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"Repertoire for a Swedish bassoon virtuoso: Approaching early nineteenth-century works composed for Frans Preumayr with an original Grenser & Wiesner bassoon"

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Citation

Agrell Killer, D. C. (2015, December 8). *"Repertoire for a Swedish bassoon virtuoso: Approaching early nineteenth-century works composed for Frans Preumayr with an original Grenser & Wiesner bassoon"*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/36960>

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Issue Date: 2015-12-08

Start with that real object,
and follow the ripples outward,
backward,
forward...
Bruce Haynes (2010)

Introduction

My study began with the examination of a historical object: a rare, early nineteenth-century Grenser & Wiesner bassoon constructed in Dresden between 1817–22 and later located in Stockholm. Investigations into the history of this instrument quickly classified it as having been a favored model in use in that region. My focus eventually widened to include questions about the life of an obscure nineteenth-century bassoon virtuoso in Stockholm, his travel journal, and his unusual repertoire containing an extended range. I sought practical solutions for the technical problems presented in this literature in order to enable performance of these works with period instruments and developed a pedagogical strategy to disseminate these discoveries.

Prologue

Thirty years ago, an advertisement for “A Very Fine Eleven-Keyed Stained Maple Bassoon, by H. Grenser & Wiesner”, appeared in an auction catalogue entitled *Highly Important Musical Instruments*.¹ A well-informed colleague notified me of this opportunity, and I flew to London two weeks before the auction date to view the bassoon. Upon arrival, I was shown into a small room where I was invited to play the instrument, which was housed in its original wooden case with a partially legible address in Stockholm, accompanied by three bocals, two wing joints and a box of reeds, all in superb condition. I vividly recall realizing that I was holding the most beautiful-sounding bassoon I had ever heard, and that it was my most profound wish to own and play it.

¹ *Highly Important Musical Instruments*, [auc. cat.] (London: Sotheby's, April 3, 1985), lot no. 134 [no auc. no.].

On the day of the auction, I resolutely returned to London, but immediately became apprehensive at the sight of the crowded hall, which was already buzzing with anticipation. Fortunately, most of these potential competitors quickly vanished after the sales of valuable string instruments were completed, and only a half a dozen or so were present when the Grenser & Wiesner came onto the block. A few minutes later on April 3, 1985, I became its owner. The bassoon immediately became an important partner in my musical life, and over the last thirty years I have had the great privilege of playing it in more than 1,500 orchestral, solo, and chamber music concerts in international venues.

To put that fortuitous moment in context: Although I had completed my studies on modern bassoon in 1981, I had already begun to slip into the other musical world of historical instrument performance. Before I graduated from the Musik-Akademie in Basel, I was a member of Sigiswald Kuijken's La Petite Bande, a period ensemble located in Belgium. It seemed clearly preferable and natural for me to play music on instruments appropriate to the period, and that same year I was overjoyed to be invited to join a newly-formed ensemble, the Orchestra of Eighteenth Century.² A thrilling and profound adventure began as we pursued a path leading from Bach and Rameau, on to Haydn and Mozart; in 1984 we presented our first performance of Beethoven's Symphony No. 1. At that time, it was very difficult to find a satisfactory classical bassoon and I bought and borrowed several, including an original English bassoon by Gerock and a French bassoon by Rust.³ They both had very serious intonation problems that I didn't know how to solve, and frustratingly, nothing else was available. The Grenser & Wiesner came into my life at a point of great urgency, and it joined me a few weeks later on a tour of ten concerts with Mozart's Symphony, K. 385 (*Haffner*) and his

² In 1981, Frans Brüggen and friends founded the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century, a period instrument orchestra made up of 55 specialists from over 20 countries, playing repertoire from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

³ Although period orchestras already existed in Europe dating from the 1950s and 60s, makers didn't start building usable copies of classical bassoons until well into the 1980s, necessitating the use of an original instrument, provided one was lucky enough to find something functional and in good condition.

Clarinet Concerto, which took us to Holland, Belgium, France, Italy, Portugal, and Switzerland. As the Grenser & Wiesner bassoon was in perfectly playable condition, the only essential tasks, aside from familiarizing myself with fingerings, were to construct appropriate reeds and have replicas made of the fragile original bocals to prevent putting them at risk through regular usage. The instrument's pleasing timbre, in particular, was often noted by colleagues in the following years. The collaboration between the two of us went well immediately, and I knew that I had been extremely lucky to find such an extraordinary partner.

Even though I was aware that the Grenser & Wiesner bassoon was a rare and valuable object and it was extremely rewarding to play it regularly, nothing propelled me to undertake any serious research about its background until I encountered Franz Berwald's *Septett für Klarinette, Fagott, Horn, Violine, Viola, Violoncello und Kontrabaß* in April 2000.⁴ This work had a range encompassing just over three octaves, up to c^2 , and although I found some solutions in endeavoring to play this note, the results were not entirely successful. At that point, I realized that the construction date of my bassoon from the Grenser workshop corresponded almost exactly with the date of the first Stockholm performance, in 1818, of the above-mentioned work by Berwald, and I began toying with the intriguing idea that my instrument might have already been used in concert for that composition. From then on, I was obsessed with this notion and proceeded with inquiries that led me to the name of the bassoonist who had first performed it. My research had begun.

⁴ Franz Berwald, 'Septett für Klarinette, Fagott, Horn, Violine, Viola, Violoncello und Kontrabaß', in Hans Eppstein (ed.), *Sämtliche Werke* (Monumenta Musicae Sueciae, 10; Cassel: Bärenreiter, 1985). See Eppstein's discussions in the Preface and Appendix. This work was initially performed in Stockholm on January 10, 1818 and repeated on December 7 the next year. It appeared in several versions, dating from 1817 and 1828. The recording submitted with this dissertation contains the final version from 1828.

The research

Playable period bassoons accompanied by bocals and reeds are extreme rarities, not to mention one in excellent condition and made by the highly reputable Grenser workshop in Dresden.⁵ A serious problem facing players and historical instrument makers today is the absence of two important components, original reeds and bocals; these fragile parts do not normally survive with an instrument but were miraculously intact here. My docARTES studies at Leiden University began with a historical inquiry about the Grenser & Wiesner bassoon and its parts, but my research then evolved towards an attempt to determine its context within the nineteenth-century bassoon repertoire in Sweden, resulting in a practical investigation of performance-related issues described below.

Connections to Sweden and Preumayr

As the address label on the instrument case suggested a destination in Stockholm, I wondered if the bassoon could have belonged to the nineteenth-century bassoon virtuoso Frans Preumayr, who had first performed Franz Berwald's *Septett* in 1818, and was the youngest brother of three musicians. Little was known about him previously, aside from his activities in the Royal Orchestra and concerts he played in Stockholm and London. He wrote a travel journal in Swedish during a European tour in 1829–30, of which only a partial transcription by musicologist Martin Tegen has been made; there is no published version. This valuable historical manuscript surfaced in Stockholm in the 1970s, and has inexplicably been neglected until now. One of my initial tasks was to discover if any information connecting Preumayr and

⁵ During the course of this study, another complete bassoon (here afterwards referred to as the “Vichy” Grenser) from the Dresden workshop surfaced stamped with “H. Grenser, Dresden” along with a pair of swords, dating it from 1797–1806 [see chapter 3, table 3.2, 74]. It was also preserved in its original case, which contained a second wing joint, two boxes of reeds and two bocals. Its excellent condition indicated that it has hardly ever been played; noteworthy are its rare ivory keys. The measurements of its parts proved to be very similar to my Grenser & Wiesner instrument; the reeds, however, were stamped by a maker active towards the latter part of the nineteenth century. The bassoon belongs to a private collection in Switzerland and I am most fortunate to have access to this second example.

my instrument (or its type) could be found there, and/or if I could identify any details about my bassoon's previous owner.

Investigating the figure of the virtuoso Preumayr, I discovered that not only Franz Berwald, but other composers in Sweden, such as Édouard Du Puy, Bernhard Henrik Crusell, and Eduard Brendler wrote solo and chamber music works for him, and that these have hardly, if ever, been performed with period instruments; modern players are also generally unfamiliar with many of the pieces belonging to this collection. Closer scrutiny revealed obvious reasons why historical bassoonists had not yet claimed them as their own: the range of most of these pieces was a full three-and-a-half octaves, stretching up to e_b^2 , well beyond the three octaves commonly used, and additionally coupled with virtuosic passagework. I was curious if performances of this virtuosic literature could actually be documented, and if so, by whom, where they took place, and the tenor of any public reactions.

Material and technical questions

Furthermore, questions about Preumayr's instrument remained open; a relevant point connected to performance of this extraordinary repertoire concerned determining if his choice of materials particularly favored high-register playing. These fundamental issues, together with other questions regarding technical matters, such as fingerings and physical approach, formed the basis of my practical research, and I set about identifying the means and methods that would best lead to an extended range.

Overview of chapters

Chapter 1 introduces the three Preumayr brothers, all musicians who emigrated from Germany to Sweden at the beginning of the nineteenth century, where King Gustav III had established a flourishing environment for the arts in the 1770s.⁶ The Kungliga Hovkapellet, or Royal

⁶ See chapter 1.

Orchestra in Stockholm, was one of the largest orchestras in Europe at the end of the eighteenth century, numbering over 50 musicians in 1787.⁷ The Preumayrs, who immigrated at the beginning of the 1800s, became prominent artists in the Swedish capital, appearing as soloists and chamber musicians, in addition to fulfilling their duties with the Royal Orchestra and on the opera stage.

Selected passages from Frans Preumayr's lengthy and unpublished *Reisejournal* serve to give an intimate portrait of him in chapter 2, as he reports on his meetings with musicians, comments upon performances, and describes how he experienced musical life in major European centres. By revealing the name of his bassoon maker as being Grenser, the answer to a major research question of this study was given, confirming my first hypothesis about Preumayr's instrument. He compared his Dresden instrument to those of his French colleagues, philosophizing about the substantial national differences he observed between quality of timbre of woodwind playing, also a subject of debate found in French concert critiques concerning Preumayr.

Part 1 of chapter 3 describes the dynasty of the Grenser woodwind builders and its strong links to musicians in the Royal Orchestra in Stockholm, including clarinettist and composer Bernhard Crusell, as well as to Frans Preumayr, providing evidence of this important connection. The popularity in Sweden of the famed makers in Dresden, one of the most important woodwind workshops in a tradition spanning over one hundred years, has been confirmed, mainly due to the large numbers of instruments located there.⁸ In part 2 of chapter 3, a detailed description is provided of the above-mentioned Grenser & Wiesner bassoon in my possession, which may be considered representative of the model preferred by Preumayr, with all its rare parts. Here the

⁷ Owe Ander, 'The Royal Court Orchestra in Stockholm 1772–1885', in Niels Martin Jensen and Franco Piperno (ed.), *The Opera Orchestra in 18th- and 19th-Century Europe* (2; Berlin: Berliner Wissenschafts-Verlag, 2008), 511–15. The size of the ensemble varied considerably over the next decades, but later stabilized again to about 50 members until into the twentieth century. Additionally: Kungliga Hovkapellet, <http://www.hovkapellet.com/om-orkestern/#english> [accessed April 20, 2015].

⁸ See chapter 3, figure 3.2.

dimensions of six original reeds are compared with examples found in previous historical reed surveys, offering valuable data for trials carried out and described in chapter 5.

Chapter 4 includes a brief investigation of nineteenth-century bassoon range, followed by a description of selected solo works composed for and performed by Preumayr. Examples taken from these works illustrate specific technical issues challenging period bassoonists, and are supplemented with performance details and biographical information about their composers.

The processes and experiences leading up to obtaining the three-and-a-half-octave range are summarized in chapter 5, where practical issues related to cane and reed construction, descriptions of different reed styles, and fingerings are outlined. While observing students and colleagues, it became apparent that physical positions and psychological mind-sets are equally significant factors influencing the realization of high-register playing; various examples are provided in short case studies.

The aim of this study was to discover information about the history of my Grenser & Wiesner bassoon, together with details about the virtuoso Frans Preumayr, and ultimately develop a practical approach leading towards performance of his singular repertoire. One limitation affecting researchers outside of Sweden is the fact that many sources concerning subjects associated with Preumayr and a nineteenth-century musical context are only available in Swedish; hopefully this will not remain so in the future. Many archives, libraries, museums and private holdings there contain accessible and intact collections that may offer even more and relevant data for continued research about this topic.

A recording of chamber music associated with Preumayr is a first on period instruments, and is included in this thesis. It is my sincere wish that the information and suggestions offered here will inspire period musicians to approach these relatively unknown works, eventually enlarging the modest collection of repertoire available for nineteenth-century instruments.

