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The Dolmetsch Legacy • 21st Century Concertos • Recorder Rock

Vintage Instruments Come Alive:

The Dolmetsch 1930s Legacy Project

Musicologist ***Andrew Pinnock*** *and recorder nerds* ***Tom Beets*** *and* ***Joris van Goethem*** *discuss their appreciation of recorders from the early 20th century with American Recorder editor,* ***Geoffrey Burgess***

Geoffrey Burgess 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 models can have a rather woofy, inflexible sound and often lack the refinement of modern hand-made recorders. But this is only one facet of the Dolmetsch legacy.

When Arnold Dolmetsch started making recorders around 1920, his intention was not to reinvent the instrument; rather, his instinct was to respect the excellent 18th-century originals he knew. It may come as a surprise that those first Dolmetsch recorders played at A=415 and had single holes. Only later did the workshop adopt A=440 and double holes.

Andrew Pinnock has been looking 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. 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.

Andrew Pinnock In 1920s Britain, original 18th century recorders were fairly easy to buy at auction or in junk shops, and fairly cheap when they did turn up. Arnold Dolmetsch would have struggled to sell copies of originals had he called them that. He therefore put a different offer to customers, promising them new instruments which would out-perform historical models while respecting the spirit of the past. In 1929, as he prepared to hand over recorder-making reins to the next generation, Arnold wrote proudly that his son Carl now made instruments "which surpass, in beauty of tone, purity of intonation and evenness of scale any other I have ever seen, old or new."

Though Arnold had arrived at "Dolmetsch fingering" almost by accident, while trying and failing to make his own early prototypes play in tune following faulty instructions in an 18th-century tutor book, it could still be marketed as an improvement on the system in near-universal use in the late 17th and 18th-centuries. Dolmetsch fingering did away with half-holing for alto Bflat4, and from some points of view this represented progress.

Arnold turned to recorder-making when Carl lost the family's original 18th-century alto by Peter Bressan (1663–1731) on the way home from a concert in 1919 – the loss is documented, as is Dolmetsch's offer of a reward for its return – but he got it back within a year or so, and stuck close to Bressan when making his initial alto batches. Early Dolmetsch tenors on the other hand were derived from originals by Thomas Stanesby Sr. (c.1668–1734): Arnold had restored a Stanesby voice flute or tenor for 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".

Fig. 1

By 1930 all but one of the four SATB sizes in Dolmetsch's catalogue were what could be called "style-copies" after historical models – that is, instruments that were closely based on historical models and aimed to recapture their musical qualities when they were first made. Dolmetsch would have copied an 18th-century soprano too, had a suitable example come his way. Without one to refer to he did the obvious next-best thing, scaling the Bressan alto down to soprano size. (Tom Prescott did the same decades later, with similarly excellent results.)

During WW2, the Dolmetsch workshop made high-precision aircraft parts in huge quantity, re-tooling and re-organising to maximise 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 strong but not so flexible tone emerged then and was soon available in both wood and plastic. Carl had been planning his recorder relaunch in spare moments during the war and was ready to hit the ground running.

Dolmetsch dominated the international recorder market until well past 1970. Younger makers

Fig. 2

setting up in competition with them went back to 18th-century originals for ideas, little realising that Dolmetsch had started out in the same place. So the 20th-century recorder design wheel turned full circle, from style-copy Baroque through "modern" back to Baroque again.

From the inception of the Dolmetsch recorder department in the 1920s, different tasks were assigned to different team members, some of them more experienced than others. Family members did the final voicing: Carl had a special talent for it. Output was very far from uniform before WW2. But although external turned appearances varied somewhat, and windways cut by hand rather than machine could be narrow, wide, or in between (**fig. 2**), Dolmetsch quality control guaranteed every customer an instrument that was at least good and might be brilliant. From the beginning, Arnold held his instruments to the high-performance standards achieved by leading 18th-century makers. All sizes except the bass had to have a full two-octave-plus-one-note range and had to play perfectly in tune across the entire range with regular fingerings. In this respect Arnold's approach was radically unlike his German recorder-reviving rival Peter Harlan's. Harlan-type recorders had non-historical bore profiles, non-historical fingering in consequence, and often a restricted range. They could be manufactured at a speed and sold at prices with which Dolmetsch could not compete. But setting price aside, even German experts agreed that Dolmetsch products were far superior. A number of German makers bought Dolmetsch sets in the 1930s in order to copy them, sets supplied willingly and in full knowledge of the use to which they would be put. One such demonstration set kickstarted FR2's Dolmetsch 1930s Legacy Project. I invited Tom and Joris to try the instruments, and thus a very fruitful collaboration began. The Dolmetsch 1930s Legacy Project puts a number of Dolmetsches

made in the 1920s and '30s through their paces and finds much to admire. They vary in character, and of course in pitch. All sizes were available at A=415 and A=439/440 from the mid-'20s, and they played comparably well at either pitch.

What is it like bringing instruments retired from active service 80 or 90 years ago back to musical life?

Tom Beets When I was a history student at university, I enrolled for as many as possible history and preservation classes. 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 was a remarkable time, characterised 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 and second-hand websites and shops. There is always a chance to find an original viol or recorder there, is there not? Many years ago Joris and I came across an item with the name *"mooi bignou Bressan pop art fluitje"* (a nice small high-pitched Breton bagpipe after Bressan in pop-art style). The online ad was accompanied by a photo suggesting that it was an original recorder by Bressan. After some research it was clear that we were dealing with a scammer. While this search was not a success, it was still exciting, and the treasure hunt continues. For many years, Andrew, Joris and I have been scouting for, and looking out for pre-WW2 Dolmetsch recorders and meanwhile we became proud owners of a nice collection of recorders "from the olden days".

The excitement of unboxing

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 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 acclimatisation to "wake up." They can significantly improve with regular playing. The sound can evolve and change as the block takes its ideal position, but the response tends not to change with playing in, nor does the tuning. When altering the sound, the best call is to experiment with the block. Having a few new blocks made and experimenting with windway size and other parameters can give you great results. As for tuning, I try to avoid destructive tuning methods such as filing, which removes material that can't easily be replaced, unless there are clearly no downsides to the procedure. I always prefer additive methods, which is altering tuning or octave size by adding material, such as wax. Ultimately, my goal is to maintain the instrument's original condition as much as possible. Some instruments instantly perform with great flair and style and impeccable tuning. Others are more vulnerable, blossom only after a few weeks, and need to be played with great care. Despite all efforts, some instruments remain merely antiquities.

Taste for recorders and their past

When playing instruments, you gather experience, and develop a certain "taste". After having made the acquaintance of a few dozen Dolmetsches from the 1920s and 30s, I can now answer the typical birthday question: "How does Joris like his English 1930s recorders?" The answer would be "Short- and steep-ramped, please" (#1193 or #1087). For myself, I have a fondness for the very early low-pitch models. While they may not possess the agility required for performing Carl Dolmetsch's commissions with piano, they offer a wonderfully delicate yet complex sound and handling experience.

Some of the instruments in the collection we have assembled for the project are well-documented; others have an unknown or fascinating past. Descant #1087 boasts an extensive CV, having made numerous stage appearances in Hamlet with the Royal Shakespeare Company, participated in countless BBC broadcasts, and engaged in extensive film and session work, including collaborations with Paul McCartney. Recorder royalty, really.

Star instruments are a set of sopranino, soprano, two altos, tenor and bass in low pitch 415 (#609, 649, 647, 648, 646, 603), made around 1932–33. These instruments were likely shipped to Germany shortly after manufacture as a demonstration set. They appear to have been played only minimally, with all but the tenor remaining in excellent condition. The viol maker Günther Hellwig served as Dolmetsch's German representative starting in 1932, and he would have required a set of recorders to showcase to prospective clients. It is possible that these instruments were intended for that purpose.

Other instruments (e.g.#267) are accompanied by correspondence with the Dolmetsch firm regarding repairs or revisions. This not only helps to understand their condition and behaviour, but, as official correspondence is usually dated, and as the Dolmetsch order books and other records were lost when the company folded in 1981, the combination of serial number and confirmed production date is invaluable!

Joris van Goethem I confess, I am a full-fledged recorder nerd. My shelves are lined with scores, and I revel in everything about playing different types of recorders, studying music, exploring new sounds, and making music in an ensemble. And yes, I suffer from Recorder Acquisition Syndrome (RAS). With nearly 100 recorders in my collection ranging from a Von Huene 415 contrabass to an Adrian Brown Virdung consort, to Geri Bollinger's dynamic instruments: a versatile selection that allows me to tackle all manner of musical challenges. The opportunity to explore an extensive collection of early Dolmetsch recorders

felt like walking into a candy store: pure curiosity, but, to be honest, with tempered expectations. I anticipated a sound lacking tonal sophistication, odd tuning, an absence of high notes, and a whole lot of clogging.

"Baroque" Fingering: Thank You, Mr. Dolmetsch
It was no surprise that these instruments played with what we now call standard Baroque fingering, though a more fitting term might be Dolmetsch, or English fingering. Contrary to popular belief, original Baroque recorders do not use the system that most of us have come to learn as normal. Instead, most have single holes and "old" fingering, leading to notable differences, particularly on an alto. Here are some examples:

B-flat (first octave):
0/123/4-6- (no little finger)
B-flat (upper octave):
Ø/123/4-6- (half-holing finger 6)
B natural (first octave):
0/123/-567 (with little finger)
B natural (upper octave):
Ø/123/-56 (half-holing finger 6)

Credit where credit is due: Arnold Dolmetsch's fingering system became an industry standard because it solved technical challenges. Today, almost all players and instrument makers use it. Half-holing single holes can be unreliable, making Dolmetsch's approach a practical improvement. However, the "old" fingering system does have its merits. Original recorders have single holes not because the makers couldn't create double holes, but because they intentionally chose single holes for the positive impact on tone quality: stronger low notes and more colourful sound. The shading and half-holing reinforce the Baroque concept of inequality in sound, allowing for richer timbral variation. It also aligns with historical tuning systems. This principle holds true for Renaissance consort instruments as well. I'm always amazed by how "old" fingerings improve the tuning and sound of an ensemble.

I was fortunate to experience and play a variety of original instruments, including the legendary trio of Denner, Bressan and Stanesby. Exploring an old recorder isn't like playing a modernised Stradivarius violin, where meticulous restoration ensures peak performance. Instead, historical recorders offer only a glimpse into the sound world of the past. Yet, to my surprise, these early Dolmetsch recorders came to life immediately. No clogging, tonal sophistication, and most strikingly – individuality**.** Even full consorts, spanning soprano to bass (S'oSAATB), were tuned in A415!

Each recorder had its own personality. The Dolmetsch instruments revealed a spirit of experimentation, with variations in windway design and a deliberate search for a sweet, clear, yet slightly reedy tone. Unlike many of today's standardised instruments, each recorder had a unique voice – much like a vintage car with undeniable charm but a learning curve for the driver.

Arnold Dolmetsch learned to play recorder using The Compleat Flute Master and an original alto by Bressan. This philosophy of learning from the instrument itself resonates deeply with me. As Tom and I explore these instruments, we let them guide us. The instruments tell us how they want to be played. Never fight your instrument: learn from it. Some demanded special fingerings, and they didn't always comply with modern expectations. But their individuality was a reward in itself. Their sound-world is unmistakably Baroque, not modern. When testing them, I instinctively played Baroque music – a testament to their intended musical language. Stanesby, Bressan and Denner knew exactly what they were doing, and so did Arnold Dolmetsch, inspired by the original recorders he knew. His early recorders showcase both craftsmanship and fearless experimentation. Every instrument tells a story and gives us a voice to sing.

Of course, the evolution of recorder making didn't stop there. Better tools, different materials and technical advancements helped in the pursuit of more power, consistency, reliability and better performance in some respects. But I can't help but think back to these nearly 100-year-old instruments and their stunning quality. If only I'd had a soprano like one of the Dolmetsch instruments for my Master's recital at conservatory…

Together Tom and Joris form the Flanders Recorder Duo (FR2) and have recently completed The Dolmetsch 1930s Legacy Project in association with the Music Department of the University

of Southampton, UK. The four videos feature (where possible) exclusively Dolmetsch recorders, recorded in venues that date from the 1930s and showcase some of the best surviving instruments from that forgotten golden era. Research informing the project, much of it undertaken by Andrew Pinnock, is accessible free of charge at the website of The Galpin Society Journal.

Episode 1 showcases altos from the exhibition set made in or around 1932-3, pitched at A=415. The repertoire is Johann Mattheson's *Sonata XI à Due Flauti* (*XII Sonates à Deux & Trois Flûtes Sans Basse*, op. 1, Amsterdam 1708) recorded in the Art Deco entrance hall of the *Broederschool* in Sint-Niklaas, Belgium (1932).

Episode 2 pairs instruments in different states of modernisation, to show how that process unfolded. In *Le Coucoû* (Daquin), a tenor made in 1929 supports a soprano made about a decade later. In *L'Hirondelle* (Daquin again), altos dating from c.1926 and 1937/38 go head-to-head. To support harder blowing and help players make a bigger sound, the modernised instruments have shorter, steeper upper ramps than you would expect to see in an 18th-century original. When Dolmetsch recorder production resumed after WW2 modernisation went a step further. Wide, parallel-sided windways of "letterbox" proportion replaced the earlier tapered windways. Listeners noticed little difference, but the playing feel did change. We prefer pre-war models, and in the videos released so far have played only on pre-war models.

Episode 3 is a lecture with sound examples. Topics discussed are pitch, modernisation, the influence of Frans Brüggen, the Society of Recorder Players, and much more.

Episode 4 showcases two Dolmetsch descants at A439/440 made about a year apart in the late 1930s and are nearly identical in design. Both have shorter, steeper ramps than players of older Dolmetsch instruments were used to. This modification allowed harder blowing than would have been wise on earlier models, and more assertive sound projection when playing solos, concertos, or a virtuoso duo as here; the spectacular czakan duet *Grand Duo* from Stephan Franz arranged by Nik Tarasov.

Links and References

The Dolmetsch 1930s Legacy Project
videos @flanders-recorder.duo.be
Andrew Pinnock: Boring for Britain: the Design, Development and Mass Deployment of Dolmetsch Recorders, 1920–1980, Boring for Britain (Dolmetsch Recorders 1920–1980): Six Brief Addenda. The Galpin Society Journals https://gs.galpinsociety.org/open%20access.htm
Information on The Dolmetsch story
@Dolmetsch.com
Stephan Franz, *Grand Duo* arr. Tarasov F. Hofmeister Musikverlag FH 2616, 1998. ISBN 9790203426165

Andrew Pinnock is a Professor at the University of Southampton's Music Department. His large collection of recorders includes 20 or so Dolmetsch instruments made before WW2.

Tom Beets teaches recorder and viol, directs Blokfluitdagen, is chair of the English Recorder Summer School, serves as a Vice-President of the Society of Recorder Players and edits the Dutch recorder magazine, *Blokfluitist*.

Joris van Goethem is a renowned flautist, recorder player, teacher, arranger and conductor. His arrangements have found their way to Hollywood and have been published by Heinrichshofen, Ascolta and De Haske.

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