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# The Heckelphone

## A Window into the History of Music

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Music [...]
creates for one
a past of which
one has been
ignorant.

Oscar Wilde (1891)

# PROLOGUE: BASSE DE MUSETTE

Almost unusual design! Gently tracing the grain of the aged wood, Alain Girard carefully examined the instrument before him. There was grace and beauty to this *basse de musette*, and a mystery, too. Picking it up carefully, he was once again surprised how light it was. At eighty centimetres, the wooden body was about as long as that of a modern cor anglais, and about one third longer than that of an oboe, and yet, it felt much lighter. In part, the reason was the lack of metal keywork on the *basse de musette*, which had only five extremely simple keys, compared to the more than twenty found on a modern oboe. But then, the mountain maple from which this particular instrument was constructed had been worked very thinly – surprising, in fact, that the wood had not cracked.

Without conscious thought, Alain's fingers found the five key touches and the two open tone holes. No thumb rest, but the instrument was light enough that one could do without it. There was a certain elegance to the bocal, the metal tube attached to the top of the *basse de musette*, curled like the tail of a pig, like a simple post horn. At the tip of the bocal, the intricately turned wooden *pirouette*, on which his lips would

rest were he to play the instrument, visually echoed the wide bell, whose flare resembled that of a trumpet. No wonder this family of instruments was also known as *trompettes d'église,* "church trumpets". But this particular instrument was special, as for reasons unknown, the opening of its bell had been narrowed to just under half its outside diameter of eleven centimetres, and its inside worked into a pear-shaped cavity – the only *basse de musette* known to be equipped with this type of bell.

If only I could be certain what it sounded like, thought Alain, when this was made, 250 years ago! Alas, the double reed needed to play the *basse de musette* had been lost, and one could only speculate what it might have looked and sounded like. No reed, no sound; wrong reed, wrong sound – it really was that simple. If one could only go back in time, to even briefly listen in…

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Steady rain was drumming against the wooden shingles on the roof of the cramped workshop. Every once in a while, a sudden gust of wind drove the rain against the panes of the small windows, causing the flame of the lamp to flicker. Jacques Jeanneret was deep in thought. His father had frowned when he first told him about his idea. Then he had argued. It had never been done this way, and there was no reason to waste a perfectly good piece of wood. But it wouldn't be wasted, Jacques had replied, it could always be worked further to make a traditional bell. Perhaps so, his father had said, but think of the hours of work wasted, and the serious work to be done in those hours. So many instruments to be made, so

Basse de musette with unconventional bell,
Museum of Musical Instruments, Leipzig (Germany)

many mouths to feed, and Jacques wanted to waste his time on this absurd idea!

Yet, here he was, moving the curved carving knife deftly along the inside of the bell, feeling his way towards the shape he firmly held in his mind. This would work, and it would be worth it, he was certain of it. What's more, pastor Frêne had agreed that his idea sounded interesting and was eager to try his new *basse de musette*.

It really was quite simple, and Jacques couldn't understand why his father was so stubborn about it. If you covered part the opening of a trumpet with your hand, the sound was muted. If you did it just right, the tone lost some of its sharpness, became softer and darker. Experimenting with the *trompettes d'église* his family had been making, he had found the same effect. He had shown his father, from whom he had learned his craft since he'd been a small boy. Of course the sound was

altered, but to what end, his father had asked? Everyone knew what a good *trompette d'église* should sound like, what one of *their* instruments should sound like, so why even consider any changes to it? That's what people wanted, that's what they expected.

Perhaps his father was simply too old to try new things. And yet, he was proud, and rightfully so, of the new key design he had come up with twenty years ago, which had since been copied by all the other makers. Well, at least by all the serious ones. If only there were a way to make them pay, at least a little, for using his father's idea!

Jacques put aside the tool and picked up the almost finished body of the instrument. Running his thumb along the inside of the bell, he thought: This is it! A nice, well-rounded shape, like the bottom end of a perfect pear, for a mellow, well-rounded sound. For a moment, he revelled in the product of his imagination. He knew that his workmanship was excellent. His father had trained him well. There were very few who could turn the soft wood that thin without ruining it, even if they had started with the right wood and aged it well. And there was no other instrument maker anywhere who had ever made a bell like the one he was about to finish, no one but he!

♮

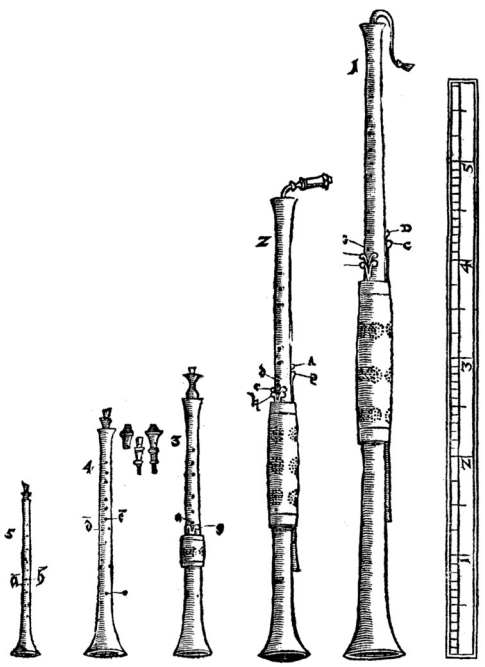
Woodwind instruments not only play a key role in the classical orchestra, but are also used extensively in jazz, film music; they even make the occasional appearance in chart-topping popular music. Modern woodwinds can be categorised into two major families: flutes and reed instruments, the latter comprising single-reed instruments, notably clarinets and saxophones,

Modern woodwind instruments:
recorder, flute, oboe, clarinet, bassoon, saxophone

as well as double reed instruments, such as oboes and bassoons. This book is focussed on  instruments, whose sound is produced by two thin pieces of cane vibrating against each other. Our story begins with an old branch of the double reed family: the *shawms*.

The origins of the shawm are shrouded in mystery, but it is thought to have its roots in ancient instruments of a similar design used in ancient Greece, Persia and Armenia. From

there, it likely came to Western Europe during the High Middle Ages. The shawm is a simple instrument, consisting of a conical tube, usually made from a single piece of wood, with a flared bottom end resembling the bell of a trumpet. The double reed, fashioned from a tall cane called *arundo donax*, *giant reed* or *elephant grass*, is inserted into a wooden mouthpiece called the *pirouette*. When the shawm is played, only a small portion of the reed protrudes from *pirouette* and thus comes into direct contact with the player's lips. As a result, the sound of the shawm is trumpet-like and piercing, with limited dynamic range, making it particularly suitable for outdoor use.



Shawms and pommers,
Michael Praetorius (1619)

# NOTES

▶ **Fact and fiction.** For the most part, this book is rooted in known facts, collected and verified by the author using the sources listed at the end of each chapter. Sometimes, contradictory or uncertain information is found in different, credible sources, and in such cases, the author has attempted to relate what appears to be most likely. Finally, in some cases, what really took place, and certainly what those involved in the events said or thought, cannot be known, and here, the author took the liberty to imagine what might have plausibly transpired.

The notes at the end of each chapter not only provide additional information, but are also intended to help the reader distinguish fact from fiction. Furthermore, statements directly attributed to persons are shown in italics if, and only if, they are known be historically accurate (for example, quotations from letters). One ambition in writing this book has been to keep all speculation and imagination consistent with known history and facts – that is, to refrain from writing anything that stands in contradiction with what is known or plausible. Some further thoughts on this effort can be found in the Postscriptum at the very end of this book.

▶ **Alain Girard.** As recounted in his 2021 article in *The Double Reed*, Alain Girard first encountered the heckelphone in 1984. Three years later, he took delivery of heckelphone #4989. Girard also plays the baritone oboe and the *basse de musette* – an instrument on whose history he is one of the leading experts. In 1994, Alain Girard founded *Les Roseaux Chantants*, a double reed quartet in which he played the heckelphone.

Girard's examination of the *basse de musette* described at the opening of the chapter is imagined; he did, however, study that

instrument, along with other specimens, and published his findings in 2001 (see sources).

▶ **Basse de musette.** The description of the *basse de musette* is based on research published by Alain Girard (see above). According to Michael Finkelman, an expert on the history of oboe instruments and their predecessors, the name 'basse de musette' was first mentioned in 1884 by Gustave Chouquet, in his catalogue of the Museum of the Paris Conservatory; it therefore seems possible that prior to that time, the instrument was not known under this name in Switzerland, where it was produced and used.

The unique *basse de musette* described in the text does exist and is now part of the collection of the Grassi museum of musical instruments in Leipzig (where it has inventory number 1352). Its history is imagined, loosely following insights and plausible speculation from Alain Girard's research. This instrument once belonged to Paul de Wit and then to Wilhelm Heyer's collection (both mentioned in later chapters), and – as accurately described in Chapter 1 – was studied and copied by Wilhelm Heckel during the time he was working on the heckelphone (see also Wilhelm Altenburg's article from 1898). It is very likely that this specific instrument played a significant role in the development of the heckelphone.

▶ **Jacques Jeanneret.** Alain Girard's research, published in 2001, references a documented from 1786, in which a pastor Théophile Rémy Frêne mentions a "sieur Jeanneret" as a maker of *trompettes d'église* living and working in the Jura Mountains between Neuchâtel and the French border. While it is therefore likely that a Swiss instrument maker named Jeanneret produced *basses de musette* at the time in question, it is unknown whether he made the unmarked instrument with the unique bell later copied by Heckel. Girard's research concludes that the *basses de musette* marked by their makers with the initials I·IR may well have been made by craftsmen

# SOURCES

▷ Wilhelm Altenburg: *Ueber einige Holzblasinstrumente mit Doppelzungenblatt in dem de Wit'schen Musikhistorischen Museum*. Zeitschrift für Instrumentenbau 18(21): 543–546, 1898.

▷ Michael Finkelman: *The Heckelphone – A Centenary Salute*. The Double Reed 27(4): 33–54, 2004.

▷ Alain Girard: *Les Hautbois d'église et leur énigme*. Glareana 50(2): 67–129, 2001.

▷ Alain Girard: *Thirty-five Years of "Heckelphony"*. The Double Reed 44(4): 104–110, 2021.

▷ Bruce Haynes: *The eloquent oboe: a history of the hautboy from 1640 to 1760*. Oxford University Press, 2001.

***NB:*** *Useful and interesting information on the instruments mentioned in this chapter, including shawms, pommers, dulcians, rackets, oboes and bassoons, on specific features (such as the pirouette) and their history, as well as further information on the life and works of Michael Praetorius can be found in the English and German editions of Wikipedia, and the author gratefully acknowledges the many contributions underlying these articles.*