fruits of considerable musicological inquiry into historical performance, it would not be surprising to find a sense of disquiet in this field. This need not be so. If we can suspend rational disbelief and discard expediency where it compromises historical research, historical instrument performance practice will continue to be a valid contributor to our pluralistic

musical culture. It is a greater sense of empathy with the past, and an awareness of concepts such as pluralism that must be fostered once again if we are not to become disillusioned with historical verisimilitude and sentimentality.

NOTES

¹ Peter Collins, *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture 1750-1950* (Montreal: McGill Queens University Press, 1965), p. 33.

² Vincent Duckles, 'Musicology', *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, ed. Stanley Sadie, vol. 12 (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 837.

³ Gordon Wright, *France in Modern Times* (New York: Norton, 1987), p. 29.

⁴ Carol Reglin Farrar, trans. and ed., *Michel Corrette and Flute-playing in the Eighteenth Century* (New York: IMM, 1970), p. 34.

⁵ Certainly it is a treatise that refers back to its eighteenth-century heritage, rather than anticipating a new musical culture. Thomas E. Warner asserts that 'a comparison of [Tromlitz's] *Unterricht* with treatises written earlier in the century confirms that a number of customs common to the early part of the eighteenth century were still in force at the end of it'. 'Tromlitz's Flute Treatise: A Neglected Source of Eighteenth-Century Performance Practice', *A Musical Offering*, ed. Edward H. Clinkscale and Claire Brook (New York: Pendragon, 1977), p. 271.

⁶ James Grush, *A Guide to the Study of the Classical Oboe* (Ann Arbor: UMI, 1972), p. 90.

⁷ 'Classical Clarinet Technique: Documentary Approaches', *Early Music* 16 (August 1988), p. 402.

⁸ 'Il n'existe qu'un coup de langue, puisqu'il n'y a qu'une manière d'articuler le son sur un instrument à vent, mais cette articulation peut être forte ou foible nette ou molle, suivant le caractère de musique.' [François Joseph] Garnier l'ainé, *Méthode pour le hautbois*, French and German edition (Paris: Offenbach, [after 1802]), p. 12.

⁹ 'Il faut la placer directement à l'ouverture de l'anche; l'air pressé (retenu) par cette opération produit à peu près la syllabe. *Ti*, d'où il résulte que la langue lancée en arrière de l'anche, produit un ton aigu et criant, si on prononce *Di* pour *Ti* le son devient plus mou aussi peut on produire sans la langue et seulement avec les lèvres des sons coupés.' Josef Sellner, *Theoretisch-praktische Oboeschule* (Vienna: [c.1825]; Paris: 1891), p. 4.

¹⁰ Albert Cohen, *Music in the French Royal Academy of Sciences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 70.

¹¹ Daniel Heartz, 'Rousseau, Jean-Jacques', *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, vol. 16, p. 270.

¹² 'Throughout its work the Academy carefully avoided addressing itself purely to the practice of music.' Cohen, *Music in the French Royal Academy of Sciences*, p. 107.

¹³ The author's thesis is that orchestral players lacked the time, and pencils, required to achieve uniform articulation in performance, which is reflected in the non-uniform notation of contemporaneous composers. Dene Barnett, 'Non-uniform Slurring in Eighteenth-century Music: Accident or Design?', *Haydn Year Book* 10 (1978), pp. 179-199.

¹⁴ Fischer, *New and Complete Instructions for the Oboe* (London: Clementi, [c.1810]). A reworking of the anonymous treatise, *The Compleat Tutor for the Hautboy*, associated with Fischer and first published in 1772.

¹⁵ Amand Vanderhagen, *Méthode nouvelle et raisonnée pour le hautbois* ([c. 1798]; Minkoff: Geneva, 1974), pp. 36-38.

¹⁶ Bruce Haynes, 'Mozart and the oboe', *Early Music* 20 (1992), p. 47.

¹⁷ Haynes's assertion may be pushed further still if we consider that Hotteterre's artist apparently based these drawings on those in Charles Borjon's *Traité de la musette* (Lyons: Girin and Rivière, 1672), which pre-dates Hotteterre's work by another 65 years. The gulf between the possession of this technology and the desire to utilise it is shown by the distance of 153 years between Borjon's publication and the appearance of the first published fingering chart for an oboe with more than two keys in Sellner, c.1825.

¹⁸ Philip Bate, *The Oboe* (New York: Norton, 1975), p. 58.

¹⁹ J. Wragg, *Improved Flute Preceptor*, 13th ed. (London, 1818), p. 3.

²⁰ James A. MacGillivray, 'The Woodwind', *Musical Instruments Through the Ages*, ed. Anthony Baines (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1978), p. 252.

²¹ Grush, *A Guide to the Study of the Classical Oboe*, p. 90.

²² 'The difference [between Baroque and modern oboes] is especially for the fingers, forked fingerings which are not

very pleasant to play and because you always can hear one little note in between: it's solved with the key system.' Ku Ebbinge, interview by Simon Healy, *The Skill of Musick* 10 (Oboe and Bassoon), ABC FM, July 1991.

²³ 'Ce Sont les différents Coups de langue qui forment l'expression, mais il faut avoir grand Soins que la langue et les doigts frappent ensemble.' Vanderhagen, *Méthode nouvelle*, p.14.

²⁴ 'Il ne représente à l'oreille qu'un rouli désagréable; qu'il est impossible d'avoir de la nêteté dans l'exécution et qu'il contraint celui qui l'emploie à ne pouvoir nuancer ses traits ni donner aucune expression.' François Devienne, *Nouvelle méthode théorique et pratique pour la Flûte*, (Paris: Imbault, [1794]), p. 9.

²⁵ In fact Haynes points out that a' = 415 pitch was usual in the classical period in Berlin and Italy in general, and that a' = 430 was more prevalent only in Vienna and Paris at this time. Haynes, *Mozart and the Oboe*, p. 47.

²⁶ Geoffrey Burgess and Peter Hedrick, 'The oldest English oboe reeds? An examination of nineteen surviving examples', *Galpin Society Journal* 42 (1989), pp. 32-69.

²⁷ Geoffrey Burgess concludes that linen thread was used primarily, silk being less common and too expensive. However, in practice, I have achieved better results with waxed silk than with the type of linen thread he identifies.

²⁸ Robert Donington, 'The present position of authenticity', *Performance Practice Review* (1989), p. 118.