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REPLACEMENT OF THE RECORDER BY THE TRANSVERSE FLUTE DURING THE
BAROQUE AND CLASSICAL PERIODS

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Abstract:

While the recorder today is primarily an instrument performed by school children, this family of instruments has a long history, and was once more popular than the flute. This paper examines when, why, and how the Western transverse flute surpassed the recorder in popularity. After an explanation of the origins, history, and overlapping names for these various aerophones, this paper examines the social and cultural, technical, and musical reasons that contributed to the recorder's decline. While all of these factors undoubtedly contributed to this transition, ultimately it appears that cultural, economic, and technical reasons were more important than musical ones, and eventually culminated in the greatly developed popular contemporary flute, and the unfortunately under respected recorder.

The flute family is one of the oldest instrumental families, originating in the late Neolithic period. There are several forms of flutes classified by their method of sound production; for Western music from 1600 to 1800, the most important are the end-blown recorder and cross blown flute. The recorder has an air stream blown into an enclosed area known as a duct or fipple, while the cross blown, transverse, or free air reed flute has air blown across the instrument and split by a sharp edge.¹ Both existed as families of variously sized instruments, with the desired instrument size indicated in the music. Until the end of the Baroque, the end-blown recorder was called the flute and was more common; within two hundred years this had reversed. Romantic musicologist George Hogarth illustrates this as the “flute, or flauto, was till lately called the German flute, or flauto tranverso...to distinguish it from the English flute, or flute a bec, an instrument with a mouth resembling that of the clarinet; but as that instrument is now entirely obsolete, the distinction is no longer necessary.”²As demonstrated by this statement, the transverse flutes gradually replaced recorders because of changing perceptions of these instruments in the eighteenth century. Comparative study of their social and cultural reputations, technological developments, and musical treatments illustrates these perceptions.

The social and cultural perceptions of the flute and recorder were significantly influenced by the nobility. In an analysis of Vivaldi’s works for both instruments, Sardelli notes that both the recorder and flute were staple elements in musical training for noble Venetian families in the early Baroque, where boys learned either flute, recorder, or violin.³ This demonstrates that both instruments were originally popular as status symbols for the educated nobility; they were

¹Murray Campbell, Clive Greated, Arnold Meyers, *Musical Instruments: History, Technology and Performance of Instruments of Western Music*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 121.

² George Hogarth, In *Readings in the History of the Flute: Monographs, essays, reviews, letters and advertisements from nineteenth-century London*, (London: Tony Bingham, 2006), 40.

³ Federico Maria Sardelli, *Vivaldi’s Music for Flute and Recorder*, translated by Michael Talbot, (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2007), 17.

distinct but equally important instruments. A similar position existed throughout the rest of Europe, where the transverse flute and recorder had coexisted from at least the sixteenth century, particularly in Germanic countries. During the seventeenth century, however, the transverse flute was surpassed in use by the recorder in the Germanic countries, Britain, and most of Europe. It was the spread of French music, French players, and modified French instruments at the end of the seventeenth century that led a resurgence for the transverse flute in Germany.⁴ This in turn led to improvements in flute design, performance and composition by a German virtuoso, Quantz. This view is historically drawn from Quantz's treatise, where he declares an unidentified French woodwind manufacture started the Baroque flute development by adding a key and multiple body pieces.⁵ Modern scholarship has noticed, however, that a Dutch woodwind maker named Haka also produced flutes, recorders and oboes at this time, with similar constructions to the now identified French Hotteterre and Philidor instruments.⁶ This suggests that there was at the least communication and an exchange of ideas between these regions for the development of the Classical flute.

Several factors likely contributed to the French flute model's popularity, including French technical developments, the popularity of French absolutist culture and music, and the actions of woodwind manufacturers and performers. The influence of French music is demonstrated by the treatment of both instruments in Lully's operas, which set a precedent for the instruments uses in Europe. For example, the first recorded use of a Baroque transverse flute in orchestra is in

⁴ Anthony Rowland-Jones, "The Iconographic Background to the Seventeenth-Century Recorder" in *From Renaissance to Baroque: Change in Instrument and Instrumental Music in the Seventeenth century*, ed. Jonathan Wainwright and Peter Holman, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 147.

⁵ Johann Joachim Quantz, *On Playing the Flute*, translated by Edward R. Riley, (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2001), 30.

⁶ John Solum, *The Early Flute*, (Oxford: Claredon Press, 1992), 36.

Lully's *Triomphe de l'amour*.⁷ Lully's innovative instrumentation during this period, at the height of absolutism, no doubt contributed to the influence of French culture and French music, as they were copied by other monarchs and the nobility. This in turn explains the adoption of French instruments, which were needed to play the French style. Furthermore, it may have been the changing musical demands of Lully's works that initiated the technical development of the Baroque flute from the Renaissance flute,⁸ in addition to correcting the tuning, tone, and range. As such, this demonstrates the impact of composers and external cultural factors that favoured the flute.

In addition to political-cultural factors, musical propaganda and advertising from French woodwind makers enhanced the social desirability of the flute. While Quantz was unable to determine who first modified the flute, modern scholarship attributes this primarily to the Hotteterre family. The Hotteterres contributed significantly to the development of all the major Baroque woodwind instruments, including the flute, recorder, oboe and bassoon.⁹ The Hotteterres were particularly significant because of Jacques Hotteterre, a flautist himself. In fact, it was Jacques Hotteterre's treatise on the flute in 1707 that promoted the flute's popularity among amateurs and prompted the rapid publication of several other transverse flute treatises, as it was the first Baroque flute and recorder treatise.¹⁰ This treatise deals primarily with the flute, although it also briefly mentions recorder and oboe. Hotteterre actually favours the flute because he placed it first in the title, gave the flute content twice the space relative to the recorder and oboe contents,¹¹ and refers the reader to the flute section from the oboe and recorder segments

⁷ Solum, 36.

⁸ Rowland-Jones, 138.

⁹ Paul Carol, *Baroque Woodwind Instruments: a guide to their history, repertoire and basic technique*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 50.

¹⁰ Nancy Toff, *The Development of the Modern Flute*, (New York: Taplinger Publishing, 1979), 23.

¹¹ Elizabeth Ann du Bois, *A Comparison of George Phillip Telemann's Use of the Recorder and the Transverse Flute as Seen in His Chamber Works*. (Emporia, Kansas: Emporia State Research Studies, 1982), 26.

for notes and fingerings.¹² This subtle advertising of the flute would only benefit him as a woodwind maker; as both the recorder and oboe were already popular, Hotteterre stood to gain the most benefit by promoting the new flute he had designed.

Continuing with this idea, an analysis of his treatise illustrates these points:

Since the transverse flute is one of the most pleasant and popular of instruments, I feel a certain duty in undertaking this brief work to further the inclination of those who aspire to play it...It is, therefore, possible to learn the principles of the transverse flute with the aid of this treatise. In it I give instructions on the manner of producing all the tones.¹³

The first sentence can be considered a promotion for the flute, or perhaps his own opinion as a flautist. The second sentence demonstrates why this treatise was so effective; it made it easy for the nobility, a growing source of support for the flute, to learn to play the instrument. A treatise making tone production easier make have compensated for the difficulty of the flute relative to the recorder, making the flute a viable alternative as a status symbol. Furthermore, the flute's difficulty, even with a teaching treatise, may have enhanced its status as a symbol for the educated nobility, as it demonstrated the players could afford to take lessons to learn the instrument, and were educated enough to read these treatises.

Hotteterre also demonstrates some of the external factors subtly influencing this text. He explains that it is "necessary, in order to reach perfection in the exercises in which one wishes to succeed, to combine as much as possible gracefulness and skill... it is quite graceful, and will gratify the eye no less than the sound of the instruments will delight the ear."¹⁴ This conformity to the ideal of a French Baroque nonchalant courtier -graceful, skilled, and pleasing- explains why the flute likely functioned as a status symbol for the nobility, especially in the Baroque.

¹² Jacques-Martin Hotteterre, *Rudiments of the Flute, Recorder and Oboe*, translated by Paul Marshall Douglas, (New York: Dover Publications, 1968), 72.

¹³ Hotteterre, 1.

¹⁴ Hotteterre, 1.

Again, external influence appears in another quotation, that the flautist “must always follow that which seems to be the most natural.”¹⁵ Here the emerging philosophical ideals of the Age of Enlightenment contribute to support the rise of the flute. Lastly, it should be noted that this treatise was not designed to argue that the flute should replace the recorder, but rather it demonstrates the start of a complex and multi-faceted change in how both instruments were viewed, slightly favouring his new transverse flute.

Returning to broader social changes that favoured the flute, the transverse flute was supported by the nobility, in part because it became associated with monarchy instead of military. In particular, this was achieved by the support of Frederick the Great.¹⁶ Eventually, by “the late eighteenth century, proficiency on the German flute was the mark of a gentleman.”¹⁷ It should be noted that the German flute was another name for the French model of the transverse flute, to distinguish it from the recorder. As copying the monarchy demonstrates class for the nobility, this was another significant incentive for the nobility to learn the flute. Interestingly, as an absolutists monarch, Frederick the Great was also copying French culture and music. This reinforces the importance of the French and Germanic regions in this transition. Ultimately, the combined support cultivated awareness of the instrument, which resulted in the production of more amateur repertoire and further increased the flute’s publicity and popularity. In contrast, a later musicologist John Hawkins complained that “the German or transverse flute still retains some degree of estimation among gentlemen, whose ears are not nice enough to inform them that it is never in tune.... the utmost degree of proficiency is scarcely worth the labour of attaining

¹⁵ Hotettere, 12.

¹⁶ Du Bois, 34.

¹⁷ Rowland Jones, *Recorder Technique* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 7, quoted in Elizabeth Ann du Bois *A Comparison of George Phillip Telemann’s Use of the Recorder and the Transverse Flute as Seen in His Chamber Works*, (Emporia, Kansas: Emporia State Research Studies, 1982), 34.

it.”¹⁸ This demonstrates one of the challenges the flute faced, which threatened its rise to popularity and shows that the flute was not inherently better or immediately accepted. Furthermore, it illustrates the difference in expectation between different levels of society; for a music critic, the transverse flute in comparison to the recorder was incorrigible because of the difference in musical qualities, while to the elite amateurs who ultimately contributed greatly to the flute’s changing perception, the transverse flute was a status symbol. The fact that noble amateurs did not need to be proficient on the flute,¹⁹ again demonstrates that for the nobility, the support of the flute was primarily social and cultural, rather than a musical, factor.

Economics also contributed to why the flute was considered a status symbol. Relative to other instruments, flutes were expensive. One flute could cost nearly three times as much as an oboe with eight silver keys,²⁰ perhaps because it already had the connotation of a prestigious, expensive, and consequently, exclusive instrument. Especially when compared to recorders, this explains why the flute was so desirable. Moreover, the growth of a large middle class to replace a small aristocracy, where men wanted to and were able to afford to demonstrate their noble pretensions with a fashionable status symbol,²¹ provided a good market for increased flute production. Thus, external social factors contributed significantly to the changing perceptions of the flute and recorder.

Aside from these social and cultural changes, when discussing why the flute replaced the recorder, there are some inherent differences that need to be considered. For example, recorders

¹⁸ John Hawkins, quoted in *A Comparison of George Phillip Telemann’s Use of the Recorder and the Transverse Flute as Seen in His Chamber Works* by Elizabeth Ann du Bois. (Emporia, Kansas: Emporia State Research Studies, 1982), 32.

¹⁹ Ardal Powell, Introduction to *The Keyed Flute*, translated and edited by Ardal Powell, (Oxford: Clarendon press, 1996), 4.

²⁰ Robert Bigio, Introduction to *Readings in the History of the Flute: Monographs, essays, reviews, letters and advertisements from nineteenth-century London* (London: Tony Bingham, 2006), i.

²¹ Powell, 1.

benefitted because they did not require embouchure development, reed manufacturing, or reed adjustment.²² This explains why the recorder initially replaced the Renaissance flute in terms of popularity, and also why the transverse flute ultimately triumphed. The lack of embouchure development may make the recorder easier to play, especially for musicians like oboists who were expected to also perform on flute and recorder, or amateur nobles in the early Baroque, but it limits the expressive possibilities for different tonal colours and dynamics because the embouchure controls the strength and direction of the airstream. Additionally, the recorder “was technically as facile as the transverse flute, if not more so. In general, its sound quality was rather soft, though it was more homogenous than the transverse flute.”²³ This begins to address some of the musical qualities that varied between the instruments, and even more importantly, shows that the flute was not inherently superior to the recorder; they were different instruments with different functions, which became more significant with changing musical tastes.

During the Baroque period, some of these inherent differences were expanded by the development, or lack of development, for each instrument. The development of the recorder stopped in the early Baroque, while the flute had just started to experience a series of gradual changes that would continue throughout the Classical and Romantic periods.²⁴ One reason why this continued technological experimentation and development benefitted the flute more is that it contributed to the increased awareness and popularity of the flute’s possibilities, while the lack of this for recorder enhanced the gradual perception that the recorder was not as serious or worthwhile as the flute. The specific technical changes the transverse flute underwent included the addition of one key to make the flute fully chromatic and improve tuning, a tapered bore for

²² Carol, 117.

²³ Du Bois, 54.

²⁴ Ibid.

tuning and sound quality, closer finger holes which necessitated a three to four part body, and the corps de rechange, or interchangeable middle pieces of different lengths for different tuning systems.²⁵ The musical results were such that “the flute was [...] capable of a larger dynamic range than the recorder, allowing it to express quickly changing and contrasting affects more successfully. In larger ensembles the flute was more easily heard than the recorder... the recorder could not satisfy the growing demand for subjective expression, for dynamic and tonal contrast.”²⁶ In addition to the listed benefits, these dynamic and tonal abilities became even more important as musical tastes changed. For example, with the standardization and growth of the orchestra, the flute’s greater dynamics facilitated a larger role in new contemporary music which the recorder could not maintain. This contributed to both instruments’ future perceptions and uses.

In addition to the social and technical factors that ultimately favoured the flute, there were some musical factors that also contributed. Already mentioned were the flute’s greater dynamic range and expressive tonal possibilities. The practicality of performing with recorder played a part, especially since the recorder was written a fourth higher and in the different French violin clef, which prevented it from being easily interchangeable with flutes, oboes, and violins.²⁷ This made it more difficult to use the recorder in chamber groups or orchestras, although if there had been enough desire for the recorder it would have been possible. Consequently, it was a lack of serious respect for the recorder that contributed to its demise, which was perhaps magnified by the growing interest in the flute’s new possibilities. To compensate for this, some works were written lower in the recorders limited range, which only

²⁵ Campbell, Greated, and Meyers, 126.

²⁶ Ibid, 33.

²⁷ Du Bois, 33

further reduced the tone qualities that made the recorder popular in the first place.²⁸ This effectively defeated the purpose of the action, and like the impacts of the flute's greater dynamic range, made it easier to use the flute instead of the recorder in new music.

These difficulties were compounded by composer's changing compositional styles. The next generation of Baroque composers "including Alessandro Scarlatti, Vivaldi, Charpentier, Lalande, Daniel Purcell ... Handel and Telemann, no longer treated the recorder as the special-occasion instrument linked to evocative texts."²⁹ As the flute gained more public support and was more desirable in music, the recorder was no longer needed for its traditional pastoral associations, especially considering the practical difficulties that could be avoided simply by using the flute instead. Changing styles were also influenced by the inherent characteristics of the instruments. The "recorder was more capable of a clear beginning and end to its tone, which made it more suitable to a non-legato style of playing. The flute tended to speak with less clarity, but was thereby more capable of a legato, singing style of playing, in which smoothness was more valued than distinctness."³⁰ Although neither is inherently better or more suitable, ultimately the differences in the musical traits and subsequent instrumental preference came down to personal preferences of critics and audiences. This is explained by John Clinton's 1851 excerpt that "the reason for the favor thus shown to [the flute] are numerous, such as the following: 1, its pleasing quality of tone, approaching more nearly the human voice than any other known instrument."³¹ Essentially, the recorder's niche gradually declined in musical popularity while the flute became more popular.

²⁸ Du Bois, 34.

²⁹ Rowland-Jones, "The Iconographic Background to the Seventeenth Century Recorder" 101.

³⁰ Du Bois, 33.

³¹ John Clinton, "A Treatise Upon the Mechanism and General Principles of the Flute (1851)," In *Readings in the History of the Flute: Monographs, essays, reviews, letters and advertisements from nineteenth-century London*, edited by Robert Bigio, (London: Tony Bingham, 2006), 185.

Another musical factor was that virtuosos were important for their respective instruments. The increase in virtuoso players was matched by a growth in repertoire,³² which demonstrates the cyclical nature between compositions and musical changes. As the flute became more popular from the aforementioned reasons, there was a greater awareness and demand for it, which resulted in more music being composed and performed by virtuosi, which continued to promote the flute's popularity, forming a positive feedback cycle. Furthermore, the difficulty of the transverse flute necessitated virtuosi for those who played it seriously-as opposed to the amateurism of the nobility and the ease of the recorder- to correct for the inherent problems of the flute.³³ This then increased the flute's reputation as a serious instrument, especially when combined with the cultural support of Frederick the Great, Lully, advertising from the flute manufacturers, other composers, and technological changes creating more opportunities for unique music. This placed the flute in a better position relative to the recorder.

It is also important to note that Vivaldi and Telemann, two composers who treated the recorder as seriously as the flute much later in the period than their contemporaries, wrote music with specific virtuosi in mind for both instruments. Telemann's music took advantage of all the recorder's possibilities, beyond normal practices. This can be accounted for because Telemann personally learned recorder before flute, was in correspondence with Quantz, and thus understood the abilities of the instrument.³⁴ This makes him an excellent example of this recorder to flute transition. A similar situation existed for Vivaldi, which can be seen in Sardelli's analysis of Vivaldi's works; with one example being "from a flautist's point of view, certain passages in V 104 strain at the frontiers of the technique of the time and make it evident

³² Campbell, 140.

³³ Quantz, 30.

³⁴ Du Bois, 38.

that Vivaldi could count on a performer of uncommon ability.”³⁵ Sardelli notes that this existed for the recorder works as well, indicating the importance of virtuosi in demonstrating the technical and musical capabilities of their instruments, which in turn feed public awareness of these instruments and increased musical demand.

Composers also played a role in the popularity of both instruments, by the amount, quality, and difficulty of the works they provided. Telemann composed three times as many works for the transverse flute, yet indicated that his works could be adapted for the recorder.³⁶ Telemann was working within the social and musical context of his time, and although he may have considered the parts adaptable, the aforementioned technical and transposition differences between the flute and recorder made this difficult. Vivaldi, in contrast, uses flutes in his early concertos and wrote two solo concertos for treble and descant recorder in the latter half of 1720.³⁷ This demonstrates that both instruments were still in throughout during the Baroque, and contrary to the trends of the time, Vivaldi’s recorder works come chronologically after his flute ones. This ties into the cyclical nature of changing musical and social tastes influencing the work of composers. While tastes may have supported the flute as evidenced by the change in Telemann works, composers like Vivaldi also influenced taste. Ultimately, the other factors won out for flute popularity over the recorder, although this demonstrates the complexity of this process.

These overlapping changes culminated in the transverse flute gradually being treated as a more serious instrument and becoming more popular than the recorder by the Classical period. This was not just due to musical changes or an inherent supremacy of the flute, but a variety of

³⁵ Sardelli, 113.

³⁶ Du Bois, 33, 55.

³⁷ Sardelli, 280.

social, cultural, advertising, technological and musical pressures applied over a long period. Furthermore, it seems that the musical factors involved in this transition actually played a less significant role, in comparison to other the other external factors. Ultimately, the flute's popularity necessitated further developments to correct the existing problems of tuning and tone quality, which when combined with increasing technological developments of the time inevitably led to the variety of classical flutes. This in turn set the stage for the eventual production of a very different modern flute, and the unfortunate contemporary lack of respect for the recorder as a serious instrument.

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