The Recorder Consort at the English Court 1540-1673

Part 2

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Henry VIII's expansion of the Court musical establishment created a new era for recorder playing in England (see Part I of this article in the August issue). A keen musician himself, the King knew the value of foreign musicians and went to great lengths to engage them for the Court. By his death in 1547, he had imported enough of them to create four consorts—viols/violas, shawms/sackbuts, flutes/cornets, and recorders—that were kept intact until the early seventeenth century and formed the basis for instrumental music-making at Court until the Civil War in 1642.

The recorder consort was established in 1540. Its members were five brothers of the Bassano family, four of whom had previously been employed at the Court as sackbut players around 1531 (one had also had a place as a musical instrument maker at Court for two years). The Basanos introduced to England from Venice the highest standards of woodwind instrument making and probably a similar standard of recorder playing. Two members of the second generation of the family in England—Augustine and Jeronimo II—wrote music for the recorder consort that was more than competent.

Instruments
Where did the consort obtain their instruments, and what sizes did they use?

The answer to the first question again seems to lie with the Bassanos; the sizes can be deduced from treatises and inventories.

Several pieces of evidence indicate that the Bassanos were significant makers of recorders and other instruments, whose products can be traced on the Continent as well as in England. Family members who are known as makers are Alvise and Anthony I of the first generation (although the three other brothers may have made instruments too), Arthur of the second generation, and probably Anthony II of the third. Anthony I was "maker of divers instruments of music" to the Court from 1538 until 1540, when he joined his brothers in the recorder consort.

The first generation made the recorders listed in the inventory of an "instrument chest made by the Bassani brothers with instruments so beautiful and good they are suited for dignitaries and potentates." The list was compiled by Johann (Hans) Jakob Fugger, superintendent of music at the Bavarian court in Munich, around 1571. In the chest was a set of nine recorders "with fingerholes in a straight line, except for the bass, which are beautiful and good," as well as four other sets of woodwind instruments—six bombards (?), seven Pfeifen (probably flutes), ten cornets and a fife, and twelve crumhorns—tuned to "the pitch of the organ," so that they could be played together. (A letter accompanying the inventory also mentions a chest of six large viols and a chest of three lutes.)

A second inventory, made in 1566 of the collection of another member of the Fugger family—Johann Jakob's youngest brother, Raimund Fugger junior, an Augsburg banker and patron of the arts—includes "a large case, in it 27 recorders large and small. Made in England." Because there are not known to have been any other recorder makers in England in the sixteenth century, it is likely that the Bassanos made those too.

A third inventory that probably includes instruments by the Bassanos is that of the collection of Henry VIII himself. It shows that at the time of his death in 1547 he had no fewer than seventy-four recorders. The only sizes mentioned by name are four basses and one "great bass" (presumably a quart-bass in C or quint-bass in B'). The remainder are in sets of four (three times), six (twice), seven, eight (three times, one of them described as recorders "great and small," and another including two basses), and nine (twice). The instruments of each individual set were presumably made to the same pitch, so they could be played together. Edgar Hunt surmises that the sets were "not necessarily all trebles or tenors but
eight with the two basses which have been recently in France. By the early seventeenth century there do seem to have been other, native woodwind makers in England, but I suspect that only expert and experienced craftsmen like the Bassanos were sophisticated enough to produce recorders with such ingenious key mechanisms. The fact that recorders played at the French court had been made in England by the Bassanos could explain the origin of the term “flute d’Angletterre,” apparently first noted by Mersenne and commonly used later in the seventeenth century.

If quint-basses and great basses were recent arrivals in France in the early seventeenth century, the Bassanos may not have been making them for very long before this date. But at least we know that such sizes did exist in England at that time. The surviving repertory, as we have seen, has part ranges that fit the soprano in d, alto in g', tenor in c', and bass in f, with the exception of one piece that may have a part for the quint-bass in B. As Mersenne suggests, however, the pieces also could have been played in a lower “register” using tenor, basses, quint-basses, and great bass.

In 1636, after the wind players at the Court became one large group (see below), John Adson, nominally a new member of the flute/cornett consort, was paid for “a treble cornett and a treble recorder,” which he had presumably bought for himself to play at the Court. Unfortunately, Court records never give the names of the makers of such instruments. The “treble” recorder was presumably an alto in g'.

**Duties**

Whereabouts in the Court did the recorder consort play, how frequently, and for what kinds of events? We can find only incomplete answers in the surviving records of the sixteenth century, not only for the recorder consort but for all the Court musicians. For the early seventeenth century, however, a little more evidence remains.

The term “Court” actually signified not one particular place but the institu-
tion, constituted by the presence of the sovereign wherever he or she happened to be. The Court spent most of the year at one of the five “standing houses” on the River Thames. The administrative headquarters was Whitehall at Westminster. Greenwich, Henry VIII’s favorite seat, was a few miles downstream; Richmond and Hampton Court, a few miles upstream. Windsor, which stood in hunting domain, was more than twenty miles upstream.

The standing houses were all built to the same general plan, consisting of three parts—the courtyard, the great Hall, and the Chamber. The musicians were attached to the Chamber and therefore under the jurisdiction of the Lord Chamberlain. The Chamber was itself divided into four parts. First, the Great Chamber, which might also serve as a Guard or Watching Chamber. Second, leading out of this, the Presence Chamber, which seems to have been open to anyone who was entitled to appear at Court. Presentations to the sovereign were normally made here. Third, opening out of the Presence Chamber, the Privy Chamber, where the sovereign dined. Access was reserved for privy councillors and other favored persons, although sometimes ambassadors or distinguished foreign visitors were received there. Finally, the Privy Chamber gave admittance to the sovereign’s private apartments.

To which part or parts of the Chamber did the recorder consort belong? The only surviving evidence seems to be the record of the Visitation of Essex in 1634, during which the members of the Bassano family living in that county received a coat of arms. It describes Anthony I, Mark Anthony, Arthur, and Andrea Bassano simply as “musician” or “one of the musicians” to various sovereigns; but Edward I, Jeronimo II, Edward II, and Henry Bassano are said to be “of the Presence Chamber” to the sovereigns they had served. That both the recorder consort (in which Jeronimo and Henry held places) and the shawm and sackbut consort (in which Edward II and Henry held places) would have played in the larger and more public part of the Chamber makes sense. By itself, however, this single record does not establish that these consorts played exclusively in that part of the Court.

How frequently did the Court musicians play? A letter from the Lord Chamberlain to the Lord Mayor of London dated 17 November 1573 says that, “being her [Majesty’s] servants in ordinary they had to attend daily upon her.” Apparently the only other surviving Court record from before the Restoration referring to this point is the certificate for the appointment of the violinist Ambrose Beelard in 1640 that mentions “his nightly and late attendance at Court.”

One other, non-Court, record relates directly to the recorder consort. Augustine Bassano, threatened with removal from his rented house in 1564, stated in a legal case that he was “one bounden to give daily attendance upon the Queen’s Majesty” (Elizabeth). Although Augustine was presumably trying to put the best possible face on his activities in order to impress the court with the extent to which the circumstances of the case were interfering with him, it may well be that he and other musicians were on call at Court all the time during the regular part of the year.

Like other Court servants, the musicians were issued livery for coronations and funerals of sovereigns—red cloth for the former and black for the latter. In a number of lists, the musicians’ servants also received liveries. Although several modern authors have assumed that the musicians performed on such occasions, it is not clear whether they played music in the processions or for the services. Like other courtiers, however, they would have walked in the processions.

Judging by its surviving repertory, one of the functions of the recorder consort—and apparently the principal function of the violin consort—was to play dance music. Elizabeth was herself a keen dancer. This music was not, however, used only to accompany dancing:

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108 The subject of the English woodwind makers of the seventeenth century will be taken up in a future article by myself and Maurice Byrne.

109 But Friedrich von Huene, writing of the C bass of Hans Rauh von Schratt in Salzburg, says that the Bassanos’ instruments were “not quite as ingenious and, to my mind, more cumbersome” (letter to David Lasocki, 3 October 1982).

110 Lafontaine, op. cit., p. 92.


112 The Visitations of Essex by Hawley, 1552; Hervey, 1558; Cooke, 1570; Raven, 1612; and Owen and Lilly, 1634, Harleian Society Publications XIII (London, 1878), pp. 344–45.


114 Lafontaine, op. cit., p. 104.


116 Chambers, op. cit., I, p. 52.

117 Public Record Office, LC2/2 (funeral of Henry VIII).
some of it, especially the contrapuntal pieces and/or those with irregular structures, probably served as entertainment or dinner music. The surviving repertoire of the violin band consists only of dances. The fantasies and wordless madrigals in the surviving repertoire of the recorder consort therefore suggest that the group had additional functions—perhaps being used more frequently than the violins for entertainment or dinner music.

During the reign of James I (1603-1625) and the first five years of the reign of Charles I (1625-1649), the three sixteenth-century consorts of wind musicians—flutes and cornets, recorders, and shawms and sackbuts—still existed in theory, but in practice the lines of demarcation began to blur. In the second half of the sixteenth century, cornetts and sackbuts had been employed increasingly to accompany voices on special occasions in the larger English cathedral and collegiate choirs; by the turn of the century we begin to find references to their use on such occasions at Court. Since cornetists had traditionally belonged to the “flute” consort and sackbut players to the “shawm” consort, combining them necessitated a change in the organization of the wind musicians. This change was noted in the records only in 1630, but in practice it may have taken place rather earlier (see below).

The many references to the increasing use of wind instruments in English churches during the early seventeenth century to cornets and sackbuts; recorders are mentioned only twice. First, Sir Edward Dearing, a Puritan holding forth against what he believed to be musical excess within the Anglican church, complained that one single groan in the spirit, is worth the diapason of all the church music in the world. Organs, sackbuts, recorders, cornets, etc. and voices are mingled together, as if we would catch God Almighty with the fine ayre of an anthem, whilst few present do or can understand. Second, Sir John Hawkins reported that “Charles I, when at Oxford, had service at the Cathedral with organs, sackbuts, recorders, cornetts, etc.” It is therefore conceivable that recorders were sometimes used in this fashion in the Chapel Royal.

Surviving texts of the numerous masques performed at the Jacobean and early Caroline courts never mention recorders by name, but, as in the contemporary theater, the instruments may sometimes have been called upon to play the “soft music.” The accounts of payments to the musicians who performed in Ben Jonson’s masque Oberon at Whitehall on 1 January 1611 mention thirteen shawms and two cornetts. The fifteen musicians in question were probably taken partly from the fourteen men who held places in the flute/cornett and shawm/sackbut consorts, but it seems likely that at least one man came from the recorder consort. A Spanish visitor who attended the masque reported that When their Majesties entered accompanied by the princess and the ambassadors of Spain and Venice, flageolets played and the curtain was drawn [up].

“Flageolets” is probably an erroneous reference to recorders (or flutes, or possibly tabor pipes). Even if the instrument in question was the flageolet—a new French woodwind very similar to the recorder—it may well have been the recorder players who performed on it.

The recorder consort seems to have been used on special ceremonial occasions. As mentioned in Part I of this article, six members of the shawm/sackbut consort plus six men who were evidently those currently playing in the recorder consort were paid “for attending the installation of the Elector Palatine at Windsor for 3 days” in February 1613. These twelve could well be the same as the group consisting of Andrea Bassano “and eleven others, His Majesty’s musicians and servants for wind instruments” who had been paid “for their extraordinary service at Windsor by the space of six days at the installation of the Duke of York” in May 1611. Similarly, on 18 November 1624 Andrea “and thirteen of his fellows” were paid “for waiting at Windsor at the installation of the Knights of the Garter” that year.

In 1625 the wind musicians were used during the great social event of the season. The event was heralded by an announcement in the Court records on 16 May that Charles I, who had inherited the crown the previous March, intends to repair to his castle of Dover... attended with a great train (both for quality and number), being the place appointed by His Highness for the landing and reception of Madame Henriette [Henrietta Maria], Daughter of France [she was the sister of the French king, Louis XIII], now His Majesty’s Royal Consort.

A warrant issued two months later authorized a payment to Jerome Lanier (a brother of Alphonso and Clement), Anthony Bassano II (who by now held a place in the recorder consort), “and eleven other of His Majesty’s musicians for the wind instruments...for their attendance at Canterbury and Dover.”

The reorganization of the wind musicians, 1630-1673

From 1630 until the beginning of the Civil War in 1642, Court records show that the wind musicians were organized into a single group, divided into three “companies,” which alternated duties of “waiting” in the Chapel Royal and at the King’s dinner table. The first company seems to have been primarily cornetists, and the second and third probably players of the cornett, shawm, and sackbut. The first company was described as “cornett, recorders and shawms” (and also as “cornetts, flutes and shawms”). I suspect that these were alternate and equivalent ways of expressing “wind instruments.” But the company presumably did play the recorder sometimes. As mentioned above, John Adson, a member of the third company who had joined the Court musicians in 1633, was
paid for a treble cornett and a treble recorder, which he had evidently provided for his own use. The second company may well have played recorders, too.

The wind musicians continued to play for masques during this period, and the texts of two masques mention "soft music." The wind musicians also sometimes played for special ceremonies. First, a warrant dated 14 March 1640 lists fifteen of them who had been to Windsor for the last two years and "were at extraordinary charges for themselves and their horses by the space of seven days in each year and do therefore demand for the accustomed allowance of 5s per day." Second, "the whole company" (in the sense of group) was paid on 2 April 1642 for going to York and for attending the St. George's feast.

At the beginning of the Civil War in 1642, the Court musicians were dismissed and remained without Court employment until the end of the Commonwealth in 1660. The Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell, did employ a small group of musicians, but none of them seems to have played the recorder.

When the monarchy was restored under Charles II, the Court musical establishment was quickly reconstituted. Surviving musicians who had served under Charles I were reappointed, and those who had died in the interim were replaced, sometimes by relatives. The continuity of the places is sometimes impossible to trace after the Restoration, but Charles II seems to have retained all but one of the twenty-two places of the wind musicians. What had been the six places in the recorder consort until the amalgamation of the consorts into a single group around 1630 were passed on in such a way as to give no hint that the recorder was still being played.

Did the Court wind musicians, then, use the recorder after the Restoration? An order of 1663 discharging them from paying subsidies describes them not only as "Musicians for the Wind Music" but also "musicians of the recorders, the flutes, the hautboys and sackbuts" (at the beginning of a listing of all the royal musicians), and a similar order of 1667 discharging all the musicians from paying poll money calls them "the musicians for the recorders, flutes, hautboys and sackbuts." But I suspect that these are archaic titles, still in use in the Court bureaucracy. That is almost certainly true of the reference to the post of "keeper, maker, repairer and mender and tuner of all and every his Majesty's musical wind instruments: that is to say regals, virginals, organs, flutes, recorders and all other kind of wind instruments whatsoever" which Henry Purcell inherited from John Hingston in 1684 and passed on to John Blow and Bernard Smith upon his death in 1695. The title originated with Andrea Bassano in 1603, or perhaps even his predecessor. The warrants of appointment of individual musicians in the group and for the purchase of instruments during these years mention the cornett, curtail, flute, sackbut, and shawm, but not the recorder. The small quantity of surviving music for the group is for cornets and sackbuts, with the possible exception of two short movements by Nicholas Lanier II. The ranges of the parts of these movements are: 1. g'-g"; 2. f'-f"; 3. f-g'; 4. d-d'; and 5. F-a—which would fit a consort of recorders (two sopranos, alto, tenor, and bass, sounding an octave higher) or flutes.

If the wind musicians were still playing recorders in consort, that practice is unlikely to have lasted for long. In 1673, the Baroque recorder was introduced from France by James Paisible and his colleagues, and quickly supplanted its Renaissance counterpart. In any case, by 1679, the "Wind music" was said to be only five in number. Only one of these musicians is mentioned—apparently as a violinst—in the list of those sworn in at the beginning of the reign of James II. It therefore seems unlikely that the recorder now played a significant role, if any, in the wind music at Court. The group seems to have ceased to exist on the death of Charles II in 1685.

The many surviving records relating to the service of the Court musicians in the sixteenth century make it abundantly clear that they were wealthier than many other Court servants and far better off than virtually all other musicians in the country. The Bassanos, in particular, were well treated, receiving grants of property—a measure of status as well as wealth—and trade licenses that boosted their already generous income. All the Court musicians were considered members of the gentry, and three of the second generation of the Bassano family attained the rank of Esquire, a step higher than Gentleman. Court musicians also received certain privileges, including freedom from some civic duties, exemption from paying some taxes, and freedom from arrest without the permission of the Lord Chamberlain.

During the reigns of James I and Charles I, the financial position of the majority of the Court musicians declined, owing to the unchanging rate of pay in the face of inflation—the price of food increased sixfold between 1551 and 1640—late payment of wages, and fewer extra payments. Three members of the recorder consort during this period—Robert Baker senior, Henry Bassano, and Clement Lanier—incurred debts that are mentioned in Court records when the lenders petitioned the Lord Chamberlain for their money. In theory the privileges and status of the musicians were the same as in the sixteenth century. In practice, however, they seem to have suffered from the growing breach between Court and country that was to culminate in the Civil War. This decline in value of a Court place to musicians was to have important consequences for music-making in England after the Restoration, when the lead passed from the Court to the theaters and concert halls, and the new Baroque recorder assumed orchestral and solo roles.


Ibid., op. cit., p. 345.
For full details of the material in this section, see Lasocki, op. cit., I, pp. 119–41.

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63 For detailed arguments on this point, see Lasocki, op. cit., I, pp. 105–12.
64 Lafontaine, op. cit., p. 92.
65 Aurelian Townshend’s Albion’s Triumph, performed at the Banqueting House, Whitehall, on 8 January 1632, mentions "soft sweet music." James Shirley’s The Triumph of Beauty, probably performed in 1640, mentions "soft music.
66 Public Record Office, LCS/134, p. 381.
67 Public Record Office, LC5/135 (unnumbered folio).
68 Lafontaine, op. cit., pp. 115ff.
69 Ibid., pp. 163, 195.
70 Ibid., pp. 255, 364, 420.
71 Public Record Office, C66/1607/1/7.
72 See the following references in Lafontaine, op. cit.: cornett (pp. 115, 118, 122–23, 129, 135–36, 138); curtail (pp. 147, 198, 220); flute (pp. 115, 118, 122, 129, 135, 138, 148, 177, 183, 188, 208, 218, 251, 256); sackbut (pp. 123, 128, 136, 140, 150, 177, 257, 267, 307, 330); shawm (pp. 115, 122, 173, 183, 188, 208, 218, 369).
73 The "five parts for the cornets" in the Fitzwilliam Wind Manuscript (see Part I) are by...