**Dulcians Great and Small**

To date, yet the bass of the family has received the most attention of makers and performers alike up to this point. This is as it should be, since the bass proved most useful in its own day, especially in its role of supporting the lowest voice of the choir in the performance of sacred polyphony, for which it received the name choristagott. However, this limited focus has suggested to the larger audience of period performance, especially in this country, that the other members of the dulcian family were mere novelties, products of instrument makers keen to display their skills and ingenuity rather than full-fledged members of the professional’s instrumentarium. The surviving repertoire that does specify members of the dulcian family, especially from the 17th century and well into the 19th in Spain, argues eloquently otherwise. Yet little of this repertoire has been heard, in no small part due to the paucity of performers who have tried to find suitable reproductions and surmount the challenges these instruments pose.

A number of such high-quality reproductions do exist and have for some time. Two English makers in particular, Eric Moulder and Graham Lyndon-Jones, have dedicated the better part of their careers to the study and reproduction of dulcians, or curtals as the English prefer. Moulder produces, among others, copies of the set of soprano through bass now housed in the Brussels Musée Instrumental du Conservatoire Royal de Musique, all of which bear the mark of Melchor Rodríguez, a noted Spanish instrument maker who flourished in Madrid from 1669-1701. Other modern makers include Martin Praetorius and Guntram Wolf of Germany, Laurent Verjat of France, and Leslie Ross of the United States. These makers are providing, to the general public and the professional alike, high-quality reproductions of the surviving originals housed in various collections in cities across Europe, including especially those in Brussels, Linz, Vienna, Berlin, Augsburg, and Nuremberg. As with copies of all original instruments, recent years have seen a marked increase in the quality of these reproductions and a closer scrutiny and adherence to the characteristics of the originals.

**Missing voice**

One instrument, however, that has yet to make its presence felt in the world of early music performance is the largest member of the dulcian family, the octavebass or contrabass. No less an authority on the history of the bassoon than William Waterhouse reported in the 1984 edition of The New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments that no examples of the octavebass or contrabass dulcian survive. However, Herbert Heyde, reporting in the Galpin Society Journal, made note of Waterhouse’s error in an article published in 1987 in which Heyde reveals the existence of four surviving octavebass dulcians and discusses their whereabouts, provenance, and characteristic features. As highly regarded and reputable a scholarly venture as the Galpin Society Journal is, it is unfortunately not readily accessible to the interested observer or even the dedicated amateur, and consequently the existence of these instruments is largely a well-kept secret to this day.

As late as 1618, the eminent composer and musical academician Michael

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**How Common Was 16’ Bass Doubling?**

The use of 16’ pitch in late Renaissance and early Baroque music (doubling the bass line an octave lower than written in large scale, concerted works, for example) is a thorny issue for which there are more questions at the moment than answers. Given the existence of capable instruments, what regions, cities, and courts exercised this practice and how early in their history? How often and in which contexts did octave doubling occur? Was the cost of providing instruments a prohibitive factor for some who might otherwise have desired to expand in this direction? Did performers have the liberty to decide for themselves whether or not to double at the octave with a 16’ instrument? If so, what were the parameters within which the practice was confined or exercised in any one musical establishment? Or was it simply de rigueur, neither warranting nor pleading further comment?

Once again, Michael Praetorius provides us with hints of a practice already assumed in the early decades of the 17th century. In his Syntagma Musicum III, section 96, he states: “Given an ample number of instrumentalists, the tutti sections produce a magnificent sound if one assigns to the bass part an ordinary or bass sackbut, a chorist curtal or bass shawm—all at actual pitch, in addition to a double bass sackbut, a great bass curtal or shawm, and a violone, which all sound an octave lower, as the sub- or contra-basses on the organ. This is quite common in Italian concertos nowadays and is sufficiently tenable” (translation by Jeffrey Kite-Powell).

Elsewhere in the same work Praetorius mentions the use of recorders sounding one or even two octaves higher than the written pitch of the soprano in such large scale works, giving the impression of a massive, orchestral tambor in which no fewer then five octaves might be sounding at once. If this was the case, even if only on festival occasions, it would belie our more common practice of small-scale, one-on-a-part performances and open up new possibilities for scoring this repertoire.

Musico logical opinion varies widely on this issue and practice to this date has largely ignored it. Yet, answers to all of the above questions will come only as musicological and organological research, instrument building, and performance work hand in hand to experiment with the possibilities. First and foremost, however, will be the need for professional quality reproductions of the instruments capable of providing 16’ pitch: the large sackbut, large violone, and the octavebass dulcian. Piffaro’s commissioned reproduction of the Dresden instrument is a step in that direction and is intended to further this cooperative inquiry.
Praetorius, too, proved ignorant of the existence of this large instrument. In a discussion of the curtal or dulcian in the second volume of his *Syntagma Musicum*, he reports that the maker of the octave sackbut, a certain Hans Schreiber of Berlin, was at the time attempting the construction of a contrabass dulcian, pitched an octave below the standard chorist bass and capable of sounding a 16′ C. Praetorius writes that Schreiber “thinks it will turn out a splendid instrument, the likes of which has never been seen. It should cause quite a stir” (translation by David Crookes). In the “Theatrum instrumentorum” of 1620, the section of *Syntagma Musicum* with the celebrated woodcuts depicting all the instruments known to him at the time, the dulcian page shows only the quartbass as the largest member of the family.

However, the octavebass dulcian currently housed in the Maximilian Museum in Augsburg, Germany, most likely dates to the second half of the 16th century. It bears the maker’s mark “Hiero.S,” one of several used by the famous Bassano family of instrument makers of Venice. Already in an inventory of 1566, the Augsburg Stadtpeiffer owned 10 fagotti. This octavebass was likely a part of a 16′ set of octavebass, quartbass, and two basses, purchased for this famous city band, possibly by the Fugger family, to complement their existing collection. In addition, a 1609 inventory of the Frauenkirche in Nuremberg shows that it possessed an octavebass dulcian, made by Jörg Haas, a few years before Praetorius’s published comment.

**Octavebass reproduction**

Fortunately, we are better informed today than was Praetorius. Three of the four surviving original octavebass dulcians have been reproduced: one of the two near identical specimens in the Schloß- und Heimatmuseum in Sondershausen by Guntram Wolf, and the Augsburg instrument, initially in 1968 by Rainer Weber and more recently by Fritz Heller. Within the last two years, German recorder and dulcian maker Martin Praetorius, with help from Hans Mons and Klaus Bickhardt, completed a thorough study and initial copy of the instrument in Schloß Pillnitz outside of Dresden.

Dresden. G. Lyndon-Jones says of the Pillnitz original, “Of the four (surviving octavebass dulcians), instrument D (Pillnitz Mö. 36) is the one I would be most likely to try to smuggle out of the museum. It gives one the impression of being in the mainstream tradition of curtal building. It represents a tour-de-force of boring and shaping, the bell having been lathe-turned on the six-foot-long workpiece of beechwood.” The fingerholes on this original show marked evidence of wear, suggesting that the instrument saw considerable use and may have proved an appealing and worthy instrument in its own day.

Martin Praetorius’s nearly exact copy of the Pillnitz original is no less a tour-de-force of instrument building and artisanship than the original itself. Over six feet long (1812 mm to be exact), the one-piece body of the original is nevertheless surprisingly lightweight. The billet of maple with which Praetorius began the reconstruction weighed over 75 pounds, while the completed instrument tips the scales at just under nine pounds. Over 65 pounds of wood was lost to plane shavings, lathe detritus, and boring debris. The main reason for the light weight of the instrument is its very thin-walled construction, a fact that made the reconstruction all the more difficult to achieve. Nevertheless, this gives the instrument great resonance and an “alive” feel in the hands when it is played. The large fingerholes and rather broad girth of the body require a sizeable hand with broad fingertips to achieve successful closure. The instrument sports only two keys, one each for low F” and E”, with open fingerholes for the lowest notes D” and C”.

The Germans called it the dulcian (“sweet” instrument), referring to a distinction in sound between it and its cousin, the shawm. The French used fagot or bassoon, the Italians fagotto, and the Spanish simply bajón. The instrument is well documented through iconographical evidence, organological descriptions, and local inventories beginning roughly in the middle of the 16th century.
Baroque contrabassoon.

Since the reed and the bocal of a reed instrument determine, to a great extent, the pitch at which any double-reed instrument will play, and since there are no surviving reeds or bocals for this instrument, trial and error alone can reveal exactly where the instrument is pitched. Lyndon-Jones again: “A (Augsburg) clearly belongs to the set of sharp-pitch curtals, and D (Pillnitz) is likely to have about the same pitch as these. The best, or only, way to find out would be to make close copies and live with them for some time, trying various combinations of crooks and reeds.” Now, with Piffaro’s copy of the Dresden octavebass in hand, that process has begun.

Based on the bocal and reeds delivered with the instrument, this octavebass seems most happy in the area of roughly A-470+ Hz. However, with the construction of larger reeds and the discovery of some alternate fingerings here and there, the overall pitch of the instrument now lies closer to about A-466. While these larger reeds sacrifice some facility and pitch stability in the upper register, they do provide a solid and resonant lower octave and a half that doesn’t require as much “lipping” to bring the pitch down. A slightly longer bocal will have to be the next step. Acoustically, the interior volume of the bocal/reed combination should equal roughly the volume of the extension of the cone, that is, the bore of the instrument, out to its hypothetical meeting point. However, this, too, must be achieved largely through experimentation. It does seem evident at this point that the pitch of this octavebass lies in the vicinity of the high pitch of many Renaissance and early Baroque woodwinds, roughly a half step above modern concert pitch.

Dulcian repertoire

Very little music prior to the 17th century, of course, specifies instrumental performance, though using instruments is assumed to be justifiable in rendering practically any composition of the time. As a result, we have little expectation that we will find music that calls for a certain type of instrumentation. Rather, the consort principle very likely generated many an instrumental performance.

“Of the four [surviving octavebass dulcians], instrument D (Pillnitz Mö. 36) is the one I would be most likely to try to smuggle out of the museum. It gives one the impression of being in the mainstream tradition of curtal building. It represents a tour-de-force of boring and shaping, the bell having been lathe-turned on the six-foot-long workpiece of beechwood.” – G. Lyndon-Jones

Klaus Bickhardt does the initial testing of the original octavebass dulcian (Pillnitz Mö. 36) at Schloß Pillnitz near Dresden, Germany.
during the latter half of the 16th century. Taking the Augsburg Stadtpeiffer as an example, consorts of dulcians at both 8′ or concert pitch, and 16′ were available for their instrumental proffering of motets, chansons, dances, etc. Michael Praetorius, again, speaks directly to this practice. He states that when consorts of sackbuts or dulcians played a four- to six-voice composition, they transposed that music down from its written pitch by a fourth, a fifth, or even an octave, especially if that piece sported *chiavette*, or “high clefs.” Practical concerns made this almost mandatory for sackbuts, since the alto size of that family was the smallest useful member, and a latecomer to the family at that. With the dulcian, however, even the smallest soprano proved perfectly playable, if perhaps a bit less satisfactory and more of a challenge than the larger sizes. Thus, an SATB consort of dulcians sounding at true vocal pitch was possible. However, it seems that in Germany and the Low Countries there existed a predilection for the lower tessitura produced by the larger members of the family, while in Spain the *bajoncillo*, the term used for the sizes smaller than bass, seem to have been preferred. During the 16th and 17th centuries, there are fewer references on the Iberian peninsula to the members of the family larger than bass.

With the 17th century, we witness the rise in composers writing with specific instruments in mind. One of the earliest pieces specifying fagotto is a small canzona for two instruments and basso continuo by Giovanni Riccio entitled “La Grimaneta.” Published in 1614, the piece calls for the curious combination of *flauto e fagotto*, or soprano recorder and bass dulcian. From that point on, a great deal of music emerged assigning lines specifically to the dulcian, or fagotto, or allowing the dulcian as one possible rendering of the part. Even in this period, however, the actual size of the dulcian family the composer had in mind, if any, is often left open to question. Even though a sizable portion of fagotto specifications may seem suitable for and best played on the bass, some attention to the tessitura of the part may suggest otherwise. This can be demonstrated...
These new instruments will make it possible for the ensemble to hear older repertoire in a new light and to venture into repertoire out of reach before these acquisitions. It’s a frontier, one of the few remaining, within the boundaries of Baroque and pre-Baroque early music performance, a frontier that we look forward to exploring, as we anticipate new aural discoveries along the way.

with a couple of examples.

In general, it seems an inescapable acoustical feature of most dulcians, originals and reproductions alike, that the very lowest note, produced with all holes covered and keys closed, tends to lie uncomfortably to unacceptably sharp. Thus, a piece of music that requires that note rather often might best be played, if the upper range of the part allows, on the next lower member of the family. For instance, Heinrich Schütz’s “Buccinate in neomenia tuba/Jubilate Deo” from his Symphonia Sacrae I (1619), scored for TTB voices with obligato cornetto, trumpet, and fagotto with continuo, lies very low on the bass dulcian, with a number of low Cs, some of which are sustained over several bars. While this presents a frustrating challenge to play in tune on a standard bass dulcian, the part lies easily and comfortably in the range of a quartbass, pitched a fourth below the bass. In addition, the full, round tone of the quartbass provides an excellent foundation for the cornetto and trumpet above, as well as for the three singers.

Additionally, Schütz’s “In lectulo per noctes/Invenerunt me custodes civitatis” from the same collection, scored for soprano and alto voices with sinfonie for three fagotti, is usually performed today on two tenors and a bass – when there are actually enough suitable dulcian players available to cover the three parts – whereas the combination of tenor, bass, and quartbass dulcians might provide a better disposition of parts and keep each instrument in the same relative area of its tessitura. Schütz does not specify the size of the fagotti he had in mind in these works. That’s left to the performer to determine.

Elsewhere, both in time and place throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, greater specification replaces these early, looser assignations. The list of such pieces is long and varied. The required combinations of dulcians with other instruments and voices are sometimes recognizably a part of our current practice but sometimes surprisingly not. The best entrée into this repertoire is the very admirable work of Margaret Kilbey, whose Curtal, Dulcian, Bajón: A History of the Precursor to the Bassoon (St. Albans, 2002; www.curtalbook.com) provides extensive documentation not only on the surviving instruments themselves, but also about those who made them, those who played them, and those who wrote for them. It takes only a brief exploration through the repertoire listed in this valuable resource to realize that we have much work to do if we are to realize for modern audiences the musical events that delighted late 16th- and 17th-century societies.

Piffaro plans

Piffaro commissioned Martin Praetorius’s reproduction of the Dresden octavebass dulcian as part of its long-range plan to explore more extensively this fascinating instrument family in all its sizes. Other reproductions have been commissioned as well, including soprano, alto, and tenor of the Rodríguez originals from Eric Moulder, a chorist bass after a Berlin original from Praetorius, and a quartbass after a Vienna original from Guntram Wolf, all at Renaissance high pitch. We’ve received some of these already and await the others by the summer of 2007. These new instruments will make it possible for the ensemble to hear older repertoire in a new light and to venture into repertoire out of reach before these acquisitions. It’s a frontier, one of the few remaining, within the boundaries of Baroque and pre-Baroque early music performance, a frontier that we look forward to exploring, as we anticipate new aural discoveries along the way.
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A Baroque Homecoming

The Odyssey of Stephen Stubbs

Herlevi: You were born and raised in Seattle. At what age did you become interested in playing music? What was your first instrument? And what led you to study harpsichord and lute?

Stubbs: A door-to-door accordion salesman came and “tested my musical aptitude.” He said I did well, and my parents got the accordion and lessons to go with it. A bit later my brother gave me a record of Bach on the harpsichord.

Soon I realized that the accordion couldn’t really go into that musical world, and I asked to change to piano lessons. I played the piano from then on. Through lessons, I was exposed to classical repertoire, while through records and radio I heard all the music of that time: early Beatles, jazz, folk, blues. The piano allowed me to experiment with every kind of music, to a certain extent, but in my late teens I found two particular places that the piano couldn’t go very well: the bending bluesy sound of the electric guitar and the delicate warmth and precision of the lute, which I heard on Julian Bream records.

I got a Fender Telecaster and joined a band, and later in college (University of Washington), one of the professors, the cellist and gambist Eva Heinritz, lent me a lute she had brought with her from Europe. In college I was majoring in composition, but I was also able to realize a long-term dream of playing the harpsichord because we had the Swiss harpsichordist Silvia Kind at our university. I taught myself enough on the lute to play some pieces and particularly to accompany myself in Dowland lute songs. At that point, singing Dowland or the latest Lennon and McCartney songs seemed very close to each other in my experience.

PLH: You started out playing jazz, and you played in a rock band during your college years. How have those musical endeavors shaped you as an early music player in regard to improvisation?

SS: My experience with jazz was pretty superficial – except for listening to it. The hands-on experience was more in playing rock and blues, although I did
The Odyssey of Stephen Stubbs

Stephen Stubbs founded Accademia d’Amore eight years ago in Bremen, Germany, to train musicians in the subtle art of 17th-century vocal performance and instrumental accompaniment. In 2005, he relocated the course to Seattle.

According to Gus Denhard of Seattle’s Early Music Guild, the baroque opera course is unusual in that it combines vocal training, stage comportment, Baroque choreography, and historical gesture. Denhard says Stubbs made the move to Seattle for several reasons, including the thriving early music community that exists in Seattle and the presence of early music luminaries such as Margriet Tindemans, Nancy Zylstra, Ingrid Matthews, and Jillon Stoppels Dupree, among others.

Former student and harpist Bill McJohn says, “Many of the vocalists showing up at the Accademia d’Amore in Germany were American.” And so it made sense to bring the course to the United States, Seattle in particular.

The Accademia d’Amore now takes place annually on the Seattle Pacific University campus, where 40 to 50 students study coursework in vocal coaching, history of Baroque opera, continuo, and stage comportment. The program is dedicated “to preparing musicians for a career in Baroque opera performance” and is tailored to meet the requirements of individual singers and instrumentalists. The goal of putting together a final performance after seven to 10 days of coursework is significant.

Another draw is Stubbs’s talent as a vocal coach. McJohn says, “Stephen has an approach that opens up a whole depth of musicianship and is spurred on by a constant search for expression within the constraints of the style.”

An umbrella organization founded by Stubbs, the Seattle Academy of Baroque Opera, presents Accademia d’Amore and also offers several weekend workshops, held at St. James Cathedral and Seattle Pacific University, throughout the year. The weekend workshops conclude with small public performances.

For more information about the Accademia d’Amore and the Seattle Academy of Baroque Opera, you may go to www.seattleacademyofbaroqueopera.org or to the Early Music Guild at www.earlymusicguild.org. The Seattle Academy of Baroque Opera and the Accademia d’Amore are part of the Early Music Guild’s professional affiliate program.