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Keyless Oboes in Southern France

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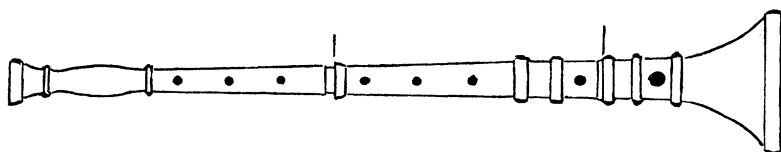
<sup>2</sup> In the article 'Woodwind Instruments of P-I Bressan' in *GSJ* XVII (1964), pp. 106-107, reference is made to a bass recorder reported by Michael Morrow in *Eire*. In correspondence we have identified this as being the same as the instrument described in this article.

## KEYLESS OBOES IN SOUTHERN FRANCE

These fragmentary notes are written with the hope that someone else (if no one has yet done so) will pursue a subject which could turn out quite interesting. (1) Visitors to the Arlatan Museum, Arles, may have observed among a fairly rich selection of instruments collected by Mistral a keyless oboe of boxwood in three joints, with ivory or bone mounts (at the top, at the bell neck, and—now missing—at the middle socket). It has no label (the labels have anyway got mixed up, many lying loose in the case). I was allowed to take it out of the glass case briefly in 1958, when I took a few measurements and made a rough drawing (reproduced herewith). The upper joint is 30 mm. wide at the top. The minimum bore is wide enough to take a pencil easily. The bore at the tenon is 13.5 mm., making a small step with the next joint. The first hole is bored at an upwards slant. The lower joint ends with 18 mm. bore and has two shallow turned rings rather like those which bear the keys in a two-keyed oboe, but there were never keys on this instrument. There is a 6 mm. hole roughly where the C key would be. All six holes are also of this size. The bell has no recessed socket but, as in some *bombardes*, *sopels*, etc., fits straight over the lower joint. It reaches 85 mm. wide and has two opposed vents of 7.5 mm. diameter. Placed in the instrument in 1958 was a large reed, of wedge shape overall and about as wide across the tip as a *ciaramella* reed. Unfortunately I failed to examine it properly, nor did I have a camera. I visited the museum again in 1974 but was unable to get permission to open the case, which was in deep darkness; the reed did not appear to be there. The following linear measurements are in mm., from the top end to hole centres, with the joints not taken apart:

Hole 1	105	Hole 4	222	Bell vents	410
2	138	5	255	Lower end	485
3	170	6	290		
Joint	205	Vent	360		
		Joint	375		

(2) That fine old recording of French Folk Music, SL-207 in the 'Columbia World Library of Folk and Primitive Music', includes a short item from the Département of Ariège entitled '*Castagno* (Chestnut



dance)<sup>1</sup> played on a primitive seven hole oboe by Auguste Sentein (Sentein, Ariège, 1950)<sup>2</sup>. There is no illustration. The tune is a short allegretto; my transcription, given in the Figure, is a semitone lower than the recording. The tone is oboe-like in a lively manner and there is both tonguing and slurring. One cannot be certain that the keynote G was made with three fingers, but this is possible, for while the *b'* is low ('neutral third') the fleetingly occurring *c''* is pretty sharp, as it might well be if fingered 'all off'.

(3) There is a reference to keyless oboes in the south of France in an article by Hèlene Tremaud, of the museum at Agde, in *Arts et Traditions populaires*, 1968, no. 1, p. 45. She describes the *joutes*, nautical tournaments held on the coast in summer at places between Agde and Sete, eight towns having their societies of *jouteurs*. Each boat has, besides the rowers, two musicians—*hautboiste* and *tambour*. The latter has a side drum with skins of still-born calf. The *hautbois* is keyless, made in blackwood by Couesnon and 48 cm. long. The reed is home-made, to deliver a nasal sound. Players now becoming hard to recruit, the Sete Conservatoire started a class for them in 1966. The article is not illustrated but gives some of the tunes, with range *d'* to *g''* in G and D major, and that Berlioz-like flavour not rare in town folk-music of southern France.

What have we in these snippets, and how are they perhaps related? The German clarinet is well enough known as a folk instrument in Europe. The French oboe seems little known in this capacity, except here in the provinces of its native land. The profile of the Arles oboc (1) suggests, if the instrument was indeed made in Mistral's day or not long before, some continuity from the oboe's earliest time. It looks very Borjon-like (1672) save for the absence of keys. Its internal features and its reed might share such a continuity and, allowing for some debasement through provincial use, suggest points to fill out one's view of the original design. Perhaps there are readers of the JOURNAL who know more about these 'folk' oboes.

ANTHONY BAINES