

HISTORY

# VINTAGE INSTRUMENTS COME ALIVE: THE DOLMETSCH 1930s LEGACY PROJECT

BY ANDREW PINNOCK, TOM BEETS AND JORIS VAN GOETHEM

A musicologist and the Flanders Recorder Duo discuss their appreciation of recorders from the early 20th century.



▲ 1: Carl and Arnold Dolmetsch in the family workshop at Jesses, Haslemere, U.K., c.1926.

*To many of us, the name Dolmetsch will signal old-fashioned craftsmanship, and out-moded tonal character. You may have grown up with a bakelite soprano or alto – or, if you were lucky, a nicely finished wooden instrument with ivory rings. Mid-20th-century Dolmetsches were finely made, well-tuned with modern (“English”) fingering, double holes for the chromatic notes at the lower end, and came with a matching prestigious price tag. With their square windways and large fingerholes, these later Dolmetsch models can have a rather woofy, inflexible sound and often lack the refinement of more modern hand-made recorders. But this is only one facet of the Dolmetsch legacy.*

*When Arnold Dolmetsch started making recorders around 1920, he respected the excellent 18th-century originals he knew. It may come as a surprise that his first recorders played at A=415 and had single holes. (fig. 5)*

*British musicologist and Purcell scholar Andrew Pinnock has looked closely at the history of the Dolmetsch workshop and its products. He situates the Dolmetsches’ work in the context of recorder production in Germany, and instruments by others trained by Dolmetsch. The revisionist picture that emerged is quite different from how the Dolmetsches are viewed by many early-instrument aficionados today, and stimulated Tom Beets and Joris van Goethem to explore early Dolmetsch recorders. — THE EDITOR*



Over a long career, **Andrew Pinnock** has worked in insurance, for Arts Council England, and for the past 20 years

in the University of Southampton’s Music Department. He took the recorder very seriously while a student, but was never brave or keen enough on practice to try doing it for a living. His large collection of recorders includes 20 or so Dolmetsch instruments made before WW2. He bought the first few as curiosities, but finding them very rewarding to play, went looking for more, and started to research their history.

## EARLY DOLMETSCH RECORDERS AND THEIR MODERNIZATION

**Andrew Pinnock**

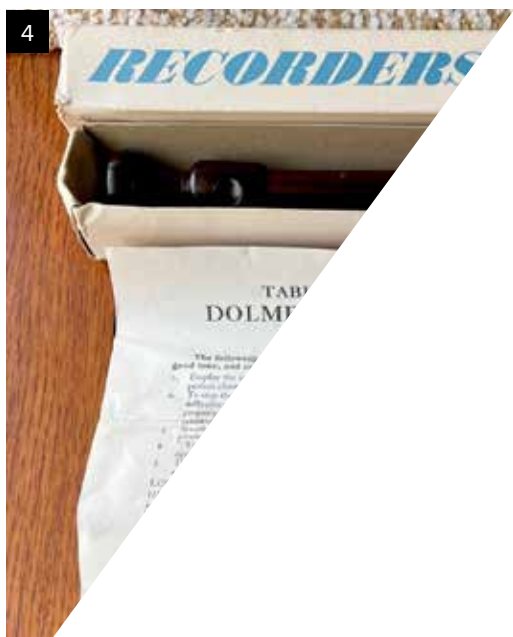
**I**n 1920s Britain, original century recorders were to buy at auction and fairly cheap with up. Arnold Dolmetsch struggled to survive had he called put a different promise which more

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◀ 3: Recorders ready for test  
most of them made by Dolr  
the 1920s and 30s. Photo

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◀ 5: Four altos in different materials A=439 and 440; the LH instrument with single holes; the others with double holes.

Sir Francis Darwin in 1916 and may well have taken measurements while doing so. A fully viable bass design eluded him until 1929. That year he borrowed a bass from the National Museum of Ireland, restored it gratis, and only “thus was Arnold enabled... to solve his own intricate problems satisfactorily” (a Dolmetsch bass is shown in fig. 7).

By 1930 all but one of the four SAT sizes in Dolmetsch’s catalogue were what could be called “style-copied” after historical models – that is, instruments that were closely modeled after historical models and aimed to reproduce their musical quality as they were first made. Dolmetsch had copied an 18th-century French alto too, had a suite of instruments in that way. Without the obvious influence of the Breton recorder (Tomlinson later

During WW2, the Dolmetsch workshop made high-precision aircraft parts in huge quantity, re-tooling and re-organizing to maximize efficiency. (Carl was now in sole charge: Arnold died in 1940.) This mass production experience suggested ways to speed up recorder production when it resumed in 1946. The “modern” Dolmetsch recorder with its wide straight-sided windway and but not so flexible tone color and was soon available in wood and plastic. Carl had been planning his recorders during spare moments and was ready to hit the

Dolmetsch national recorder past 1970 in contrast to 19th-century li-

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▲ 6: Exhibition set of Dolmetsch recorders S'oSAAT, made 1932–33 (A=415).

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► 7: Dolmetsch bass recorder #60? at A=415. Photos 5–8 Ian Brearey the Royal Academy of Music

between (fig. 8), Dolmetsch quality control guaranteed every custom instrument that was at least good might be brilliant.

From the beginning, Arnold's instruments to the performance standards achieved by 18th-century makers. The bass had to be plus-one-note perfectly in range with this respect. radical revision.



**Tom Beets and Joris Van Goethem** were both members of the Flanders Recorder Quartet, with which they recorded many

CDs, and travelled extensively. They now form the Flanders Recorder Duo (FR2). **Tom** is one of the most exciting recorder players of our time as well as an inspiring recorder and viol teacher. He teaches in music schools in Belgium, directs Blokfluitdagen, the largest early music and recorder course in Europe, is chair of the English Recorder Summer School, and serves as Vice-President of the Society of Recorder Players. Tom edits the Dutch recorder magazine, *Blokfluitist*, and since 2013, has conducted over 50 recorder orchestra days.

## RECORDER HEURISTICS, THE ART OF SEARCHING

**Tom Beets**

When I was a student at university, I enrolled in as many history and preservation classes as possible. In particular, the 4-hour-a-week course on Heuristic Techniques captivated my interest. In the context of history, heuristics refers to the art of searching for and discovering sources, texts and information. This tickled my passion for research, for understanding the past, and for approaching music with awareness.

A few years later, I got interested in the 1930s music and dance culture and Lindy Hopped my way through life! The interbellum era

markable time, characterized by a flourishing of the arts, the revival of early music and its instruments, and a growing awareness of the social role of music. In 1926 Margaret James established the British Pipers' Guild. Bamboo pipes were a way of teaching music to children who had no access to orchestral instruments, aiming to make music accessible to all.

In my 30s, I had the opportunity to play several original recorders and began making bamboo flutes. Because of my love for the material of wood I later trained as a carpenter. That all happened in the background of playing and teaching recorder... The Dolmetsch 1930s Project is in fact the vibrant cocktail of all my interests!

I often find myself browsing through auction-house listings, second-hand websites and social media.

There is always a chance to find an original viol or recorder, isn't there? Many years ago I came across an item with a label that read *bignou Bressan pour* a small high-pitched recorder. After Bressan's online advertisement, I found a photo of a small, round, wooden recorder.

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## The Excitement of Unboxing

Found one! Age and provenance researched, pictures verified, seller contacted, sale agreed. The instrument arrives. Let the unboxing begin!

It is uncommon for vintage recorders to come with a case, and even rarer for them to be in good condition. There might be cobwebs inside included at no extra cost, or cracks in the wood offered free of charge. What I have learned is that buying from musicians usually means that you will get an instrument in good working condition, and that auction houses tend to clean up instruments nicely. Nevertheless, one German auction house did not refrain from carving the auction lot number “6” into the window ramp of tenor #578!

## Conditioning the Instruments to Play Again

After visual inspection and/or admiration, I carefully remove the block for inspection. Block and windway need special care when cleaning. Depending on the state of the instrument and the wood type, you’ll find me using linseed or sweet almond oil for oiling. While there may be some cosmetic imperfections or dents (merely *taches de beauté*, or beauty spots), I only consider repairs when absolutely necessary. At any rate, I try at all cost to avoid touching the

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The key takeaways?  
No clogging, tonal  
sophistication, and most  
strikingly – individuality.

instrument’s “music production area.” Windway, block and chamfers need to remain in original condition, but from time to time, serious interventions are required! The head joint of a 1929 voice flute was severely cracked. Aafab fixed the problem by putting it on a lathe and removing the cracked wood. They finished the repair by turning and installing a new cap for the instrument, leaving me with the original sound, but a safer and healthier instrument.

Some instruments require a period of acclimatization to “wake up” and can significantly improve after playing. The sound can change as the block warms up in position, but the tuning tends to change with the tuning. Varying the block is the best compromise. If the block is too small and the windway is too large, the sound will be thin and the tuning will be sharp.

that can’t easily be replaced, unless there are clearly no downsides to the procedure. I always prefer adding methods, which is altering the tone or octave size by adding reeds such as wax. Ultimately, to maintain the instrument in good condition as much as possible, instruments need great flair and tuning. Other methods, such as blossoming, need to be used with care. Despair is not an option.

## RESOURCES:

- The Dolmetsch Legacy video (search Dolmetsch legacy)
- For a much more detailed look at his two articles, browse the website [gs.galperin.com](http://gs.galperin.com) “Boring for Boring Dolmetsch Recorder”
- For more information, see the book “Step by Step” by Galperin, 1997