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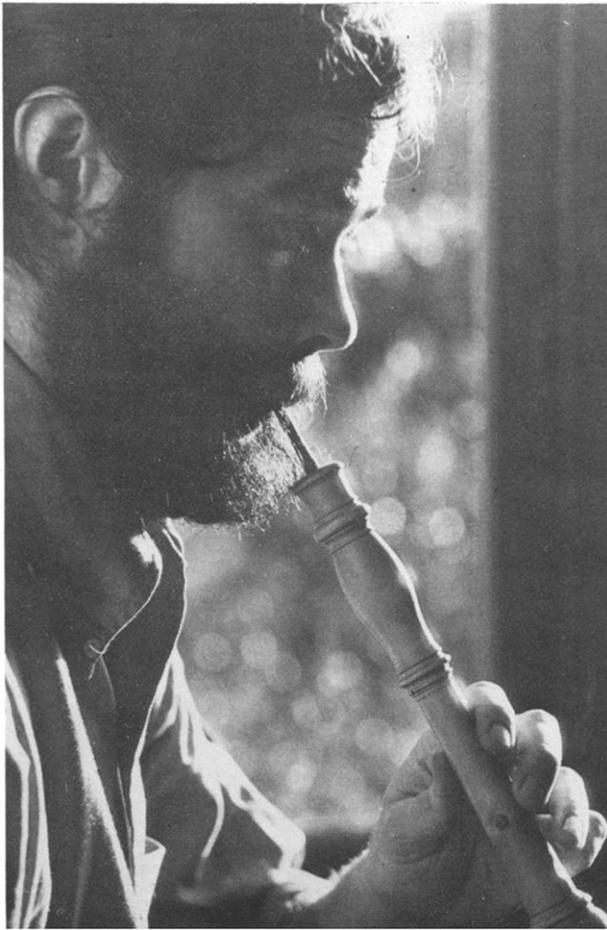
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Bruce Haynes (photo: Rondal Partridge)

# Tonality and the baroque oboe

BRUCE HAYNES

On the fundamental importance of tonality to the baroque oboe, a case in point is described by Nikolaus Harnoncourt in his commentary on recording the complete Bach cantatas with original instruments.<sup>1</sup> It has long been known that, because in certain churches for which he composed the organ was pitched a tone or minor third higher than the woodwinds, Bach notated the parts for a few of his cantatas in two different keys: the organ and strings in one, the woodwinds (in order to compensate for their lower pitch) a tone or

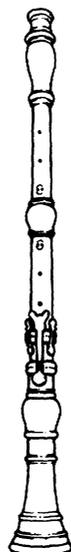
tone-and-a-half higher.<sup>2</sup> When the cantatas came to be published by the Bach Gesellschaft at the end of the 19th century, the editors solved this discrepancy (quite logically from their point of view) by transposing the wind parts down to the key of the majority of the parts. This has unintentionally caused many headaches to players using modern instruments, and made the parts into true feats of virtuosity for players of the baroque oboe. Harnoncourt's more practical solution was to play the oboe parts in their original keys, and transpose the other parts, as transposition causes relatively fewer problems for string and keyboard instruments.

With non-keyed woodwinds (as the baroque instruments essentially are), the tonality in which one plays is of prime importance, as it has a fundamental influence on both the technical fluency and tone quality of the performance. Not having a separate finger-hole for each semitone (as on modern woodwinds, which accounts for their complex mechanisms), these must be obtained by using 'cross-fingerings', i.e. lowering an open-fingered note by closing holes further down the bore. These cross- (or forked-) fingered notes always have a matted, veiled tone quality, noticeably different from the open-fingered ones. Apparently, this tonal *chiaroscuro* was prized in the 18th century; it can be compared to the different qualities the human voice produces when singing different vowels.

It follows, of course, that woodwind performance in a tonality with many sharps or flats contains more of these darker sounds. In addition to the normal fingerings, the player also uses special fingerings for trills and other ornaments which affect the tone-colour he produces. The tessitura of the piece—its basic range—also influences the tone quality; the high register is somewhat sharper in quality than the lower, and involves generally more tension in breathing and embouchure as this is the only way to obtain overblown notes without an octave key. It therefore comes as no surprise to learn that composers such as Mozart had very definite concepts of the physical qualities of various tonalities, as does every player of early woodwinds.

Now when we consider solo music for instruments in the 18th century, much of the best of it was written for the extremely popular flauto traverso, or the versatile jack-of-all-trades—the violin. While oboists also did considerable solo playing, most of it was in the context of the orchestra, where the instrument was originally intended to support the violins, a role which it never outgrew. Then, as now, there were probably fewer amateur oboists, and thus a smaller music-buying public for oboe solos. Much oboe music was probably borrowed and adapted from other instruments. Consequently it is not surprising that the vast majority of solo music which does specify the oboe does so as an alternative to the flute, violin, or the then-fashionable musette. Thus, of the existing original solo music for the oboe in the baroque and classical periods (outside Germany, where composers were usually quite specific about instrumentation), only a small fraction was written principally with the oboe in mind.<sup>3</sup>

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This creates an immediate problem, however, for players of the two- and three-keyed oboe, because the bulk of this music favours the sharp keys and is uncomfortably high in tessitura. This is of course to be expected, as the traverso is built in D, so that pieces in this key (or close to it) involve the fewest awkward fingerings. The violin is more adaptable, but fingering in relation to the open strings (g, d', a', e'') also clearly makes D and G major the easier keys.<sup>4</sup> As for the musette, the fingering of the *grand chalumeau* and the tuning of the *bourdon* make it happiest in G and C.<sup>5</sup> This preference towards the sharp keys is unfortunately not shared by the oboe.

There is abundant proof that the oboe was regarded in the 18th century as an instrument whose home key was C, from which it ventured usually no further than three flats or sharps, with a tendency towards the medium flat keys.<sup>6</sup> Its lowest note is not the traverso's d', but the c' one step lower. And whereas the traverso of the first quarter of the 18th century already played easily to high d''' and e''', and the violin (depending on the player) even higher, the oboe of the same period was not very successful beyond c''', with an occasional d'''.<sup>7</sup>

All of this indicates that the oboe would be happier if it played traverso and violin music in a lower key, with fewer sharps in the signature; the logical choice would be to go down one step, which eliminates two sharps (e.g. A major to G major, D to C, etc.). As it happens, there are historical indications that this key relationship was common (although players in the 18th century were probably adept at sight transpositions, so that much potential proof was never put down on paper).

The best-known example is probably Mozart's Concerto K.314, originally written in C major for the oboe, and later adapted to the traverso in D (the flute's home key).<sup>8</sup> There is also a manuscript version of Handel's traverso Sonata op. 1 no. 5 in G major, written in F for the oboe.<sup>9</sup> No less an authority than Quantz (himself originally an oboist) advises oboe players who wish to play his flute duets to transpose them down one step.<sup>10</sup>

The other major early 18th-century authority on woodwind performance, Jacques Hotteterre, also hints at this expedient for the oboist. In the 'Avertissement' to his first book of *Pièces* for flute,<sup>11</sup> he advises that: 'Although these pieces are composed for the transverse flute, they are nevertheless adaptable to all instruments which play the treble line, such as the recorder, oboe, violin, treble gamba, etc. . . . as there are notes which are below the recorder's range, these pieces must be transposed if one wishes to play them on this instrument . . .' The transposition indicated is up a minor third. This statement establishes that (1) Hotteterre saw no reason why, in principle, his pieces could not be played in keys other than those written, and (2) the proper key is the one most natural to the instrument (i.e. D major on traverso/F major on recorder, the lowest note of both instruments). Now, the fingering which produces the lowest note on the recorder (f': 0 123 456 7) sounds a c' on the oboe, so

that the parallel oboe tonality to the recorder's F would be C, a fourth lower. And to take Hotteterre's reasoning further, if he equates D (traverso) with F (recorder) he would logically equate D (traverso) with C (oboe). One can thus infer that Hotteterre would have considered it reasonable to transpose traverso music down one step for the oboe.

There is one rhetorical question to settle: considering the emotional qualities often associated with specific keys, is not transposition a weakening of carefully selected 'affects'? There are in fact too many 18th-century examples of transposition—e.g. in the *oeuvre* of J. S. Bach, and of Handel—executed by the composers themselves for the sake of practicality, for us to feel bound by an absolute equation of character with tonality. Quantz discusses this question,<sup>12</sup> and while he believes in the 'different effects of different keys' it is clear from his discussion that many of his contemporaries were not as thoroughly convinced.

By transposing one step, one of course also shifts the relative position of open and forked fingerings, which are basically the same on oboe and traverso. This therefore affects the relationship of 'good' and 'bad' notes. As the same shift occurs on the recorder by following Hotteterre's instructions, however, it was evidently less important to him than the ease with which fingerings in general could be performed. In fact, when the oboe is playing in a key in which it is comfortable, the relationship between covered and open notes is actually brought out more clearly. One final point: the oboe in sharp keys has a bright, tinny quality which, although generally less suitable for chamber music, is ideal for the festive character of much orchestral music. (It is no accident that the baroque trumpet is usually in D, so that pieces involving it are in D major, a very bright key.)

I do not mean to advocate a blanket transposition of all flute or violin pieces down one tone for the oboe. Practical experience has proven that this 'step' should not necessarily always be taken. It is, however, a consideration to be made, and I suggest that in many cases it can help to lighten the difficulties of the baroque oboist, and make his performance more enjoyable to hear.

<sup>1</sup> In progress, on the Telefunken *Das Alte Werk* label.

<sup>2</sup> See Arthur Mendel, 'On the Pitches in Use in Bach's Time', *Musical Quarterly*, 41/3 (July 1955), pp. 332-54; 41/4 (October 1955), pp. 466-80. Professor Mendel is currently updating this valuable study.

<sup>3</sup> With the exception of German music, the common practice was to publish solo sonatas with alternative instrumentation; generally traverso, violin, and oboe, with the principal instrument listed first. I am currently compiling a complete repertoire list of chamber music for the oboe from c 1650-c 1825. Such a list can never by its nature be complete, and is already the result of several years of work. On the basis of this list, the following statistics are relevant: of solos written for a variety of alternate instruments, there are presently 63 known collections or individual pieces which indicate the use of oboe (with continuo); of these, only six specify the oboe as first instrument; in all others either the principal instrument is traverso (26 times), violin (17), musette (10), hurdy-gurdy (vielle; three times), or gamba (once). Outside Germany, there are only eight known collections or individual solo pieces written for the oboe. This clearly indicates

how little of the oboe repertoire was written specifically for the characteristics of the instrument.

<sup>4</sup> My appreciation to Sigiswald Kuijken for advice on this matter.

<sup>5</sup> Ch.-E. Borjon, *Traité de la Musette* (Lyon, 1672), chapter 6, paragraph 3; and J. Hotteterre, *Méthode pour la Musette* (Paris, 1738), p. 64 and pp. 73-4, where he also (interestingly enough) discusses transposing down one step for reasons of practicality.

<sup>6</sup> See L. J. Francoeur, *Diapason général* . . . (Paris, 1772), p. 15. J.-B. de Laborde, *Essai sur la musique ancienne et moderne* (Paris, 1780), p. 266. J. Wragg, *The Oboe Preceptor* (London, c 1792), p. 65. O. Vandenbrock, *Traité Général* (Paris, 1793), p. 58. (J. Chr. Fischer?), *The Hoboy Preceptor* (London, c 1800), p. 10. W. Braun, 'Bemerkungen über die richtige Behandlung und Blasart der Oboe', *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* (Leipzig, 1823), p. 171. E. Halfpenny, 'Oboe', *Grove* 5, p. 148; 'A Seventeenth-Century Tutor for the Hautboy', *Music and Letters*, 30 (1949), p. 362; 'The Tonality of Woodwind Instruments', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, 75 (1948-9), p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> Hotteterre, *L'Art de Préluder* (Paris, 1719 R 1966), p. 7, says that the traverso preludes ' . . . may also be played on the oboe, except those that linger on the high notes'. J.-P. Freillon Poncein, *La Véritable manière* . . . (Paris, 1700), and Hotteterre, *Principes de la flûte traversière* (Paris, 1707), both give fingerings for high *d'''*, but no higher fingerings are recorded until Michel Corrette in 1776 (*Méthode Raisonnée*).

<sup>8</sup> B. Paumgartner, introduction to the Hawkes & Son edition of Mozart's Concerto K.314.

<sup>9</sup> Brussels Conservatoire MS XY 15.115, pp. 209-12. There is still another manuscript of this work 'in the hand of the reliable Handel copyist known as S2' (I quote correspondence from David Lasocki who is currently preparing an edition of this version—Manchester Central Library, 130 Hd 4, vol. 312, pp. 55-9).

<sup>10</sup> J. J. Quantz, 'Vorbericht' to *Sei Duetti* . . . op. 2 (Berlin, 1759).

<sup>11</sup> *Pièces pour la flûte traversière avec la basse continue* (Paris, 1708).

<sup>12</sup> Quantz, *Versuch* . . . (Berlin, 1752): trans. E. R. Reilly, *On Playing the Flute* (London, 1966), p. 164. For additional comments on the importance of woodwind tonalities, see pp. 126 and 200.

## Notes

Pen and ink drawings by Robert Kindred are found on the following pages of this issue: pp. 315, 354, 359, 401, 419, 427, 443, 447.

*EM* 7/1, p. 55. The last two lines at the end of the left-hand column belong at the end of the right-hand column on p. 54: 'than to judge the third directly,' etc. The music example (top right) illustrates the difference tones.

*EM* 7/2, 'The French style and the overtures of Bach'. We regret three errors which were entirely beyond our control: p. 191 col. 2 para. 3 ll. 6-7 should read ♯ = MM127; p. 193 col. 2 para. 1 penultimate line should read ♯+♯+♯ = MM53 = ♯; p. 196 col. 1 fn. 17 l. 2 should read ♯ = MM160, l. 6 should read ♯ = MM120.

*EM* 7/2, p. 209. The number of the last Archiv record mentioned by Mary Berry is 2533 359. In the caption to illus. 6, comparison is intended with illus. 5 (opposite) not illus. 3.

*EM* 7/2, p. 263. The price of Iain Fenlon's Birmingham catalogue should read £21.