



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Baroque Flute

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Source: *Early Music*, Vol. 13, No. 2, J. S. Bach Tercentenary Issue (May, 1985), pp. 331+333+335

Published by: [Oxford University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3127011>

Accessed: 17/10/2013 00:40

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A view of the musical life of Leipzig, including the Thomaskirche and Thomasschule: engraving by C. F. Boetius from *Singende Muse an der Pleisse* (Leipzig, 1736) by Sperontes (Johann Sigismund Scholze, 1705–50)

The Baroque flute

I had expected that my article 'In search of the Baroque flute' (EM Feb 84 p.34) would come under fire. The three letters in the November 84 issue which criticise it cover a lot of ground between them, and it would be difficult for me to answer all three correspondents point by point without running almost to the same length as my original article. I shall therefore confine myself to the main points, especially those raised by Mr Laszewski.

1 Low French Pitch

Quantz (XVII, vii, 7) describes the 'German A chamber pitch', of which he approved, as 'the mean between the French and the Venetian'. This puts the French at about two or three semitones below the German pitch. But we know very well what the latter was, from the many German-made flutes that survive from Quantz's time, including his own. These were tuned to a range of pitches

which comes, roughly, between a':390 and a':430. The very common a':392 is merely the lower end of the normal baroque concert pitch. Hence 'Low French Pitch', as described by Quantz, must be a great deal lower than a':392, and is clearly recognisable as the range of tunings found in the 'd'Amore' group of wind instruments.

Clearly the best way to verify this theory is to investigate the original French sources. This I have done in some depth. I find that in the early 18th century the French attitude to voicing and pitch was one of almost total relativity. Transposition was the order of the day. (In this context I was interested to read Andrew Parrott's article in EM Nov 84, pp.490–516, which reaches a similar conclusion of obligatory transposition at the other end of the Baroque period.) Our most useful informant is no less a person than Jacques Hotteterre le Romain. In his *Méthode pour la Muzette*, he describes

the three traditional pitch standards most commonly used in his day. These are: *Le Ton de C sol Ut*, *Le Ton de D la Ré* (a whole tone higher), and *Le Ton d'A mi La* (a third lower). This corresponds exactly to the three-tiered system described by Quantz. From this and other contexts, it is clear that 'Le Ton de C sol Ut', later known simply as 'Le Ton d'Ut', was the nearest French approach to an idea of 'absolute pitch'. It is the tuning used by the keyboard, and represents the standard in terms of which a note was judged to have its 'true' value. Hotteterre speaks of three groups of instruments each playing at one of these three pitches, but unfortunately does not say what instruments these were. In a marginal note to the text, however, he explains that the clef transpositions described in his book *L'Art de Préluder* relate to the discrepancies between these playing pitches. This handbook is the most important of all sources for French performing pitch. It is written specifically as a guide to performance on the flute, with additional applications to oboe and recorder. In Chapter X, Hotteterre describes some of the transpositions then in use, and singles out that of a third as particularly important for these instruments, 'parce qu'elle conduit à pouvoir jouer les airs dans leur véritable ton, et à l'unisson de la voix': 'Because it enables one to play tunes *in their true tonality*, and in unison with the voice'. This implies that the tonalities in which the flute part, based on the G1 clef, normally plays, are not the 'true' tonalities of the music. (The word 'Ton' has a whole spectrum of meanings, which includes both 'pitch' and 'key'). In Chapter III, he gives a selection of *Préludes* in a wide variety of keys. At the end of each section he demonstrates how the music will read on the G2 clef. He gives equal weight to the major third and the minor third transpositions. As an example, here are the instructions that come at the end of the *Préludes* in the key of G:



evidence that I can bring to my case—the unique sound of the ‘bas dessus de la flûte traversière’.

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Beethoven's Graf piano

I very much enjoyed reading the Nov 84 issue of *Early Music* and was especially impressed by Deborah Wythe's article 'The pianos of Conrad Graf' (pp.447–60). It is by far the best study of the subject at present.

I would, however, like to make one small remark about her article. Because of the wording of the nameplate on the Graf piano Beethoven used (now in the Beethovenhaus at Bonn), which contains a reference to the Mondschein No.102, Ms Wythe concludes that the piano should be dated 1826 or 1827 (App.2, p.458). Now nameplates are easily fixed, removed or substituted. In fn.31 Ms Wythe seems to be conscious of the fact that possibly unauthentic nameplates can be fixed. She does not seem to envisage the possibility of nameplates being removed or substituted. The wording of the nameplate of Beethoven's Graf certainly proves that it was fixed in 1826 or 1827. But the piano itself is very probably earlier, for several reasons.

It is true that G. von Breuning¹ does not help us in trying to determine when the Graf was put at Beethoven's disposal. He states that the instrument stood bentside against bentside with the Broadwood of 1817 in the *Schwarzspanierhaus* at Vienna in 1826. In this house, now alas demolished (as is the *Mondscheinhaus*), Beethoven had his last lodgings before he died.

Graf himself, however, testified on 26 June 1849² that he had constructed the quadruple-strung instrument especially for Beethoven 'a few years before his death' and that he had put it at Beethoven's disposal ('Ihm zu seinem Vergnügen Stelt'). It was not a gift, but a kind of long-term loan. After the composer's death Graf therefore claimed the piano back and sold it to the Viennese bookseller Franz Wimmer, who bought it for his daughter Lotte.

Lotte Wimmer later married the clergyman Widmann at Liestal, Switzerland, and took the piano with her. In 1889 the instrument was acquired by the Beethovenhaus at Bonn.³ If the piano was made in 1826 or 1827, it was less than 'a few years' before the composer's death.

The relation between Beethoven and Graf goes back at least to 1814. In that year Graf repaired the Broadwood grand, which seems to have been in a pitiable state for Beethoven constantly ruined his pianos.⁴ The friendly relationship seems to have continued right up to the composer's death, and at the funeral Graf was one of the torch-bearers.⁵ It seems possible, if not probable, that Graf loaned Beethoven a piano, one made expressly for the composer, somewhat earlier.

But there are more convincing proofs that this was probably the case. Ms Wythe rightly points to the fact that the Beethoven Graf was one of the mainly quadruple-strung instruments by this maker. In 1820, quadruple-strung pianos are mentioned in Beethoven's conversation books. Matthäus Andreas Stein (son of Johann Andreas and brother of Nanette Streicher née Stein) tells Beethoven that he, too, builds quadruple-strung pianos.⁶ And Nanette Streicher in the same year lets Beethoven know that her husband had also made quadruple-strung pianos, and she invites the composer to come and try them.⁷ Why do quadruple-strung pianos suddenly appear in the conversation books in 1820 and neither before nor after? The simplest explanation seems to be that Graf had loaned Beethoven his quadruple-strung grand in that year. As the instrument has no opus number, nothing prevents us from supposing that it was made in 1820. It follows Ms Wythe's model B, already to be found in opus no.693 (Finchcocks, Goudhurst, Kent), which according to the chronology probably dates from about the same year.

The friendship between Beethoven and Graf lasted for at least thirteen years. Ms Wythe rightly points out with reference to Danhauser's *Liszt am*

Klavier that Graf very probably practised 'celebrity advertising'. It is, therefore, quite possible that Graf's feelings for Beethoven were in part founded on the composer's celebrity, and that Graf considered it excellent publicity for one of his instruments to be in Beethoven's lodgings. For this reason Graf certainly did not neglect the instrument he loaned to the composer. He very probably tuned, repaired and restrung it regularly, the latter being necessary because Beethoven's deafness caused him constantly to bang on his pianos. As Graf was not without vanity, and perhaps also for reasons of publicity, he would have changed the nameplate of the piano when he received the title 'k.k.Hof-Klaviermacher', and also when he moved into the Mondscheinhaus.

So in my opinion, as I suggested in 1977⁸, the Beethoven Graf is to be dated 1820. Ms Wythe is, of course, quite right in concluding that the nameplate dates from 1826 or 1827.

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¹G. von Breuning, *Aus dem Schwarzspanierhaus* (Vienna 1874), pp.58, 66 and 124. See also A. W. Thayer, *Ludwig van Beethovens Leben*, ed. H. Riemann (Leipzig 1922–23), v, p.252; P. Bekker, *Beethoven* (2/Berlin 1912), p.111.

²T. Frimmel, 'Von Beethovens Klavieren', *Die Musik*, ii (1903), no.14, p.88

³T. Frimmel, *Beethoven-Studien* (Leipzig 1905–6), ii, p.230; T. Frimmel, *Beethoven-Handbuch* (Leipzig, 1926), ii, p.269.

⁴L. Nohl, *Beethovens Leben* (2/Berlin 1909–13), iii, p.259.

⁵Nohl, *op cit*, iii, p.543

⁶*Konversationsheft* 9, 1820, fol.8v–9r

⁷*Konversationsheft* 12, 1820, fol.62r.

⁸J. H. van der Meer, 'Beethoven et le pianoforte', *L'Interprétation de la musique classique de Haydn à Schubert*, Colloque international, Evry, 13–15 Octobre 1977 (Paris 1980), p.67–85.

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