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REDISCOVERING BAROQUE WIND 1

The baroque bassoon

Hansjürg Lange

TALKS TO
J. M. THOMSON

*The Lange workshop observed
(photos: Bryn Campbell)*



Almost a decade has been needed to re-establish the flute, oboe and bassoon in the baroque ensemble. Not only have instruments had to be assembled, studied and copied, but players have had to master earlier techniques and evolve a professional milieu for themselves. What at first seemed an impossibility has become a reality: the baroque orchestra, with its subtleties of timbre and texture, has been re-created. Discussions about details continue. Many refinements are possible, but for audiences, 18th-century music has acquired a new dimension. In this series on baroque wind, leading players will discuss their instruments, approaches to technique, style and repertoire. Hansjürg Lange, well known as a maker and performer, here describes his beginnings and the way in which his intuitive search for a certain range of sonorities has developed: ‘... as a maker to give the instrument a soul and as a player to find the soul of an instrument.’

It is a far cry from a workshop in the small Suffolk village of Aldringham to the Swiss village of Goldern in the Bernese Oberland. Not only is the language different—Swiss German (a dialect with a distinct Scandinavian touch) as opposed to Suffolk dialect, but so is the light—the brilliant mountain light of the Central Alps and the suffused, immanent quality of Suffolk, inspiration of Constable and the 18th-century school of watercolourists.

For Hansjürg Lange light and colour symbolize differences in tonal qualities between, for instance, the sounds of modern and baroque instruments. ‘Modern bassoon sound is like the moon seen on a clear night

and that of the old bassoon like the moon seen through a slight haze with that wonderful fading out of its light into the atmosphere’, he says. ‘Or, in a less imaginative way, the earlier bassoons have a slimmer sound whereas in the modern bassoon it gets fattish.’ Apart from the question of clarity, there’s the volume: ‘The modern basson is—and of course it has to be—a more pompous instrument.’

Hansjürg Lange came to the bassoon from the recorder: ‘... I really only played it by ear, I hated reading, be it words or music.’ His father was a school-teacher who also taught music so there was much music making in the home. He had wanted first to become a gardener, but his interests switched and he became fascinated by wood and moved into cabinet making, the possibility of becoming a teacher being at the back of his mind. After a time he was able to say to his father: ‘Would you mind if I bought a bassoon?’ ‘If you buy the instrument’, his father replied, ‘then I’ll pay for the lessons.’ He had never really wanted to play anything else and his modern German-system instrument had to be scaled down in family ensembles to blend with voices, recorders, viola da gamba, etc. ‘My teacher once told me to “get away from my Jümpferlition” (spinster noise).’

A few years later, around 1962, he met Michel Piguet, the renowned baroque oboist and recorder player, who was looking for a bassoonist to join his ensemble. ‘For the first time I saw and touched an 18th-century bassoon, a fine instrument of Piguet’s collection. Although I used only a modified modern reed with which very few notes responded, the feel of the instrument, and a glimpse of how it might sound,

really struck me.’ He was lent this instrument for six years, after which it served as a fundamental model for subsequent research. ‘You can have an instrument which works nicely, everything is there and it plays in tune, it speaks easily but it has no inner quality, or you can have an instrument like this bassoon. I don’t think I would necessarily have gone on, if I hadn’t had this one first—it was a stroke of luck.’

The transition to the making of instruments took a roundabout path. ‘Having played on this borrowed instrument for some years, I became rather attached to it and yet knew the day would come when I should be without it. So, with my training in cabinet making and some experience in instrument making, I naturally thought quite early on of making my own copy of what I knew best. When I met Piguet I was still in the workshop of Hans Conrad Fehr in Stäfa, on the lake of Zürich. We were about four to five people, specializing in recorders and flutes of a baroque type, neither replicas nor copies, and not what would be understood by the word “baroque” now.’ Fehr recorders at that time had a clear, compact sound, contrasting with the rather breathy recorder sound often heard today.

Work began at seven in the morning and continued until five-thirty in the evening. ‘I badly wanted to have more lessons and carry on with my music study, so in the end I went back to work on my own again, which made playing with Piguet’s ensemble much easier—I could drop things to go to a rehearsal at any time. Sometimes work in the ensemble started at seven in the morning, at other times ten at night.’

Piguet’s Ricer-care Ensemble had up to six people and was one of the few European ensembles of its kind, playing a very wide repertoire, and one which today would seem impossibly unauthentic. ‘We did medieval and renaissance, as well as baroque music on 18th-century instruments, which of course sounds very bad now, but I must say it was an experience to hear him play these medieval dances on his Rottenburgh oboe; in some respects it was just as convincing as hearing it played on the right instruments today.’

Hansjürg then took up craft teaching in an international boarding school in the Bernese Oberland, the Ecole d’Humanité, and tried to combine the life of a teacher and performer. This proved a difficult period when he was asked also to return the borrowed French bassoon. ‘I was in quite a panic, because I was supposed to play in an important concert abroad and as I was no longer to have the original instrument I had to set about making my own—so my first bassoon really came out of necessity.’

‘Free hours were mainly at night. I was by then married to an English girl and, beside teaching, we looked after a “School Family” of seven children of various ages. My private workshop was no more than part of a disused pigsty, big enough for my lathe, and when I worked in it, there was just about a foot to the wall behind me and 5-6 inches to the black stained ceiling. Otherwise I was lucky: it had been disused for many years.’

With a set of measuring discs Hansjürg measured the ‘critical’ bassoon as accurately as he could, a disc every other tenth millimetre. ‘I should say the actual measuring was the least problem, for it was then a case of how to set about drilling the long bores and double bore in the butt joint, also the finger-holes at the correct angle. That presented more headaches and sleepless nights, brooding on how I could set about it. I had to invent several special gadgets to make it possible. There was no-one near I could have watched or asked.’

‘Luckily, I was allowed to hang on to the original bassoon longer than expected because the new one could never have been in a properly playable state in time for the concert. During the following holidays I finished “Number One”. It turned out to be quite different from the original: that is, more open in sound (it is still working). In fact some time later I did something very silly to it: wanting to do my best to preserve the wood, I oiled it again and obviously used the wrong kind of oil, for it made a layer in it and the intonation went quite berserk. I was to play in the *St Matthew Passion* in Oxford and just couldn’t play *b* flat in tune. A few hours before I had to leave, in desperation, I decided the only thing to do was to ream it out slightly again. Somehow I held the butt joint on the wrong way round and produced a bore tapering in two directions, like an X rather than an A. Only years later when I re-measured the instrument for some reason, did I realize what I’d done. However, I shall never regret it at all because it improved the sound no end, although to play the notes in a well-focused way became somewhat more difficult.’

‘Having made the first bassoon, I was prodded from various sides, mostly I suppose from myself, to try making more. The Bernese Oberland is a marvellous area for slow-grown sycamore—it’s not for nothing that a school of violin makers was founded in Brienz, not far from Goldern. Sycamore and certain maples are good woods for bassoons. I’ve seen bassoons made of boxwood, plum, pear, rosewood and even yew, but certainly the sycamore is safest, in addition to its excel-

lent resonating qualities. . . . The wing joint particularly, with its most irregular shape, gets very wet from being played because of the condensation, therefore you simply need the kind of wood that can move and yet does not crack so easily. Rippled sycamore is especially good in this respect.'

After two years, the young couple came to live in London and eventually moved to Aldeburgh, in Suffolk, where Hansjürg was able to set up a much more elaborate workshop. He wishes he could have taken the Swiss climate with him, where the cold dry wintry weather was ideal. 'Here I battle continually against the damp, although Suffolk is the best place you can choose in the British Isles, being about the driest part—not all of Suffolk, of course, but Snape, Aldeburgh and that area.'

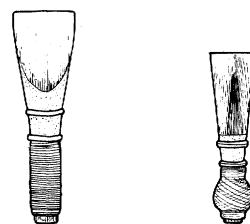
When he became a professional maker, it was time to re-appraise his original intuitive approach. Nowhere was this more important than in the making of reeds: 'It can be quite an unconscious business, you know—you just go on until it works and you don't really know what you're doing, but if you have to show it to a student, you must know the principles behind your work.'

Not a researcher or scholar by nature, Hansjürg has tended to find his own way without recourse to early methods and tutors. 'The only things Piguët happened to show me in the beginning were the few pictures of early reeds that Anthony Baines put into his book *Woodwind Instruments* . . . actually, they were English bassoon reeds so they weren't much help for the French bassoon. But it nevertheless gave me some kind of clue.' (He couldn't speak or read English at that time.) 'Much later I found literature, with the help of friends. But I still had to find my way from the practical, not the theoretical. I came to the conclusion that these early tutors were guidelines, and it's quite wrong if you start to pin them down word for word and take them literally, because they're fragments; things varied in those days much more than they do today. We tend to apply, quite unconsciously, our own ideas of uniformity that we've gathered over the last seventy years and consequently we look at the 18th-century makers and players too much with our own eyes. Very vital things were left out in their texts, which were just taken for granted. Skills and knowledge which two hundred years ago belonged to every schoolboy cannot be expected to be mentioned in a tutor. So, if you take such descriptions as still exist too literally, you can only too easily get stuck in a certain track until you find out (the hard way) that as "book-

worms" we can discover only a fraction of the truth. Where *do* we find in words such determining factors as the attitude of these earlier great masters towards materials, most of all living materials such as wood and cane, horn and ivory? We can, of course, best learn about this hidden side through everyday contact with their "products". But, we must also expect some surprises; we must keep an open mind if we find our present-day principles overthrown entirely.'

'Through such intimate work, an ideal of sound can reveal *itself* and become a very strong part of one. I don't think one actually copies instruments if one tries to tackle it from this standpoint. Naturally, we still have so much to learn from them now; the closer we stick to the physical structure of the original the more "early sound" we capture, but the soul of the instrument can only be created by *us*.'

The principal difficulty is still centred around the reed: 'the most subtle part of the whole bassoon'. Hansjürg considers reedmaking a highly individual task and feels all players should make their own. 'If I make a reed I very often don't know where to scrape before I put it into my mouth. I play, I take out the reed and then know exactly the spot where I ought to scrape. I hardly ever finish reeds until I've done some very good practising, feel my lips are quite strong, and have come to a point where I'm really relaxed again. Afterwards one finds there are certain guidelines if people want to know where to scrape. (Incidentally, it's



left: French early
18th-century-type reed
right: A modern
German-type reed

often just the other way round from scraping modern reeds!) If a certain register or a note doesn't work, one can give indications, but in the beginning I had to work it out from a practical standpoint. I was very glad I'd never looked through a book about reedmaking until long after I came to England, because it left me free from almost any idea about modern reedmaking. It is not always easy to detect one's own preconceived, "improved" ideas and it is a big step to rid oneself of them and open oneself to the concepts of the past. One gets the most valuable clues by looking into typical bassoon parts, knowing what the fingering should be. It is quite easy to get around the problem of a sluggish response or bad intonation using extra pressure and complicated fingerings. But what about some fast



passages in, say, Rameau's and later, Mozart's writing?'

Since those *very* experimental days he feels he has progressed and is now able to play (as a rule) notes according to 18th-century fingering charts. There is still, and presumably always will be, a hidden mystery in reedmaking. 'I have not yet filled the washing basket full of reeds, which my first teacher told me was essential before anyone could know how to make them!' If reedmaking requires almost arcane skills, the making of crooks is equally important, but Hansjürg feels he has not yet done enough experimental work on this to be able to make any pronouncements.

If you ask him for a description of the difference between a baroque and a modern bassoon, he will start with the way each is made, for from this stem their different qualities of sound. 'Structurally, the modern bassoon is a denser instrument. Traditional wood is used but the vital two parts—the wing joint and one of the bores in the butt joint—are lined with hard rubber (nowadays other materials will be used), and in order to get an absolutely impeccable finish, the inside is as polished as a gunbarrel. This produces a very smooth, centred sound. A lot, of course, has to do with the reed because of its smaller volume and the

"artificial" tension which is introduced in the process of making. It goes without saying that the bassoon today plays a different role, it's an instrument in its own right. In an orchestra, you can hear it distinctly whereas the baroque bassoon blends into the ensemble and is sometimes very difficult to detect. In playing the modern bassoon there is little to vibrate apart from the air column. The heavy mechanism "holds the wood down", and there is little friction of the passing air against the body of the instrument. The old, much lighter bassoon, gains its individuality more easily because here the whole instrument is set in motion to a far greater degree.'

Where modern bassoons are concerned, his own ideal of sound is still very much French orientated. The French instrument has retained a more vocal quality than the German: 'France is still the more sophisticated country from that point of view.' When asked if this was because of French sensitivity and flair for woodwind generally, he hesitated before replying that he felt that the quality of sound sought by each country was, most markedly in earlier periods, closely linked to their language. By comparison with the nasal French sound, the English bassoon is a unique member of the family. 'As we Continentals say: "If you want to talk

English just put a hot potato in your mouth". The English bassoon has that slightly throaty quality that comes out from behind the hot potato. It's like a regimental sergeant-major shouting at his troops. You can speak very loudly without straining your vocal apparatus. There's an unequalled roundness about the sound of the English concert instrument right into the 19th century.' It is the *ideal* of sound that is the determining factor rather than anything else.

How much do we owe to Hotteterre for the 18th-century bassoon and how successful were the Hotteterre family's modifications? Hansjürg Lange felt this was difficult to answer because we do not actually possess an Hotteterre bassoon. 'One could perhaps say that they took the first big step by bringing the bassoon into the ranks of refined instruments. The earliest bassoons I have tried, from 1680 to 1730, certainly still have a range of distinct sonorities or registers. Gradually, as time went on, as with string instruments, an even sonority throughout the scale of the instrument was sought. French bassoons earlier than the mid-18th century are themselves very rare, possibly as a result of the aftermath of the French Revolution. 'Makers usually stamped the royal crown on their instruments and I could imagine them, as with other more sophisticated instruments like oboes which were found in the palaces, actually being physically destroyed.'

At first he deliberately refrained from advertising to avoid being swamped with orders before he had confidence in one of his own instruments. But even without advertising, he was swamped. 'It was, and still is, a nightmare—by keeping my customers waiting, I am afraid I ask an awful lot of them. Particularly as a result of having moved workshop and house, waiting times have not improved. It's difficult to do justice to my family, playing, making and my particular interest in education in a broader sense. But, somehow the time will have to be found.'

Much happier as a continuo player than as a soloist, he finds himself in demand in baroque ensembles and has acquired much practical experience of national styles and repertoires. His admiration for the sound of the early French bassoon is paralleled by an admiration for their composers. 'Rameau, for instance, treated the wind a little as a Stravinsky of the time. He achieved probably some of the most wonderful blends of wind music ever written.'

Yet the bassoon continuo parts of Bach are a tremendous test of a performer, as in the *St John Passion* for instance. What is it like to have to play those *very*

long continuo lines? 'It's legendary how Bach barely considered a singer's physical set-up when he composed. The same applies to the demands made on a bassoonist's stamina. But this is not of importance: with Bach you simply don't get away by just contributing to a blend or an effect. His ideal of what he wanted to be expressed through his music seems little influenced by whether a part lay nicely or not. He was subtle in the way he used the bassoon, and seems to have known it to be a good actor.'

Mozart's bassoon writing shows the most intimate knowledge of the instrument: '*Così fan tutte*, for example, is a real woodwind opera and has very difficult passages to play. I am thinking of the Overture, and also that of *Figaro*. With a five-keyed bassoon it still makes one sweat, but in a purely technical way it lies much more comfortably than with a multi-keyed instrument.'

Like many responsible, thoughtful makers involved in what is called the 'early music revival', he often questions his motives and his own role in it: 'Am I prolonging a fashion by making these instruments or am I a creator? Am I contributing towards a true development?' He answers such questions in various ways. 'Only by seeing more and more clearly the deeper meaning of this revival and understanding it will we find the way to continue it and not let it be stranded.' He sees parallels between the development of music and the other arts, and notes how there has been 'a gradual progression of making sound much denser, which went hand in hand with the whole development of materialism. You find a sensitivity at work earlier which we have lost in our modern instruments, or do not possess to that extent.'

'I think it's been necessary to return to the past to re-experience that particular refinement of the senses, in order to re-educate our own. This is the only thing which justifies our doing it—our wanting to become aware of and consciously use these marvellous "organs", these senses. I believe that by growing more and more sensitive, we can find greater ways of communication, ways beyond the merely sensual. For me it is a means of finding a path into the future, of finding the right path. I don't do it for its own merits, so to speak. It's in music that the moral sense finds its truest expression. I have never looked at music as a luxury, but as a necessity. Through that, it has become a duty; I have to strive to make my instruments sufficiently good tools to enable the artist to carry out this duty. If I play myself, I always hope to be able to bring across something alive and true.'