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The Chester "recorders"

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FEBRUARY 12, 1901.

SIR J. F. BRIDGE, MUS. DOC., OXON.,

IN THE CHAIR.

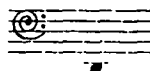
THE CHESTER "RECORDERS."

BY JOSEPH C. BRIDGE, M.A., MUS. DOC., OXON.

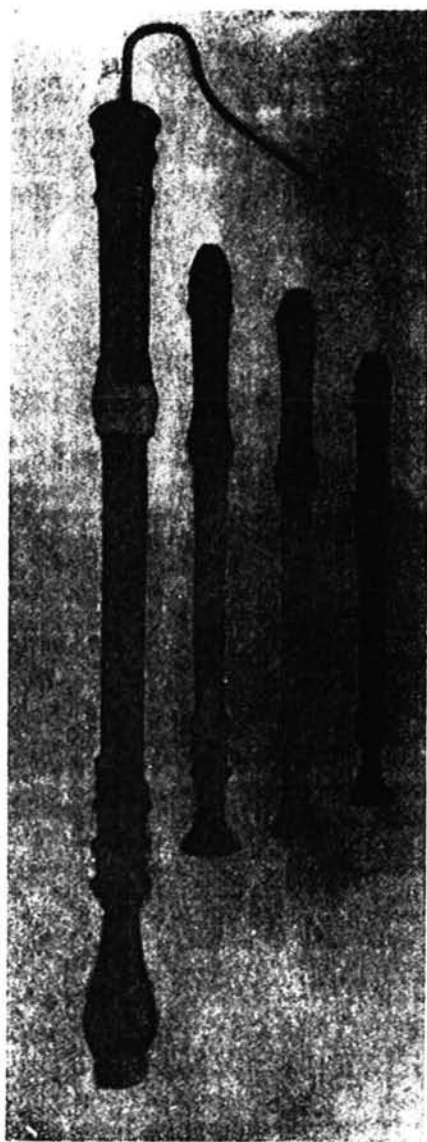
Two of the most old-fashioned towns to be found in Europe are Nuremberg and Chester, and comparisons between them are often made and similarities and coincidences pointed out. It is a remarkable fact that the only sets of Recorders now known to exist are to be found in those two cities. In the year 1886, the Chester Archæological Society moved into new quarters in the freshly built central "Grosvenor" Museum. Amongst the lumber from its old rooms was a peculiarly shaped box (which crumbled to pieces almost immediately) and in it the Secretary found what he thought to be "an ancient bassoon." On viewing the remains, what was my delight to find that the Society was the possessor of a rare set of ancient Flutes-a-Bec, or Recorders. These instruments in old times were made in "sets," like viols, and ranged from a *Sopranino*, going up to—



to a *Great Bass*, going down to—



A *facsimile* of the Nuremberg set has been made for the Brussels Museum, under the direction of M. Victor Mahillon. These instruments were brought to England and performances given upon them at the "Inventions" Exhibition.

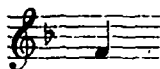


Reproduced by kind Permission of Mr. R. NEWSTEAD, Curator of the
Grosvenor Museum, Chester.

The Chester "Recorders."

III

The Chester set consists of soprano in—



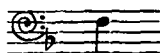
Weight, $8\frac{1}{2}$ oz.; length, 20 in.; wood, red cedar, with ivory mouthpiece.
Alto in—



Tenor—



Bass* in—



2 lbs. $10\frac{1}{2}$ oz., 42 $\frac{1}{2}$ in.

The Chester instruments bear the name of *Bressan*, under a Tudor rose. The only reference I have found to this maker is in Hawkins's "History of Music" (Vol. V., p. 483, original ed.), where he speaks of his objection to flutes—viz., that they can never be made strictly in tune. He adds that flutes-a-becc are generally in the key of F, and "to effect this truly is a matter of no small difficulty. The flutes of the latter kind of the younger Stanesby approach the nearest of any to perfection, but those of Bressan, though excellent in their tone, are all too flat in the upper octave."

En passant, I may say that the Stanesbys were clever and excellent workmen. Stanesby, Senr., died in 1734, and Stanesby, Junr., in 1754. I have brought with me a tenor recorder which I bought in Chester. It is in the key of C, and bears the name of Stanesby, Junr., and must have been made, therefore, about 1750. I should doubt if there were many made after that date.


The music for recorders was, I believe, of a very simple character, and confined, more or less, to an octave of notes. Semitones could only be obtained by cross-fingering, and notes beyond the octave could only be obtained by "pinching." The following directions for this are given in Salter's "Genteel Companion; or, exact directions for the Recorder," 1683:—

"Your pinching notes ascend higher than the plain notes. . . . You must bend your left thumb and let it be half over

* Messrs. Glen, of Edinburgh, have two recorders: a Tenor, in C, 25 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. long, and a Bass, in F, 39 $\frac{3}{4}$ in. long. Maker's name, *Rippert*. The Bass instrument is very similar to the Chester Bass.

the hole underneath the Pipe, for that belongs to the upper line where the pinch is made, and pinch the nail of your thumb in the hole, then blow your Recorder a little stronger than you did when you played the other notes, and you shall find the Recorder sound eight notes higher."

Mersenne, in his "*Harmonie Universelle*," published in 1636, gives several compositions for flutes-a-bec, but they are all of a simple character.

There were several methods of writing for the recorder, but in all cases the stopping of the holes by the fingers is represented by black dots placed upon a series of lines varying from 6 to 8. A line through the dot  showed a "pinched" note.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries they were undoubtedly looked upon as choice and expensive instruments, and were distinctly under Royal patronage, for Henry VII. bought recorders and rewarded players on them; and the inventory of Henry VIII.'s wardrobe, taken after his death, shows that he possessed 154 flutes, of which seventy-six were recorders, and we know that in his lifetime he amused himself daily by "playing at the recorders, flutes, virginals, in setting of songs and making of ballads."

At the beginning of the seventeenth century the instrument began to be more universally used, though the following well known quotation from "*Hamlet*" shows that it was not a common instrument up to that period:—

"Re-enter Players, with recorders."

"*Hamlet*.—O the recorders: let me see one. (Then turning to Guildenstern he says) Will you play upon this pipe?

"*Guildenstern*.—My lord, I cannot.

"*Hamlet*.—I pray you.

"*Guildenstern*.—Believe me, I cannot.

"*Hamlet*.—I do beseech you.

"*Guildenstern*.—I know no touch of it, my lord.

"*Hamlet*.—'Tis as easy as lying: govern these ventages with your fingers and thumb, give it breath with your mouth, and it will discourse most eloquent music. Look you, these are the stops."

In Charles I.'s time, the King's band consisted of eight hautboys, six flutes, and six recorders.

Pepys records with delight how he purchased a recorder, "the sound of it being most pleasing" to him.

Evelyn, in his diary 1679, says: "They are now much in request for accompanying the voice," and several instruction books appeared about that period. In one of them, "*The Genteel Companion*," published in 1683, we read in the Preface: "Of the kinds of musick vocal has always had the

preference in esteem, and by consequence the recorder (as approaching nearest to the sweet delightfulness of the voice) ought to have the first place in opinion, as we see by the universal use of it confirmed."

As time went on we find recorders were changed in name to "flutes and recorders," then to "flutes," and finally to the "common flute." As if unable to survive this degradation it died about 1750, to be succeeded by the so-called German flute.

Although treble recorders were made as late, say, as 1750, I believe that bass recorders had died out long before.

In July, 1772, Burney, the historian, was at Antwerp.* "After this I went to a very large building on a quay, at the side branch of the Scheld, which is called the 'Oosters Huys,' or Easterlings House; it was formerly used as a warehouse by the merchants trading to Lubec, Hamburg, and the Hanseatic towns; it is a very handsome structure, and has served, in time of war, as a barrack for two thousand men.

"I should not have mentioned my visiting this building if I had not found in it a large quantity of musical instruments of a peculiar construction. There are between thirty and forty of the common flute kind, but differing in some particulars, having, as they increase in length, keys and crooks, like hautbois and bassoons; they were made at Hamburg, and are all of one sort of wood and by one maker—Casper Rauchs Scratenbach was engraved on a brass ring or plate, which encircled most of these instruments. The large ones have brass plates pierced, and some with human figures well engraved on them; these last are longer than a bassoon would be, if unfolded. The inhabitants say that it is more than a hundred years since these instruments were used, and that there is no musician, at present in the town, who knows how to play on any one of them, as they are quite different from those now in common use. In times when commerce flourished in this city these instruments used to be played on every day by a band of musicians who attended the merchants trading to the Hans towns, in procession to the Exchange; they now hang on pegs in a closet, or rather press, with folding doors, made on purpose for their reception; though in the Great Hall there still lies on the floor, by them, a large single case made of a heavy and solid dark kind of wood, so contrived as to be capable of receiving them all; but which, when filled with these instruments, requires eight men to lift it from the ground; it was of so uncommon a shape that I was unable to divine its use, till I was told it."†

* This extract has already been quoted by Mr. Welch, but I repeat it as it is such an important piece of evidence as to the disuse of the recorder.

† "Present State of Music in Germany."—Burney, Vol. I., page 41.

No doubt the box was of the shape found at Chester, but much larger. Now had Burney possessed any real antiquarian zeal or knowledge, what a prize was there! But it is evident that he was *absolutely* ignorant of recorders. He knew the small ones were "common flutes," but he evidently had never seen or heard of bass or double-bass recorders, nor had he the wit to see that these were *uncommon* flutes. Of all that set, I believe only one survives—in the Museum at Antwerp. It goes down to D below the bass stave. This instrument is unique.

In 1790 we find Malone commentating, in his edition of Shakespeare, on the quotation from "Hamlet" (of which there are different readings), and wondering what a recorder was like, and whether it had a thumb hole at the back or not. These facts point to the conclusion that the big "recorder" flutes were quite unknown in the middle of last century, and, by the end of the century, the whole family had died out.

And now as to the word "recorder." The verb "to record" has in our present day only the meaning of "to remember," or "take note of"; but in earlier times it had another and very different meaning. It meant "to sing, chant, or warble like birds." "To record," says an old writer, "among fowlers, is when the bird begins to tune or sing within itself." We find the verb "to record" used in this sense frequently by the poets. Nicholas Breton, a pastoral poet of the Elizabethan era, says:—

"Sweet Philomel, the bird
that hath the heavenly throat
Doth now, alas! not once afford
recording of a note."

Again, Thomas Watson, in "England's Helicon," says:—

"Now birds *record* new Harmonies,
And trees do whistle melodies,
Now every thing that nature breeds
Doth clad itself in pleasant weedes."

Of course, we find the instrument in Shakespeare. In "Pericles," Act IV. :—

"To the lute
She sang, and made the night bird mute
That still *records* with moan."

Again, in "The Midsummer Night's Dream," he says:—

"He hath played on his prologue
Like a child on a *Recorder*."

Again, in "Two Gentlemen of Verona," scene iv. :—

"And to the nightingale's complaining notes
Tune my distresses and *record* my woes."

There is one other celebrated passage in "Hamlet" which I have already quoted.

Philip Sidney describes how—"the shepherds, pulling out recorders, which possessed the place of pipes, accorded their music to the other's voice."

Milton, in "Paradise Lost," speaks of—

"The Dorian Mood
Of Flutes and soft Recorders."

We see here, then, that the words recorder and flute are used side by side from a very early period, and Mr. Welch considers that he has traced the word "recorder" up to the middle of the fourteenth century, and that the word "recorder" is of English growth, while "flute" came over with William the Conqueror. However this may be, it is evident there must have been some difference between recorders and flutes to justify the different nomenclature. Woe to the unfortunate student who seeks this knowledge in ordinary books of musical reference. He will find there a statement, repeated again and again, to this effect: that there was in the upper part of the instrument between the top hole for the fingers and the mouthpiece a special hole covered with a piece of bladder or goldbeater's skin, which gave to the instrument a distinct quality of tone, and that the name "recorder" was derived from this peculiarity of construction. The late Dr. Stone, in his article on the recorder in Grove's Dictionary, says :—

- (1.) That a book published on the recorders in 1683 describes this peculiarity, and that Mr. Chappell thought the name was derived from it.
- (2.) That Mr. Chappell quoted the late Mr. Ward as having seen "old English flutes" bored through the side in the upper part of the instrument, and
- (3.) That there is at South Kensington a *sixteenth century recorder* with such a hole.

With regard to No. 1, let me say that there is not one word in the book published in 1683 about this hole covered with membrane, nor in any other known work on the recorder, nor is there any sign of such a hole in any one of the illustrations of these instruments which have come down to us.

2. That this evidence is much stronger than Mr. Ward's memory, however good that may have been.

3. That Mr. Welch has examined the so-called sixteenth century recorder, and finds it to have been made in London

about the year 1810. It has a small hole covered with skin, which does not affect the sound in the least, and was perhaps put there as an experiment.

There is nothing new to a Chinaman. In the *Victorian Magazine* for July, 1892, a Mr. Barrett mentions buying a Chinese flute in San Francisco, which had an aperture between the embouchure and the finger-holes. The shopman stuck on this hole a piece of skin in order to give a nasal tone.

Mersenne, in his *Harmonie Universelle*, published in 1636, describes many kinds of recorders and flutes, and in one case seems to suggest a similar sort of experiment, and I fancy that this is the basis for the gigantic fiction I have mentioned.

It is generally considered that flutes-a-bec were called recorders when pierced with eight holes—seven in front for the fingers and one at the back for the thumb. Undoubtedly the hole at the back was the most important feature.

I am myself inclined to think the treble instruments were oftentimes merely called flutes, and the larger instruments and those made in sets, recorders.*

DISCUSSION.

THE CHAIRMAN.—Ladies and gentlemen, it is against my own will (although, of course, it is a pleasure for me to come to support my brother) that I consented to occupy this chair. It was my wish that so great an authority on these matters as Mr. Welch should preside to-day; but he obstinately refused, so I consented to perform the necessary duties of a chairman. It is gratifying to me that my brother has come all the way from Chester to bring these most interesting instruments before this Association. I think it is a worthy example to many members of our profession who may have some special opportunities for acquiring information. Nothing gives us so much pleasure as to see those who can lend a little variety to our proceedings. My brother, and those who helped him, have shown great pluck in bringing these four instruments—or rather not so much in bringing them as in trying to play on them. Of course it would be ridiculous to say that we in London have never heard anything like it. I have no doubt that if he could have brought his own Chester quartet up things would have gone a little smoother, though perhaps we

* Gavotte by Henri Le Jeune, 1636; Quartet for four recorders, J. C. Bridge; and Duet for treble and bass recorders, were played upon the set of instruments belonging to and exhibited by the Chester Archæological Society. The performers were the Rev. J. L. Bedford, Mr. Radcliffe, Mr. Finn, and Dr. J. C. Bridge.

should have missed some of the excitement and curiosity as to how they would have got through it. I suppose most of us have not had an opportunity of hearing recorders before, and I think our thanks are particularly due to those gentlemen who have come forward at the last moment, Mr. Radcliff, Mr. Finn, and Mr. Bedford, who comes from Chester and plays on the pibcorn.

Mr. WELCH.—I should like to ask Dr. Bridge a question. What is the pitch of these instruments? Are they flat like the French pitch, or *diapason normal*, as it is called, or do they correspond to the Philharmonic or English concert pitch?

Dr. BRIDGE.—They are pretty high—above the French, up to the Philharmonic pitch.

Mr. WELCH.—I am not surprised at the answer, for the evidence of flutes goes to show that the statement, so often repeated, that there was a great rise in the English pitch during the first half of the nineteenth century, cannot be sustained. I will mention another case. Mr. Radcliff has in his possession a fipple flute—or *flute-a-bec*, to use its French name—made by an English maker, which is quite up to concert pitch. So surprising does this circumstance seem to those who believe the high pitch to be of modern growth, that the suggestion has been made that it must have been shortened to bring it up to the pianofortes with which it was played, it having been used half-a-century ago by the late Mr. Richard Carte in illustrating his lectures on the flute. An examination of the instrument, however, fails to reveal any indication of it having been cut. Now no one can suspect that the flutes before us have ever been tampered with; yet they are at the same pitch. They are most precious; for although single specimens of fipple flutes are not uncommon, a complete set, a discant, alto, tenor, and bass, is of the greatest rarity. It is true that they would be more valuable still if they could be traced back to the time of Henry VIII. There is, however, as far as I know, only one set in the world, that at Nuremberg, mentioned by Dr. Bridge, which dates from the sixteenth century. The Chester set, however, is complete, whereas one of the instruments, the smallest, is missing from the Nuremberg set; but the case, which has been preserved, is so constructed as to show the exact length and size of the missing instrument, so that there has been no difficulty in reproducing it. There seems to be some uncertainty about the kind of wood of which the Chester flutes are made. In a description of them which Mr. Newstead, the Curator of the Museum, was so good as to send me some time ago, he mentioned that an expert, a joiner, to whom they had been submitted, pronounced the wood to be red cedar. Their dark colour, however, is due evidently to a stain; the wood

itself, where it is uncoloured, looks very much like box. Perhaps there may be some one present qualified to judge who will give us his opinion.

Mr. STAINER (after examining one of the instruments).—They do not seem heavy enough for box.

Dr. J. C. BRIDGE.—I am no expert in wood, but several experts have seen these instruments and they say they are made of cedar. The ivory is very beautiful, and this must have been an expensive instrument, because the ivory is cut from a solid tusk. I ought to say we do not really know where these came from. A well-known Chester antiquary had a dim recollection that they were given to the Archæological Society by a Colonel Cholmondeley. At Cholmondeley Castle, which is not far from Chester, there is a private chapel, and it struck me they may have been used there, and being in course of time disused they were given away. But this is simply conjecture. With regard to the wood that is all I can tell you.

Mr. WELCH.—I had hoped that Dr. Bridge would say something about Handel and the flute. Very few amongst us have heard a bass flute until now, yet the bass flute was used in the orchestra as late as Handel's time. Handel employed not only the bass transverse flute, the *traversa bassa*, as he terms it, but the English bass flute—the bass recorder I had almost said; but I must not call it a recorder, for, when Handel wrote, it was no longer known by that appellation. By one of the strange mutations of nomenclature with which students of the history of musical instruments are familiar, the recorder, just as the seventeenth century was drawing to a close, changed its name to that of the flute. So rapidly and completely did the word recorder drop out of use that, by the middle of the eighteenth century, writers were in doubt as to what instrument a recorder was. Even as late as 1883, when Dr. Stone wrote the article on the recorder in Grove's Dictionary, the precise nature of the recorder was still a mystery. But since it has been shown that recorder was only an old name for the English flute, it is not uncommon for the owners of eighteenth century English flutes, which they had previously called *flutes-a-bec*, to speak of them as recorders. This is to be regretted, for, by so naming them, they create a false impression, similar to that which would be produced if a trombone were shown to the uninitiated as a sackbut, giving rise to a misconception, and indirectly claiming for their instruments a higher antiquity than that to which they are entitled. But I am wandering away from Handel. I was about to say that Handel wrote not only for the transverse, German, or lip flute now in daily use amongst us, but also for the straight, English, or fipple flute which we have just had the privilege of hearing. I should mention that

the fipple, which gives its name to the instrument, is the plug, or languid, as an organ builder would style it, which partially blocks the tube. Handel calls the fipple flute *flauto*, the lip flute *traversa*, rarely *flauto traverso*. He is very particular in distinguishing between the two instruments, so that we always know, if we refer to the German Handel Society's edition of his works, on which of them he intends a passage to be played. He sometimes scores for at least four treble fipple flutes; but we should bear in mind that formerly oboe players were expected to occasionally take the flute. The nearest approach with which I am acquainted in Handel's works to the harmony we have heard this afternoon is to be found in the opera 'Giustino.' The music, which is in three parts, is scored for *Flauti I.*, *Flauti II.*, and *Basso de' Flauti*. There were thus not less than five fipple flutes, four trebles and a bass, playing together. The flute colour, it is true, was not quite pure like that brought before us to-day, for there was an oboe in unison with the first flutes, and a viola with the bass flute. The passage forms the introduction to a song sung by Giustino just before he falls asleep and dreams a dream in which the Goddess of Fortune appears and reveals to him his destiny. I hope on a future occasion to submit for your consideration an attempt to explain why Handel chose the peculiar scoring for the situation.

Dr. BRIDGE.—What was the lowest note played by the bass flute?

Mr. WELCH.—I cannot say with certainty, it being some years since I saw the score, but if I can trust my memory, it was F. Another instrument of the fipple flute family used by Handel was the *flauto piccolo*. The piccolo with which we are familiar is a *traversa piccolo*, not a *flauto piccolo*. In connection with the *flauto piccolo* there is a question of interest to musicians. The *obbligato* to 'O ruddier than the cherry,' which, according to the score, should be played on a *flauto* or fipple flute, is played in the present day, not on the flute, but on the piccolo. What is the reason? Was the word *piccolo* accidentally omitted in the score? or could Handel, when writing 'Acis and Galatea,' have designed the *obbligato* for the *flauto*, but afterwards changed his mind, and, in practice, caused it to be played on the *flauto piccolo*? A *flauto piccolo* was used for the *obbligato* at the Antient Concerts. On this point the evidence is unquestionable. Mr. John Ella, who joined the band nearly eighty years ago, mentioned to me more than once that when 'O ruddier than the cherry' was sung, the second oboe player, a Mr. Sharp, used to play the *obbligato* on a flageolet. The Concerts of Antient Music were established within twenty years of Handel's death. The first conductor was Joah Bates; he was succeeded by

Greatorex, who was still conducting when Mr. Ella played in the band. Why, then, was not the *obbligato* given to the flute, or the piccolo? Why did Greatorex have it played on the flageolet, which had ceased to be an orchestral instrument? An answer which suggests itself in the absence of information is that he was acting in deference to a cherished tradition.

Dr. BRIDGE.—Were the piccolo players competent?

Mr. WELCH.—I know no reason why they should not have been.

The CHAIRMAN.—I think we should convey the best thanks of the meeting to my brother, who has been so kind as to come down, and also to the gentlemen who have assisted him with the illustrations.

(The votes of thanks were then passed unanimously.)
