

A brief history of the development of the Bassoon

By *Ariel Detwiler*

Imagine our modern Bassoon with just six holes on the front and two holes on the back, two feet shorter, weighing a few pounds less (without all that metal!) and carved from just one piece of wood—no assembly required. From no keys to more than 30, and roles ranging from supporting bass lines to becoming a feature soloist, the bassoon has a rich history that is still unfolding, even today.

Origins

The origins of the bassoon are very obscure due to the lack of records found today. Generally, the bassoon is associated with the early **Dulcian** of Western Europe, originating under many different names over time. The Latin word “*dulce*,” meaning “sweet,” was the inspiration for naming the gentle, ‘sweet’ instrument: **Dulcian**, the earliest surviving predecessor of the bassoon, about 12 of which still survive worldwide today. Some names for the early Bassoon included the French **Basson**, German **Fagott**, Italian **fagotto**, English **Curtall**, Spanish **Bajón**, and others like **Courtaut** and **Choristfagott**. The first records of these names are found in royal inventories and manifests around Europe ranging from 1516-1580, all of them with the same idea of creating a much-needed bass woodwind instrument, but all of which also created very different sounds.

Construction

The bassoon requires extreme skill in woodcrafting to make. The instrument is made of different types of Maple today, but started out using harder wood, which gave it a more supple and covered sound. “**Crooks**” were very similar to the modern Bocal, which over time were redesigned to use very thin metal to allow for more ease of playing and range of tone quality.

In Venice and London, the **Bassano** family had three well-known generations of Dulcian makers starting in 1530. A unique set of six differently pitched (bass, tenor and descant) **fagati** survive today in Augsburg, believed to have been built between 1530 and 1566. A **bajón** was found in Spain in 1530 and migrated to Flanders in 1563 and a **dulzin** (*Dulcian*) appeared in Nuremberg in 1575. Our best evidence for early bassoon creation remains in reliefs carved in stone buildings as well as paintings showing the bassoon being played.

Modern Development

The Dulcian was used well into the 18th Century, but was slowly replaced by the Baroque and Classical bassoons. Two developments occurred: that of the German and French bassoons. Each model of bassoon gradually added more keys and changed details in the construction of the joints to stabilize the pitches of the instrument, and by the time Mozart wrote the Concerto in B-flat that changed the Bassoon’s place in the musical world, the German bassoon included at least 7 keys.

After a vigorous study of woodwind acoustics, bassoonist **Carl Almenraeder** presented his 17-key model of the German bassoon in the early 1800’s, which included modifications of tone hole placement, creating a modern bassoon that played an entire chromatic range for four full octaves, B-flat to B-flat. In 1831, **J.A. Heckel** opened a factory with **Almenraeder**, using the modified German bassoon as a guide for an instrument that would start a legacy. After **Almenraeder**’s death in 1842, **Heckel** was prompted by composer **Richard Wagner** to build a bassoon that descended to low A as well as a contrabassoon based on the Heckel model, and **Julius Weissenborn** would write a complete method book specifically for the Heckel bassoon by 1887. The final major improvements were added to the bassoon by 1905, including lining the wing joint in hard rubber in 1889 and adding the whisper key to the bocal later.

In France, bassoon makers held to the tone quality and separate fingering technique of the French bassoon, and the company **Buffet-Crampon** would finish a standard 22-key model by 1879, which is still in use today. Attempts are continually being made to revive the use of the French bassoon in order to preserve its prized tone quality in the high register and ease of technique unequalled by the universal German bassoon models.

Notable Achievements

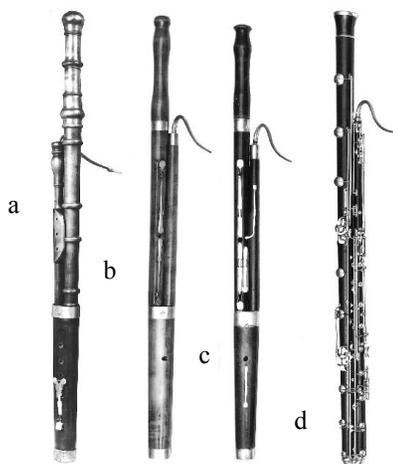
The exciting firsts for the bassoon included a full method book by **Etienne Ozi** in 1787, a solo bassoon piece by **Selma y Salaverde** in 1638, a sonata by **Bertoli** in 1645, and a part in **Antonio Cesti**’s 1668 opera *Il pomo d’oro*. 39 Bassoon Concerti composed by **Antonio Vivaldi**, a virtuosic classical concerto by an 18-year-old **W.A. Mozart**, and many notable 20th Century soloists and teachers such as **Sol Schoenbach**, **Milan Turkovic**, and **Simon Kovar** are very important to the continued success of the bassoon today.

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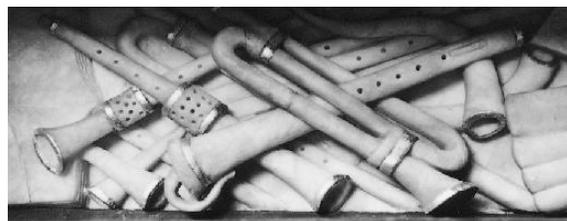
By Ariel Detwiler

Comparison of Bassoons

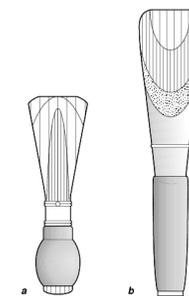
	DULCIAN	BAROQUE	CLASSICAL	MODERN
Dates in use	Ca. 1516 - 1700's	mid 1600's - present	1700's-1800's	Ca. 1823 - present
Range	C2 - F4/G4	B \flat 1 - G4	B \flat 1 - B \flat 4	B \flat 1 - F5
Keys	2: RH low F, RH low E	5: low E, LH low D, RH low B \flat , RH low F, RH low A \flat , LH (back) E \flat res.	9: all Baroque keys, plus: RH F#, LH E \flat res. (moved to front), LH C#, LH WK flick. More 1/2 hole use.	30+: Trill keys, LH front and back resonance keys, low B \sharp , low E, alternate keys
Intonation	A=440 or 465 (flat)	A=415 (sharp)	A=430 (sharp)	A=440
Construction mods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •One piece of wood only •Possible "Lefty" Bassoon with <i>Swallowtail</i> F key. •Bore OPENS up. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •One piece of wood for multiple joints •Turn moldings to hold keys on without screws •Bore OPENS up, with more length added: bell •Many different 2, 3 and 4 joint models 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Turn moldings removed (unnecessary) •Bore CLOSES up. •4 joint models 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> •Ivory bell ring added •Bore CLOSES up •English style body (shorter wing) •French v. German styles (wood, keys)
Sound	"dulce" = sweet; mellow, covered	Sweet, mellow, covered, even tone in registers	More nasal with big differences in tone quality: high=bright, low=dark	More smooth, louder, options for blending and color changes in all registers
Reeds	Flatter, thicker, much longer	Flatter, thicker, much longer (very little air needed)	Flatter, thinner, longer	Rounder, thinner, more air needed
Repertoire written	?	Vivaldi Concerti, Telemann Sonatas	Mozart Concerto	Weber Concerto, Saint-Saens Sonata, etc.
Other	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Names: <i>Curtall</i>, <i>Dulzin</i>, <i>Bajón</i>, <i>Fagott</i>, <i>Fagotto</i>, <i>fagot</i> ("bundle of sticks"), <i>Courtaut</i>, <i>fagat</i>, 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trills are more "exotic" and they don't stick to the notes written; <i>emphasis</i> use over accents, almost no vibrato use. • Use of neck strap/shoulder strap 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extended techniques • Shoulder or seat strap/harness • Key rollers for ease of play



Dulcian examples



- (a) three-key by Johann Christoph Denner, Nuremberg, c1700
 (b) four-key by Thomas Stanesby (ii), London, 1747
 (c) seven-key by Friedrich Kirst, Potsdam, late 18th century
 (d) Boehm system, with 30 keys, by Triébert-Marzoli-Boehm, Paris, c1855



Modern Early