

BASSET AND BASS RECORDERS, 1660–1740

by David Lasocki

By the early 16th century, as documented in Sebastian Virdung's *Musica getutscht* (Basel, 1511), recorders were available in three sizes, pitched a fifth apart: a bass recorder in *F* (*Baßcontra* or *Bassus*), a *Tenor* in *c* and a *Discant* in *g*, all notated an octave lower than sounding pitch, or in other words, at 4' pitch. During the course of the century, sizes of recorder were extended both upwards and downwards, as documented in Michael Praetorius's *Synatagma musicum* II (Wolfenbüttel, 1619), who describes what he calls a *gans Stimmwerck* or *Accort* (whole consort). Because of its extended range, he had to rename all but the tenor and switch to 8' pitch, as sounding. Its sizes consisted of *Groß-baß* in *F*, *Baß* in *B^b*, *Basset* in *f*, *Tenor* in *c¹*. *Alt* in *g¹*, *Discant* in *c²*, *Discant* in *d²* and *klein Flötlein* or *exilent* in *g²*. In the 20th century, the size in *f* was generally called a bass; but now that lower recorders have become more common, we have switched to Praetorius' terminology and call that size a basset.

This situation remained the same until the advent of the Baroque recorder, which was apparently developed in France around 1660. It was made in three pieces, generally possessed the characteristic "beak," and had a cylindrical mouthpiece, inverse conical middle piece, and cylindrical head and endpiece. The basset size in *f* had a cap containing a hole at the top to allow the insertion of a crook, as on a bassoon, through which the instrument was blown. The stretch of the finger holes required a key for the bottom one. Most of the celebrated maker Peter Bressan's surviving bassets included a strut at the bottom, which served to prop up the instrument but also made it more resonant. Such an instrument is clearly depicted in Example 1, the title page to the first volume of John Hudgebut's *Thesaurus Musicus* (London, 1693), which also shows angels playing what may be alto and tenor sizes.

The vast majority of the surviving repertoire for the Baroque recorder until about 1740 is for the alto recorder in *f¹*. Thus evidence gives the impression that the alto had become the standard size, perhaps the only size used by amateurs, and that the remaining sizes had virtually disappeared, although sopranos in *c²* and *d²* (*fifth flutes* and *sixth flutes*) as well as sopraninos in *f²* were often used for concertos. As we shall now explore, however, other kinds of evidence give a different impression about the basset and bass sizes, not to mention the tenor and the newly invented voice flute in *d¹*.

Treatises

The most comprehensive view of recorder sizes in the late Baroque comes from James Talbot (1664–1708), Regius Professor of Hebrew at Cambridge University, who was a keen amateur musician and recorder teacher. His unfinished manuscript treatise on musical instruments, compiled around 1692–95, seems to have been his contribution to a broader treatise on music that he was writing in collaboration with the celebrated composer Henry Purcell, who died in 1695. Talbot includes measurements for tenor and basset recorders by the celebrated French expatriate maker Peter Bressan. He also gives a table of the sizes of recorder known to him: 8th (sopranino), 5th (fifth flute), 3rd (third flute), *consort or treble* (alto), *voice flute* (a minor third lower), *tenor* (said to be a "5th" lower than the alto), *bass* (basset) and *pedal or great bass* (bass). The small sizes are named in relation to their interval above the alto. Perhaps Talbot was confused about the interval of the tenor below the alto because he was still thinking of the

interval below the old discant recorder in g^1 . Curiously, the sixth flute is missing from Talbot's list.

The treatise on acoustics by Joseph Sauveur, *Principes d'acoustique et de musique* (Paris, 1701), contains a short section on the range of woodwind instruments, using terms and ranges "according to the practice of Monsieur [Jean Jacques] Rippert and Monsieur Jean Hotteterre le jeune, who are the most skilled makers in Paris." Sauveur's ranges begin on "the lowest note of the instrument," then go to "the highest note on which one can still make sustained sounds (*tenuës*)" with an extension to "where the instrument can ascend in passing." In an accompanying plate, he gives the range of the *basse* as $f-d^2$ with an extension to e^b^2 , *quinte* c^1-d^3 with an extension to g^3 , *taille* f^1 to g^3 , *haute contre* c^2 to d^4 and *dessus* f^2 to g^4 . Thus these sizes are simply basset, tenor, alto, soprano and sopranino.

The organist Thomas Balthasar Janovka's Latin music dictionary, *Clavis ad thesaurum magnae artis musicae* (Prague, 1701), discusses four sizes of recorder: fourth flutes, altos, tenors and *bassisticae* (notated in the bass clef, an octave lower than sounding, range given as $F-g^1$).

Johann Mattheson, *Das Neu-Eröffnete Orchestre* (Hamburg, 1713) remarks that of the "well-known recorders of all sizes ... primarily three kinds" are used: alto, tenor and one "which is innocently called the *Bass-Flöte*," range $f-f^2$ (again notated an octave lower than sounding). The remark about "innocently" presumably refers to a basset not really being in the bass register. He continues: "Lower than [f], all trouble notwithstanding, one cannot yet go lower on recorders." Thus he did not know the true bass recorder.

The Weimar organist and composer Johann Gottfried Walther (1684–1748), a distant relative of J. S. Bach, wrote two treatises in which he gave definitions of recorders. In the manuscript *Praecepta der musicalischen Composition*, given to the author's student Prince Johann Ernst of Weimar, among the list of musical terms relating to the recorder we find "*Basson*: the *Baß-Flöte*, goes from F to c^1 , d^1 , normally also even to g^1 ." The definitions in Walther's better-known published musical dictionary, *Musicalisches Lexicon* (Leipzig, 1732), are condensed from the earlier treatise. "*Flautone* (ital.)" is now defined as "a large or *Bass-Flöte*."

Joseph Friedrich Bernhard Caspar Majer's *Museum musicum* (1732; 2nd ed., Nuremberg, 1741) reproduces Walther's definition of the alto recorder, adding that it comes in two others "kinds," *Alt- or Tenor-Flöthe* in c^1 and *Baß-Flöthe* in f . Johann Philipp Eisel's *Musicus autodidactos* (Erfurt, 1738) remarks that "of the *Fleuten Bass*, which is a fifth lower than the *Tenor-Fleutte*, the bass notes are the same as on the *Fleute Douce*." That is to say, the alto and basset are both in F. Denis Diderot's celebrated *Encyclopédie* (1751–65) has separate articles for the same sizes of recorder noted by Sauveur: sopranino, soprano, alto, tenor and basset (*basse de flûte à bec*). Finally, right at the end of the 18th century, Joos Verschuere Reynvaan's *Muzijkaal kunst-woordenboek* (1795) still mentions recorders of four sizes: soprano, alto, tenor and basset (*bas-fluit*).

Purchases and Sales

Treatises did not always reflect current practice, but advertisements of instruments and records of purchases and sales show how the makers and other people writing them used terminology. The first indication of Baroque recorders in several sizes comes from an order placed with the Amsterdam woodwind maker Richard Haka for the Swedish navy in 1685 that also included sets of 13 shawms, 6 alto shawms and 6 dulcian; and 4 oboe, tenor oboe and bassoon. The terminology is either taken directly or translated from French practice: "1 palmenhout Bass

fleutte does in 3 Stuken ... 1 palmenhout quint fleutte does in 3 Stuken ... 3 palmenhout talije [taille] fleutten does in 3 Stucken ... 2 palmenhout alt fleutte does in 2 Stucken ... 2 palmenhout discant fleutte does in 2 Stucken” (probably basset, tenor, alto, soprano and soprano).

Consorts of recorders, presumably of the Baroque type, begin to be listed in Dutch auction catalogues in the 1680s: “Een Fluyt-accort, bestaende in vier Fluyten” (The Hague, 1686); “Een Accoort Fluyten” (The Hague, 1689); “4 regte fluyten welcke te zamen accort zijn” (Leiden, 1690). A sale in Leiden in 1705 included “groote Fluyt van Boekhout.”

Thomas Boekhout himself, a maker in Amsterdam, advertised in 1713 that he sold “Baas-Fluyten die al haer toonen geven als op een gemeene Fluyt.” Apparently the range of bassets was normally more limited than altos. After Boekhout’s death, his son Jan advertised in 1718 that “il continuë à faire toutes sortes de Flutes ... Basse de Flûtes....”

In 1714, Abraham van Driel, a maker who had just moved to Amsterdam from Hamburg, advertised that he sold: “alderhande soorten van uitstreekende goede Fluyten, die niet stoppen, en ’t speelen nooit afvallen, als mede Hautbois, bassons, Dwars en Bas-Fluyten, op een nieuwe manier door hem zelf uytgevonden, en nooit voor dezen van niemand so gemaekt.” The grammar is not clear to me, but Jan Bouterse connects the “nieuwe manier” with only the basset recorders, and wonders whether Van Driel’s claim had anything to do with Boekhout’s new type of basset recorder.

We have the details of two different orders of instrumental consorts including recorders received by the celebrated Nuremberg maker Jacob Denner (1681–1735). In 1710, the Duke of Gronsfeld ordered four consorts of instruments in cases: (1) four oboes, one tenor oboe and two bassoons; (2) four alto recorders (*Flauten*), one tenor recorder (*Alt-Flaúden*) and two basset recorders (*Bass-Flaúden*); (3) four chalumeaux, one alto chalumeau and two bass chalumeau; (4) four violins, one viola and one cello; as well as two clarinets.

Around 1720, Denner made out an estimate for three similar consorts of woodwinds for Göttweig, a Benedictine abbey near Krems in Lower Austria, which was presumably restocking after being almost destroyed by fire two years earlier: (1) oboe consort in six parts: three oboes, one tenor oboe and two bassoons; (2) chalumeau consort in six parts: three chalumeaux, one alto chalumeau and two bass chalumeaux; (3) recorder consort in six parts: three alto recorders (*Primieur Flaúden*), one tenor recorder (*Second Flaúden*) and two basset recorders (*Basson*); as well as two flutes and cases. The monastery had already bought “various recorders” in 1692 from two Nuremberg dealers, probably originating in the workshop of Jacob’s father, Johann Christoph Denner. The *instrumentarium* of the monastery during the decade 1700–09 listed two basset recorders along with ten other woodwinds: two flutes, two oboes, two shawms and four bassoons. Two basset recorders survive in Göttweig today, stamped “I.C.DENNER” with the addition “D / I.”; they may be the earlier instruments rather than those from the 1720 purchase. The Denner marks have so far proved impossible to apportion among members of the family. “I.C. DENNER” is found on forty-six surviving recorders: one soprano, one soprano, ten altos, three tenors and no fewer than thirty-one bassets; “I. DENNER” on sixteen recorders: twelve altos and six tenors.

In 1694, the Benedictine monastery at Kremsmünster near Linz in Upper Austria paid a saddler for making a cover of sheep’s leather for “a great consort of recorders.” When an inventory was taken of the monastery’s possessions in 1739, it included all the following: “four basset recorders (*Bass-Flautten*) ... a pair of boxwood recorders ... a pair of ordinary recorders in common wood ... a pair at English pitch ... a pair in A ... a pair of tenor recorders (*Alt Flautten*)

... a pair of little recorders (*Flettl*) made entirely of ivory,” mostly in the choir-director’s office.

A letter that the woodwind virtuoso Michael Boehm wrote to his former employer, Ernst Ludwig of Hesse-Darmstadt, in 1729, mentioning what music and instruments he had used at Darmstadt, includes the items “four large unstained recorders ... in addition to the English recorders.” These recorders from England are likely to have been made by Bressan, who still had good connections on the Continent.

The inventory of Bressan’s possessions made after his death in 1731 is disappointingly general, mentioning only “4 common flutes ... a Drawer with old flutes & Hoyboys.” But other documents are more forthcoming. “A basset recorder (*flauto fagotto*) by Mr. Bressan” is found among the possessions of John Law, Contrôleur-général des Finances en France, in 1729. “A Case with five Fluits by Bresan” was auctioned in London in 1740. And the possessions of the famous Amsterdam music publisher Michel Charles Le Cène three years later included seven recorders by Bressan apparently in five sizes, alto, voice flute, tenor, fourth flute and basset: “Twee zwarte ‘fluyt dous’ met ivoor ... Een bruine ‘dito’ ... Een zwarte ‘sang fluyt’ [voice flute] met ivoor ... Een bruine altfluit ... Een bruine kwartfluit ... Een bruine basfluit....”

A number of different sizes of recorder continue to be named in Dutch sale catalogues through the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth. Besides unspecified “grootte,” “grooter” and “nog grooter” instruments, we find: 3 *bas fluiten* (Amsterdam, 1727); *Een seer goede Bas-Fluyt, door van Heerde* (The Hague, 1731); *Een Bas fluit door Haka, met Zilver*; *Een Bas fluit, met Zilver en een dito met Yvoor* (Amsterdam, 1758); *Flute douce longue de Basse de R. T. [recte P. J.] Bressan. Une dito de de Bie* (The Hague, 1759); 2 *bas-fluyten* (’s-Hertogenbosch, 1760); *Een Bas-Fluit* (Groningen, 1764); *Een Bas-fluit, met zyn Koper Mondstuk door C. Han* (Middelburg, 1768); *Twee Basfleuiten à Beck* (Middelburg, 1773); and *Een bas fluit*, perhaps by this time a bass transverse flute (The Hague, 1776).

Inventories

Inventories of the possessions of owners or makers of instruments made soon after their death by relatives or associates also demonstrate current terminology. In 1700 the Tuscan Court in Florence owned: “a consort (*concerto*) of sixteen recorders, consisting of four sopraninos (*sopra acuti*), four sopranos (*soprani*), four altos (*contralti*), two tenors (*tenori*) and two bassets (*bassi*)” made by Haka; and the same inventory mentions a further “consort of eleven recorders, consisting of two sopranos, three altos, four tenors and two bassets” with the otherwise unknown mark of a fly.

In France, the inventory of the possessions of the late Jacques Danican Philidor, tambour, fifre, grand hautbois de la Chambre Escurie du roy, ordinaire de la musique du roy (chapelle), and petit violon de la chambre (1708), lists five sizes of recorder, which we can again identify using Sauveur’s terminology: “three basset recorders (*basses de flûte*) ... three other basset recorders ... five tenor recorders (*quintes de flûte*) ... a box filled with instruments: four tenor recorders ... three altos (*tailles*) ... four soprano recorders (*hautes contres*) ... three soprano recorders (*dessus de flûte*).” These instruments were presumably part of Philidor’s stock-in-trade as a maker.

A similar inventory of the household of the woodwind maker and performer Martin Hotteterre, when his wife Marie Crespy died in 1711, lists five sizes, including “nine instruments, whether bassoons as well as basset recorders (*basses de flutes*), valued with three bassoons and one basset recorder ... two basset recorders and two imperfect ones....” In 1725, the

inventory of Antoine Hercule Nicolas Ballois, hautbois et cromorne du Roi, listed “*une basse flute*.” The inventory of the Naust woodwind-making workshop in 1734 mentions recorders generally as well as “old basset recorders (*basses de flutte a bec*).”

The inventory of the possessions of the late Amsterdam maker Henrik Richters in 1727 listed a number of recorders, including “3 bas fluiten en 1 niet opgemaakte basfluit...”

In 1731, the inventory of instruments belonging to the Ratskapelle in Danzig mentioned “1 brown basset recorder.” The inventory of the court of Sayn–Wittgenstein at Berleburg (Westfalen) in 1741 seems to reflect instruments that had not been used for a while: “Eight large recorders, on one the bottom (?) part missing. A *taille* [probably actually a basset] without a brass crook.... A *Flaut-doux-Basson* [basset or bass] without a crook. Another without a crook.” A similar state of neglect is apparent in the inventory of the Gotha Court orchestra in 1750: “two recorders, almost unusable.... Two old *Bass Fluten* [basset recorders]. One ditto, a little larger.”

Surviving Instruments

Phillip T. Young’s book *4900 Historical Woodwind Instruments* (London, 1993) lists surviving instruments arranged by maker, from which Andrew Robinson compiled the following useful table arranged by country and size:

<i>Country</i>	<i>Sopraninos</i>	<i>Sopranos</i>	<i>Altos</i>	<i>Tenors</i>	<i>Bassets</i>	<i>Total</i>
France	2 4%	4 9%	20 43%	11 23%	10 21%	47
German-speaking	5 2%	6 3%	126 60%	25 12%	49 23%	211
England	— —	7 7%	59 55%	35 32%	7 7%	108
Netherlands	7 8%	19 21%	47 53%	2 2%	14 16%	89
Italy	2 —	1 —	8 —	— —	— —	11
Totals of each size	16 3%	37 8%	260 56%	73 16%	80 17%	466

Note that the bassets are a little more numerous than tenors and a lot more than sopranos and sopraninos. Most of the well-known makers left bassets: Boekhout, Bressan, the Denners, Haka, the Hotteterres, Rippert, Rottenburgh, Schlegel and Stanesby Senior. No Baroque basses seem to have survived.

Repertoire

If bassets were around in such large quantities, and even basses were known, what music did they play? In France, Jean-Baptiste Lully in his ballet *Le Triomphe de l’Amour* (1681) called for alto

and tenor recorders along with *Petite Basse de Flutes* (basset recorder notated in the C2 clef) and *Grande Basse de Flutes et Basse-Continue* (apparently bass recorder in *c* notated in bass clef, playing an octave higher than written). Seventeen years earlier, in his ballet *Les Amours déguisés*, he had written an air labeled “Concert de flustes pour les Amours,” a specified “recorder consort,” in which the clefs and ranges suggest the same instrumentation. Other works by Lully between 1663 and 1680 imply the use of basset and bass recorders.

Another great French composer of the period, Marc-Antoine Charpentier, scored for the *basse de flute* in both sacred and secular music, the ranges and clefs requiring either bass recorder sounding an octave higher or basset notated at pitch.

In his opera *Jephté* (1732)—surprisingly late for the recorder in the France of the Baroque period—Michel Pignolet de Montéclair included parts for five sizes of the instrument: soprano, soprano, alto, tenor and basset (*basses de flutte a bec*). As in England, players imagined themselves playing the standard size of recorder, the alto, using its standard clef (in France, the French violin clef), and the parts were notated to come out at the right pitch. But rather than transposing the part, as the English did, Montéclair employed a different clef for the purpose: G²_{1/2} (a treble clef in the second space of the staff) for the soprano; F₄ (bass clef) for the basset.

In England, Godfrey Finger wrote a Symphony for four recorders in the ranges alto, alto, tenor, basset as incidental music for the play *The Rival Queens* (1701). Such recorder consorts may have been used in other theatre music of the period. As late as 1737, Georg Frideric Handel used a *Basso de Flauti* doubling the violas in his opera *Giustino*.

A role for the basset (or bass?) recorder as a continuo instrument is suggested by several English publications. A basset recorder is specified on the title-page of Johann Christoph Pepusch’s *A Second Set of Solos for the Flute with a Through Bass for the Bassoon, Bass-Flute or Harpsicord* (1709). The bass part has a range of C to g₁, the recorder player would have had to adapt it. The anonymous *New Aires made on Purpose for two Flutes and a Bass Familiar & Proper for Practitioners in Consort* (1712), has “BASS FLUTE” headings in the bass part, which also has a large range: C to f₁. At least three of Walsh & Hare’s publications have the heading “FLUTO BASSO” at the top of each page of the bass part. The bass parts all have low Es and Ds below the staff, so perhaps they were intended for the bass recorder. Modern authors have claimed that three 18th-century works of art show the basset recorder as a continuo instrument in settings that may not include the recorder. The only one I have seen in a readable reproduction is a detail of a fresco in Prague (ca. 1730), which shows professional musicians playing traverso and oboe, accompanied by viola da gamba and basset recorder.

In Italy in the early 18th century, Alessandro Marcello, left a manuscript *Concerto di Flauti* in G major, scored for: “*Due Flauti soprani e due sordini*” (two soprano recorders and two muted violins), “*Due Flauti contralti et una Violetta sordina*” (two alto recorders and a muted viola), “*Due Flauti Tenori et una Violetta sordina*” (two tenor recorders and a muted viola) and “*Un Flauto Basso e Violoncello*” (a basset recorder and cello) range *G–d¹*, notated in bass clef, sounding an octave higher for the recorder. It may well have been intended for a meeting of the amateur musicians among the Accademia degli Animosi in Venice, of which Marcello was a keen member. An aria in Giovanni Bononcini’s opera *Endimione* (1706), performed at the Viennese Court in 1706, has parts for violins, oboe, and recorders, with bassoons doubling *Bassi Flauti* on the bass line. The range of the bass part is D–e₁, so perhaps a bass recorder was intended.

On the Continent, oboe bands were common in cities and the military, and we have

already seen matching sets of shawms, oboes and recorders by Haka bought for the Swedish Navy, as well as oboes, recorders and chalumeaux (once also violins) by Denner being bought for the Gronsfeld Court and Göttweig Abbey. Moreover, a letter by the Basel maker Christian Schlegel in 1708 says he can make “a quantity of oboes, chalumeaux, recorders, and other instruments in complete choirs.” Unfortunately, there is very little surviving repertoire of these oboe bands, so it is difficult to know what they might have played on recorders, although there are a couple of possible surviving pieces. J. C. Faber’s suite entitled *Parties sur les fleut dous à 3* has parts with the ranges b^1-d^3 , e^1-a^2 and $f-d^1$, presumably alto, tenor and basset recorders. C. F. Witt’s Suite in F has parts for oboe or recorder doubling violin, violin doubling recorder, viola doubling *flauto taillo* (range d^1-f^2) and a *bassono* part (range $C-d^1$) that might have been intended for a doubling bass recorder.

An engraving depicting Antonio Lotti’s *Teofane*, performed at the new Dresden opera house in 1719, shows among the orchestral instruments three alto (or possibly two alto and one tenor) recorders as well as a basset recorder between two theorbos. Johann David Heinichen specified three alto or tenor recorders and a bass recorder in an aria in *Zeffiro e Clori*, performed in Venice in 1714, two years before he became *Cappelmeister* in Dresden. A group concerto of Heinichen’s for two recorders, two violins, two oboes, and two viols uses *Bass de Flauti*, violone, and bassoon, respectively, to accompany the solo sections of each of the first three types of instruments, and presumably the bass instruments play together in the *tutti*s. Similarly, Georg Philipp Telemann used three contrasting ensembles in his *Trauer Actus: Ach wir Nichtig, ach wie Fluchtig* (1724): viols, voices, and AAT recorders with a bass marked “*Bassoun ô Flaut. 4*” (bassoon or recorder 4) in the range $f-bb$, thus for basset recorder.

The most famous piece of music for the basset recorder from the 18th century is a trio sonata in F major by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach written as late as 1755 in Berlin. Four versions of the trio have survived, two of which involve the recorder: H. 588 for viola, basset recorder and basso continuo, and H. 589 for bassoon, basset recorder and basso continuo. Bach pasted a piece of paper on the manuscript showing that he really knew the instrument he intended: “The basset recorder [*Baßflöte*] goes from f to c^2 ; F major, C major and G major are the most comfortable keys for it.” A sister work for viola, basset recorder and basso continuo by one of the Graun brothers has been reconstructed by Klaus Hofmann.