

Interview with Adrian Brown - by Charles Fischer (12/15/2003)

Adrian Brown is widely considered one of the very best contemporary recorder makers. He started making instruments as a teenager, being fascinated by the “magic” involved in turning wood and metal into something so controllable and flexible as a musical instrument. At the instrument making course at the old London College of Furniture his principle teacher was the late Kenneth Collins, who was a master craftsman and had worked for many years at the Dolmetsch factory in Haslemere. Collins had a great knowledge of workshop procedures, tool making and problem solving, but unfortunately knew very little about original recorders or tuning and voicing. With Collins’ help and encouragement, Adrian completed his first instrument in time for Christmas 1979, when he proudly presented it to his brother as a Christmas present. He had additional instruction from Eric Moulder and Graham Lyndon-Jones, who were both professional woodwind makers and part time lecturers at the college.

At that time there was a great deal of interest in making more historically based instruments and he jumped directly onto the bandwagon of the authentic movement, reading all that was written about old recorders. The recorder scene in England was very large but extremely amateur and from a playing point of view, not nearly as wonderful as he had at first thought, so he traveled a lot in Europe, visiting both museums and music conservatories, learning about the original recorders at the same time as he started developing contacts with serious players. This practice carried on long after finishing his course at the LCF in 1982 and the establishment of his first workshop in Reykjavik, Iceland. His contacts with players were essential to provide the necessary feedback on his work, which as a “rotten” player he was unable to judge for himself. Even now, with more than twenty years experience, he still relies a great deal on the opinions of his customers to help him develop his instruments.

Adrian has done much research into renaissance recorders, and has just finished collaborating

with the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna in the preparation of their new catalogue. Over the last few years, he has measured all the renaissance recorders in the major collections of Vienna, Frankfurt, Verona, Merano and Brussels, as well as many instruments in the smaller collections worldwide. He maintains a database of surviving instruments at www.adrianbrown.org/ database.

His instruments use a mark lifted directly from the Tudor Rose stamp found on the Bressan recorders, but with a crescent moon rather than that of a rose or a star, having been influenced in his youth by the book “The White Goddess” by Robert Graves. His letterhead logo has quite an interesting story and I recommend reading all about it on his website at http://www.adrianbrown.org/latest_news/

In order to demystify certain aspects of tuning and maintenance, he published “The Recorder, A Basic Workshop Manual” which quickly sold out and went out of print over five years ago. According to Bernard Thomas, the publisher, a new edition is expected in early 2004. Currently, Adrian lives and works in Amsterdam and is married to the professional recorder player, Susanna Borsch.

CF - Did you have any formal musical training on the recorder or other instruments as a child or young adult?

AB - Not really, I learnt the guitar and played in rock bands as a teenager. Later I played accordion in various folk dance groups and in a way that got me into instrument making. I did take some recorder lessons years ago, and my wife gives me the occasional lesson, but the main problem is that I don't really have enough time to practice! :) I have picked up quite a lot about musical theory over the years, mainly by listening to others and reading and I think this is pretty essential learning for a maker. I don't think the playing side is so important, so long as you can blow properly.

CF - You mentioned that you sometimes take a lesson from your wife.

What is the story of your meeting her.. was she your customer first?

AB - Yes, we met at the 1996 recorder symposium in Calw, Germany, where she was taking part in the competition. She's probably best known in your country for having replaced an indisposed Daniel Bruggen during the spring 2000 tour of the Amsterdam Loeki Stardust Quartet.



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CF - Have her recorder-playing interests and tastes influenced any of your design choices as a maker?

AB - Of course I have tried some things out on her first, to see how they work, and she often ends up getting the prototype instruments, poor thing! She plays in three different recorder ensembles here and in the Axyz ensemble, a 14 piece chamber group specializing in new music written using non-western techniques. The fact that she plays a lot of modern music opened up a new world for me that had been hitherto uncharted waters! I have made a few special instruments in this direction, that up to now have only been used by her.

CF - Does she assist you in your business?

AB - She does help with the tuning of the consorts, where it's really useful to be two, but otherwise I work pretty much alone. However, she's obviously the first person I ask whenever I'm unsure of something, or need a second opinion.

CF - What inspired you to make your Virdung consort with two different interchangeable bell shapes?

AB - The whole concept behind the "Virdung" look-alikes, was to try to imagine instruments based solely on what we see in the woodcuts. I was trying to imagine the reason why the bells of these instruments have an extra turned feature and what sort of role this could have played. As I saw it there could only be three possibilities: a contraction at that point, an expansion or just a plain cylinder, so I tried all three. The contracted bell and the straight version both worked well, the contracted version giving as one would expect, a slightly muted quality to the sound.

CF - I have heard that you developed a new style of renaissance recorders with Peter van Heyghen based on recorders from the museum in Vienna, and introduced at the conference for renaissance recorders and flutes in Utrecht, this August, and that they received a bipolar response (i.e. people either loved them or hated them). One well-known recorder professional called it "one of the most inspiring new recorder developments I have witnessed in a long time!"

So I would like to know:

- 1) What is so different about them from your previous renaissance consort instruments?
- 2) Why do you think people had such widely different responses to their sound?.

AB - Taking 2) first: I suppose any bipolar response must mean we're doing something significant, or original:) I have been involved with the Mezzaluna group from the outset and I suppose given the research Peter and I have done together, it was only natural for him to look for an outlet to present this in a musical context. It is most gratifying as a maker to be involved this closely with a group

of musicians and they present a wonderful test bed for new ideas and developments, so I suppose my feelings about the Utrecht concert are always going to be subjective. I think any time there is something new on offer in the musical world, there will be mixed feelings about it. Some will herald it as the new dawn and other revile it as being against everything they have stood for, and so on and so forth! The important thing I feel is to try to go forward and seek new directions, and this has definitely been the motivation here, rather than adhering to any rigid dogmatism. The two concerts linked to the symposium were stylistically at opposite ends of the spectrum, but the most encouraging thing I feel, at least in terms of the future of the recorder, is that both concerts were completely full.

To answer your questions about the instruments; again it would be strange, given the amount of original instruments I have examined and measured, if this were not to rub off on my instrument making. It's not so much that I want to copy old instruments, but rather use the framework of their measurements, to stimulate my own developments. I can always "improve" instruments, by for example, moving the position of their tone-holes, changing the bore profile and so on, but limiting yourself to boundaries, forces you to find other solutions, that I personally find gives my work more meaning. So I'm not sure if you can say that over the past few years I've had a "back to basics" conversion, but I do take more care in my own work to try to use as much of the information gained from original instruments as possible.

The most important differences in the instruments themselves, to those I was making before concern the sizes of recorder. Mezzaluna use almost exclusively five recorder sizes built a fifth apart. So their consort's sizes are in the sounding pitches of: Great bass in F, Basses in c, Bassets in g, tenors in d' and altos in a'. This gives the possibility of playing using the normal f, c', c', g' combination in three different positions sounding either: F,c,c,g / c,g,g,d' or g, d',d' a'. This might not sound like a great deal, but I think it makes a huge difference to the wholeness of the sound. Particularly in the middle position, sounding c,g,g,d', the entire consort seems to have a weightlessness about it. The fact that the group is six part also enables them to play larger scale works, either using three middle sizes, for five part, or three middle sizes and two top sizes for six part music. For some later pieces, with a larger overall range, four sizes are necessary, bringing another quality to bear, as the players are now reading, (for a four part piece) f,c',g',d" the top line player as you can imagine, having quite a lot to do! Here again, the more covered sound of the top line instrument, blends much better with the rest of the consort, than I feel would be the case, with our more normal fourth interval between top sizes..

CF - What are the differences in your current production of renaissance recorders compared to your previous production? Tuning? Voicing? Bore?

AB - The biggest difference apart from the sizes issue, is the bore and tone-hole positions. It's an interesting habit that we recorder makers, when reproducing an old recorder, will always tend to first move the tone hole positions when something doesn't work out. If you think about it, this is probably the only thing we can be sure

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hasn't changed since the instrument was made. The sizes can be different, the bore could have been enlarged, the window, voicing and so on too. But the tone-holes, unless there is evidence of plugging and re-drilling, which after all would be pretty obvious, will always be there where they were originally. It's perhaps a typical reaction from our time that we assume the maker drilled them in the wrong place and thus put them in new positions to improve and conform to our ideas of how the instrument should be. It's more difficult for us to assume that they are in correct positions and that it is we who are missing the plot in some area!

CF - Based on your analysis of the smaller instruments listed in your renaissance recorder database and the clustering around certain pitch levels, do you feel that there were no 16th c. sopranos in c" and altos in f" or did they exist alongside d" and g" instruments, regardless of what the theory books said?

AB - This is difficult to be sure about. The alto in f is very unlikely and if some do exist around this pitch they must be considered as either a top line instrument in g at a lower pitch, or a tenor/alto size in c at a higher pitch. When exactly the transition between the g' recorder and the f' recorder occurred and why, is one of the intriguing questions that in my mind still needs answering. Praetorius mentions an alternative soprano size in c", instead of d", so it's probably a fair bet to say they were in already in use by the late 16th century. A soprano size in d" however, fits more into the logic built on fifths, and was

probably the more common. My database is probably a bit misleading here, because I've included a lot of obviously 17th century small sizes, that would better fit in the "handfluyt" genre. There are in fact, very few surviving recorders of this size, that can be considered as consort recorders.



CF - How would you differentiate between instruments playable with the Ganassi fingering and so-called "Ganassi Recorders?"

AB - There were always other instruments known, that could be coaxed into playing the fifteenth note as a harmonic of the first note. (This is what basically decides that it'll play with Ganassi's fingerings) and Bob Marvin gives a couple of candidate instruments, (but funnily enough, not including the famous SAM 135 in the Vienna Kunsthistorisches Museum) as early as 1972. During the course of my work at the Museum, I have discovered a few other instruments that play, or would have played with Ganassi's fingerings. These instruments were presumably known to other makers before, it's just that since the 1982 article by Morgan, there has been a general fixation on SAM 135 as the sole "Ganassi" recorder. The important technical thing is not that the bore is cylindrical, a slight taper will also work as long as the holes are large and placed well down the instrument and that the bore has a largish flare, after the choke. The smaller the instrument is, the more cylindrical the bore can be, but the great majority of surviving renaissance recorders are bassets or larger, so it's quite normal that most of the surviving instruments that will work with Ganassi's fingerings are bassets. But I do feel it's important to state again that these are consort instruments and have little to do with solo music from the 17th century.

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CF - Do you think there can be such a thing as a “Ganassi-Consort?”

AB - I don't see it like that. One could propose a Schnitzer consort (most of their instruments seem to respond to Ganassi fingering), or a “von Schrattenbach” consort (some instruments attributed to this family would also work with Ganassi fingering) but I think it's important to point out that the instruments were in all probability built first and the discovery of the fingerings came as a consequence. I don't believe there were separate “Ganassi” instruments, he simply found that some instruments would and some wouldn't play his high notes. He does not mention if the notes in his extra tables can be played on the two lower sizes of instrument, quite possibly because in his mind, there was no musical point in playing these notes on the lower musical parts. In this respect, it's interesting to analyze his diminution examples. Despite the famed two octaves and a sixth, in the whole of “La fontegara” the highest note used is a''' (note XVI) and it occurs only twice. Even the double octave note g''' (XV) occurs only six times and together they occur in only four of the examples.

CF - We have heard the terms, “Van Eyck”, “Transitional”, “Early Baroque”, “Kynsecker” all applying to various recorder models suitable for playing the 17th Century Italian and Dutch repertoire. You have added a new term to this lexicon: the “Dolcimelo” recorder. Why did you choose that term and how does it distinguish your instruments from other replicas of this period?

AB - I didn't really want to use any particular term for these instruments, but of course you have to call it something! I don't really like any of those terms; Transitional is probably the best, but assumes we know the approximate date of the original. If I was to name it after Van Eyck, he might come to be thought of as a blind instrument maker in recorder folklore. After all, it's amazing how many recorder players think that Ganassi was a recorder maker! Concerning the term pre-baroque, it's worth remembering that the Roman Empire was also pre-baroque! :) Dolcimelo was something Peter van Heyghen came up with when we were discussing this. The original three recorders in Vienna that I used as a basis for this instrument, all have the anonymous mark that looks at first sight, rather like a couple of apples. After the usual fun with the Apple Macintosh and the Beatles, it sort of stuck. Dolcimelo is of course also the name of the treatise by Virgiliano, who's musical examples work pretty well on this instrument.

CF - In her article on “The Early Baroque Recorder” Eva Legene checks for the possibility of “Paulus Matthysz” fingerings and in your recorder database you check for “Jambe de Fer” fingerings. Are they equivalent?

AB - They are equivalent in that acoustically, the switch from note XIII to XIV goes over the break from the second to third partial. In simpler terms, note XIV is played as a

twelfth of note III, unlike the other possibility, where it is an octave of note VII. This difference gives us what we call “baroque” fingering, but was first noted, albeit with slight variations, by Jambe de Fer in 1556, so the term baroque fingering is hardly appropriate! For much of the late renaissance, at least two types of fingering (and thus of course bore types) overlapped. After all, the difference only concerns the high register but implies a very different bore type. I am in the process of trying to classify all the renaissance bore profiles I have information about, to try to see if there are links between instruments, place of manufacture, time period and so on.

CF - What led you to choose the Denner Alto as your model for a baroque alto recorder?

AB - I find that the sound of the English baroque instruments at a=405hz or thereabouts is pretty unbeatable, but I think that practicalities have to be made somewhere. There are plenty of great German instruments around a=415hz that are more practical to use for today's “standard” baroque pitch, and that is my compromise as far as baroque altos goes. They may not be so strong as a Bressan or Stanesby design in the low register, but I think on the whole, they work better than a scaled up, shortened instrument that was designed for a lower pitch. I think you can apply this thinking to all sizes and designs of recorder, they all seem to have an optimal pitch, which when disturbed with, seems to compromise the original design. It's not a question of lower being better, or so on, more of finding at what pitch a certain design is happy with. I have been doing my best to convince my customers of a more “historically” accurate interpretation, but it remains for all of us, an interpretation and I feel we have to balance this with our desire to make a living from our work. There are some instruments I would not make, because I wouldn't feel happy, or honest with the result. Both makers and players have to draw the line somewhere and whilst commercial pressures and modern conditions may often influence its position, it will always exist somewhere.

CF - I notice you don't offer any “corps de rechange” for your baroque instruments.

AB - As a rule I'm not a great believer in one head joint – two recorders. I've done it with the cylindrical instruments but there is always one joint that works better, and I feel it's generally better to make two instruments.

CF - After Morgan made the first Bizey copies at A392 in the 70's it seems that it was the only original instrument at that pitch to be copied by other makers up to today. There are also some makers who are scaling down Bressan, Stanesby, and Scherer models to A392. Why do you think no one has tried to copy the beautiful (and fairly well preserved) L. Hotteterre instrument which is in the Dayton Miller Collection alongside the Bizey?

AB - I don't know this instrument although I have got the catalogue and have seen the photo there. I don't know even if a drawing has ever been made? The Bizey instrument certainly works very well, even if by all accounts, it's a pretty late instrument.

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CF – Have you noticed any trend towards conservatories emphasizing consort playing in addition to, or even instead of, the solo virtuoso/virtuosa baroque/modern model which has dominated the previous decades?

AB - I have sold quite a few consorts to conservatories and music schools over the last fifteen years, so where the instruments are available, one would expect there to be a greater emphasis on teaching consort music. I can't confirm or deny this however.

CF – What is your opinion of recorder orchestras?

AB - Oh dear, are we on record? I'm sure they must be a wonderful experience for young recorder players, and I know what great fun they are, having very fond memories of participating in one for an afternoon, a few years ago. On the other hand, I don't think personally I would go too far to listen to one in concert! The reason is that I don't really like the sound of recorders in unison. No matter how many recorders to a part, or how well they are in tune, the result never blends enough for me and always warbles!

CF - A quick search on the "Recorded Recorders" section of the Recorder Homepage plus my own music library turned up the following CDs crediting your instruments* Are there some other titles you would like to have on record (so to speak) which feature your instruments?

AB - This is a difficult question, because I must admit that I don't often listen to recordings of my instruments. It's very interesting to listen to CD's and try to guess which recorders are yours, but for me the experience in a concert situation is much stronger. I suppose I am disappointed that given the number of consorts I have made, there are not more recordings of renaissance vocal music with my instruments. There are some very good recordings of the instruments, but in nearly every case, the music is transcriptions of organ pieces, viol music, etc. It's almost as if some recorder players are frightened by vocal polyphony! :) Apart from that it would be nice to hear a recording with the Dolcimelo instruments, even some old favorites like the Castello and Fontana sonatas would be really interesting to hear with these instruments. Well Charles, you've got two of them now, so how about it!

CF - When your book on recorder maintenance is reissued (estimated by the publishers as early 2004), will it be basically unaltered or will you be making any changes and additions?

AB - I have only really had the possibility of updating the "tools and suppliers" page, due to an almost total lack of communication with the editors. I did expand the tuning section once, to include my (then) thoughts about tuning consorts, but I don't know if it will be incorporated in their plans.

CF – What are your plans for the future?

AB – I am working on several articles at the moment, the first is an overview of surviving renaissance recorders, essentially a written out version of my lecture in Utrecht, and another, a much-expanded version of this for the forthcoming catalogue of the Vienna collection. I am continuing my research into the surviving instruments and I hope one day to have measured the lot! On the making side, I have been asked to make accurate copies of the

Schnitzer instruments in Merano, which represent a totally different aesthetic in terms of consort recorders. The originals are almost totally unplayable so it will be very interesting to see how these reconstructions compare with those of the HIERS/HIES instruments from Vienna. I would also like to make some of those extended basset and bass sizes, that have 2 or 3 extra notes below the normal 7-finger note, in the fashion of a bassoon. These are important instruments in that they allow the playing of pieces that would otherwise be difficult on recorders, but the extra work with their key mechanisms and long fontanelles, means this will still have to be a few years down the line!

CF- Thanks, Adrian, for taking the time to answer the interview questions so candidly and thoroughly!

*Selection of CD's featuring Adrian Brown's instruments:

Bach Sonate a Flauto, Violino e Basso, Sébastien Marq & Le Concert Français: Astrée; E 8676

Essercizii Musici : Trios, Solos et Fantaisies, Sébastien Marq & Le Concert Français Astrée, E 8554.

Coprario / Lawes / Locke, Maskes & Fantazies, Sebastien Marq & Le Concert Français, Astrée 8504

Vicki Boeckman "Early Italian Baroque" Kontra Punkt 32059 renaissance tenor (1989)

Les Boréades de Montréal (Francis Colpron) "Private Musik" ATMA 2-2132 alto after Bizey (1994)

Cléa Galhano "Songs in the Ground" Ten Thousand Lakes SC-114 alto after Denner

I Barocchisti (Maurice Steger) "Vivaldi Concerti" Claves CD 50-2010 alto after Denner

Francis Colpron "Dieupart - Les Six Suites" ATMA ACD2-2234/35 voice flute after Denner

Michael Schneider (5 baroque titles on Capriccio) voice flute after Denner

Trio Passagio (Matthias Maute) "Telemann Recorder Sonatas" Vanguard Classics 99146 altos after Denner (1991, 1994) and voice flute after Denner (1992)

Rebel (Matthias Maute) "Concerto di Napoli" Dorian DOR-90286, alto after Denner (1992)

Maurice Steger "An English Collection" Claves CD 50-9614 voice flute after Denner

Ensemble Caprice (Mattheus Maute and Sophie Lariviere) ATMA ACD 2-2213 renaissance soprano at A465, alto after Bizey, alto after Denner, renaissance alto at A465, voice flute after Denner

Piffaro (4 renaissance titles on Archiv and 2 on Dorian) - renaissance recorders at A465 by Adrian Brown (1993)

The Sacred Organ's Praise, Brisk Recorder Quartet: Erasmus Muziek Producties, WVH125.

The King's Private Musick, Brisk Recorder Quartet: Christophorus, CHR 77239.

La Symétrie, Ensemble Flûte Harmonique amb 97 947.

English Consort Music, Ensemble Bona Speranza: Prospect, PD 302493 Renaissance Consort and Virdung Consort