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Giovanni Punto (1746-1803) Cor basse célèbre

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Giovanni Punto (1746-1803)

Cor Basse Célèbre



Figure 0.1
Portrait of Giovanni Punto, drawn by Charles-Nicholas Cochin and engraved by Simon Charles Miger, 1782

0. Fundamentals and principles

Octave Designation

The octave designation chart used in this thesis:

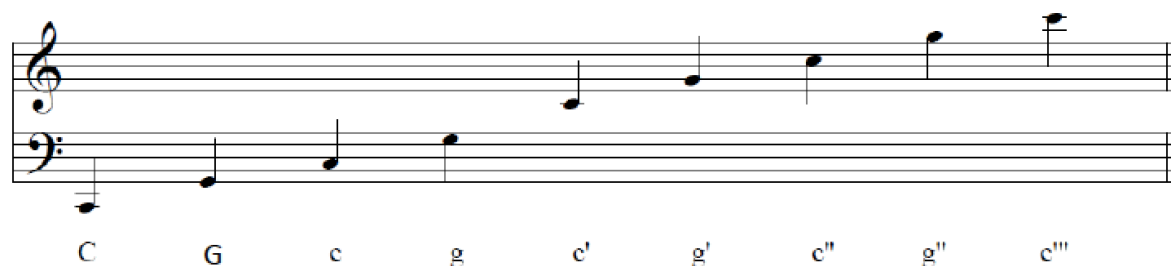


Figure 0.2
Octave designation chart

All pitches refer to written rather than sounding pitch, unless noted differently.

Harmonic Series

The Harmonic Series (figure 0.3) form the basis of any natural brass instrument. The flats and sharp in brackets indicate the natural pitch compared to well-tempered tuning; the 7th, 13th and 14th harmonics are a fraction too low; the 11th harmonic is a fraction too high. The partials are numbered according to their place in the series, rather than their position above the fundamental:

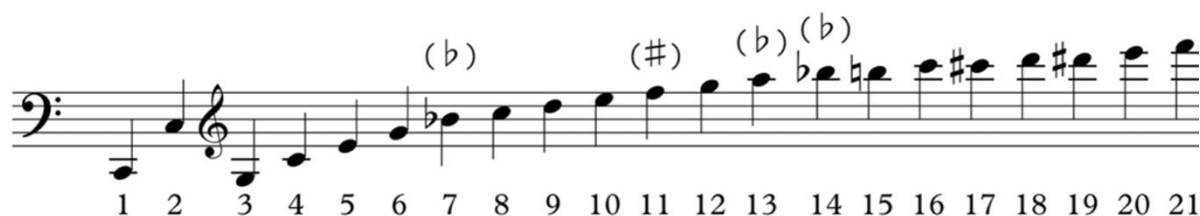


Figure 0.3
Harmonic series

Stich/Punto

The subject of this thesis was born Jan Václav Stich, used the German name Johan Wenzel Stich, and adopted the pseudonym Giovanni Punto at the beginning of his international career. Mixed forms and corruptions of these names also appear in sources. For the sake of clarity, I will only use the name Stich for the first period of his life, up to the escape: from then on, I will consistently switch to Punto.

The Horn

In retrospect, the horn was classified by type and era: the *hunting* horn, the *natural* horn, the *baroque* horn, the *classical* horn, the *hand* horn. I avoid those terms as much as possible to bypass the erroneous suggestion of standardization and strict dividing lines, and to indicate that the instrument was simply called horn at any point in history.

Crooks

A crook is a piece of tubing that can be added to or removed from the horn in order to change its length, and as a result the pitch. A different length gives a different fundamental and its corresponding harmonics. 18th century horn parts were almost always notated in C major. Composers indicated the key—the crook—at the top staff. For example, *Horn in F* means the horn player applies the F crook and can thus produce the overtones of the harmonic series of F, plus the non-partial harmonics derived from it. Notated C sounds like F. An important aspect of historical performance practice on the period horn is the palette of sound colors provided by all the different crooks. With any change of crook, in fact the instrument, with its characteristic features and timbre, is being altered. Each crook length requires a specific approach of embouchure, tongue, air flow, and hand technique.

Cor Alto and Cor Basse

As discussed in detail in chapter 2.2, horn players and composers in the 18th century made a clear distinction between the range and sound of the first and second horn, leading to the implementation of the terms cor alto and cor basse by Louis François Dauprat (1781-1868) in his 1824 horn tutor.¹ Throughout this thesis I use the terms alternately:

¹ Dauprat, L-F.: *Méthode de Cor-Alto et Cor-Basse, Part 1, 2 and 3*. Paris, 1824; 15

- 1st horn, high horn, or cor alto
- 2nd horn, low horn, or cor basse

Alto and Basso crooks

The terms alto and basso also have another meaning for horn players and 18th century composers. C and B \flat (sometimes also A) are the crooks that exist in 2 versions, alto and basso, each providing very different sound characteristics.

- *Horn in C-basso, or horn in low C*, is constructed by using the long C crook, resulting in sounding down an octave from notated pitch. The timbre is dark, like open strings on the cello.
- *Horn in B \flat -basso, or horn in low B \flat* , is constructed by applying the long B \flat crook (normally the low C crook plus a one tone coupler), sounding down a major ninth from notated pitch. The sound is dark and bronze, resembling open strings on the violone.
- *Horn in B \flat -alto, or horn in high B \flat* , means the horn player should apply the short B \flat crook, sounding down a whole tone from notated pitch. Bright sound, like a trumpet in B \flat .
- *Horn in C-alto, or horn in high C*, means the horn player must use the short C crook: notation coincides with concert pitch. Very bright sound, like a trumpet in C.

The Method and the Daily Exercises

During the 1790s, Punto published the *Seule et Vraie Méthode pour apprendre facilement les Éléments des Premier et Second Cors* (the only and true method to easily learn the elements of the first and the second horns)² and *Étude ou Exercice Journalier, Ouvrage Periodique pour le Cor* (Study or Daily Exercise, Periodic Work for the Horn).³

² Hampel, A.J. and Punto, G.: *Seule et Vraie Méthode pour apprendre facilement les Éléments des Premier et Second Cors, Composée par Hampl et perfectionnée par Punto (son élève)*. Paris, c1794, 3/1798

³ Punto, G.: *Étude ou Exercice Journalier, Ouvrage Periodique pour le Cor*. Paris, 1795

Both publications turned out to be crucial for my research. For reasons of readability, in my thesis I refer to those tutors as:

- *Seule et Vraie Méthode, Méthode, or Method.*
- *The Daily Exercises.*

Lip bending and hand stopping

Bending harmonics with lips and airflow has been practiced since at least the 17th century and is still used by brass players in the 21st century to make minor intonation corrections. Often the technique is applied unconsciously. Today, especially in jazz, brass players bend notes for special effects.⁴ In this thesis, the term lip bending refers to a technical skill enabling a player to correct the pitch of a partial (for instance the 11th harmonic that is too sharp, or the 13th harmonic that is too low), or to reach a pitch that is completely out of the harmonic series (factitious notes).

Although the term might suggest differently, the lip bending technique results in an alteration of the pitch that is immediate; the player then lands directly on the desired note.

During the 18th century, horn players developed hand stopping. Manipulating and bending harmonics by use of the hand in the bell is a technique still taught to today's valve horn players and used almost instinctively when correcting pitches.

The basics of hand stopping, or hand technique, are simple. If the hand (normally the right hand) is held inside the bell, it can assert control over timbre and pitch:

- Moving the hand slightly inwards makes the horn longer and lowers the pitch of a blown partial with about a semitone, if supported by lipping the pitch down. The sound will become veiled.

⁴ Campbell, M.: *Historically Informed Horn Playing in the Early Eighteenth Century Tradition*. Thesis, Sydney, 2019: 16

- Moving the hand outward has the opposite effect, and raises the pitch of the partial, but only up to about a quarter tone, if supported by lipping the pitch up. The resulting sound is bright.
- 'Stopping' the bell forcefully with the hand makes the horn shorter and raises the pitch of a blown partial with a semitone, if supported by strongly lipping the pitch up. The result is a blaring and brassy sound. (*Cuivré* in French, *Schmetternd* in German.)

In practice, the best result is obtained with a combination of lip bending and hand stopping. Generally, the lower the partial, the easier it is to be forced down with the lips and airstream, together with a little support of the hand in the bell. In this video I demonstrate lipping down the 2nd harmonic of E \flat (notated c) to the factitious notated G on an orchestral horn by Courtois Neveu Aînée, aided by a cor basse mouthpiece with an inner rim width of 19 mm.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IHwY3hKfkpl>

Embellishment and Improvisation

Embellishment and improvisation are terms I use to denote pitches played that are not written into the printed score, whether done spontaneously or prepared in advance.

Original French

While some of the quoted texts may be somewhat excruciating for the French speaking reader, I prefer to cite spelling and grammatical peculiarities without correcting mistakes.

It's fine to assemble the shards of a lost performance tradition, but how much better to reinvent it. Richard Taruskin.⁵

Introduction

As an active member of the early music movement since 1988, I have been extremely privileged to share the stage with wonderfully gifted natural horn players from all over the world. From 1999 onwards, I present masterclasses, and I have been teaching natural horn at the Conservatories of Amsterdam and Den Haag. With my colleagues and with my students I have always tried to emphasize the variety in sounds of our instruments and the diversity of our music making, fighting the modern idea of standardization. No two period horns sound the same. Moreover, the nature of the instrument itself is diverse, with the different crooks that all have their individual sound and character, and with the variety of timbres due to the subtle use of the right hand in the bell of the horn to manipulate tones outside the harmonic series.

The original claim of the early music movement, namely that of an Authentic Performance Practice, has become obsolete since early music performer and musicologist Richard Taruskin (1945-2022) disapproved it in his much-discussed essay *The Limits of Authenticity: A Contribution*, first published in 1984.

Many, if not most, of us who concern ourselves with “authentic” interpretation of music approach musical performance with the attitudes of textual critics, and fail to make the fundamental distinction between music as tones-in-motion and music as notes-on-page.⁶

The terminology commonly used today is 'Historically Informed Performance Practice', which leaves a healthy space for doubt and experimentation.

⁵ Taruskin, R.: 'On Letting the Music Speak for Itself: Some Reflections on Musicology and Performance' in: *The Journal of Musicology*, Vol. 1, No. 3, 1982; 343

⁶ Taruskin, R.: 'The Limits of Authenticity: A Contribution', revised version, in: *Text and Act, Essays on Music and Performance*. Oxford, 1995; 70

In the same article Taruskin advocates practicing on period instruments for the purpose of an alienation effect that forces one to approach the music more freshly, more direct, more attentive. The following quote perfectly summarizes what I experienced during my research:

Experiments based on historical research serve the same purpose for performers: they open their minds and ears to new experiences, and enable them to transcend their habitual, and therefor unconsidered, ways of hearing and thinking about the music.⁷

With the recognition of its achievements over the past decades, the danger of imitation and equalization is lurking, even within the originally progressive and idiosyncratic early music movement. To my reassurance, the debate about different types of horn in different regions and eras, the question whether the right hand was placed in the bell or not during a great deal of the 18th century, the search for historical mouthpieces, are all examples of ongoing research and debate in the ranks of sincerely interested period horn players, often leading to fascinating results on the stage.

In 1796, the *Jahrbuch der Tonkunst* (1796) in Vienna and Prague reported:⁸

In betracht der Menge seiner Töne, ist dieses Instrument arm, so viel reicher aber in seiner Wirkung, wegen der Rundung und Völle seiner Töne, und wegen seinem Bebeklang. Der Komponist, welcher das Horn gut zu nützen weis, kann merkwürdige Sensationen dadurch erregen: er kann nach belieben ausmalen (...)

(This instrument is poor in the quantity of its tones, but so much richer in its effect, because of the roundness and fullness of its tones, and because of its resonance. The composer who knows how to use the horn well can arouse remarkable sensations with it: he can paint as he pleases [...])

In our times the period horn is often considered an unruly, unpredictable instrument.

Conviction prevails among horn players that the simplest parts can only be executed at an acceptable level of accuracy on the natural horn with utmost control and lots of luck. I never accepted this negativism. Playing the colorful horn concertos of Haydn and Mozart, so full of character and shifting emotions, I just could not believe those should be performed with fear and tension.

I took full responsibility in my role as a natural horn performer and teacher when I decided to use the practical skills and the tacit knowledge I gained over many years, to study a

⁷ Ibid. 79

⁸ Schönfeld, J.F.: 'Horn' in: *Jahrbuch der Tonkunst von Wien und Prag*, 1796: 193-194

palette of historical playing techniques and sound related material issues, hopefully contributing to more heterogeneity in the concert halls. What better way to do this than an investigation into the equipment and playing style of a pivotal figure, one of the most celebrated eighteenth-century horn virtuosos, praised by Mozart and Beethoven?

The main questions of this research are:

What did horn virtuoso Giovanni Punto (1746-1803) sound like, and what elements of his playing potentially contribute to a more diverse treatment of the horn in our times?

What do his teaching materials, the reports about his performances and the fame he acquired among the famous composers Mozart and Beethoven contribute to our knowledge of the period horn?

I started my studies with a historical investigation of Punto's life and career, attempting to establish the context of a traveling virtuoso in the second half of 18th century Europe. Soon, the research evolved towards a practical, experimental investigation of performance-related issues.

To better understand the subject of my research, I put his *Méthode* and his *Daily Exercises* on my music stand and practiced both for many years.

By considering the *Method*, for the largest part a *theme and variations*, as a catalog of embellishments and improvisations, I hoped to achieve a looser, more spontaneous approach to written music of the same period.

Practicing on increasingly wide rimmed mouthpieces seemed the best way to discover and develop the sound characteristics and typical features of the low horn, the cor basse.

Chapter 1 starts with a description of the development of the horn in the years between 1680 and 1780, and places Punto in the center of those changes. In an overview of his life and its context it becomes clear Punto was a driving force in the dissemination of new playing techniques all over Europe, including London. There is not much verifiable information about the life of the virtuoso and some of the famous stories can be attributed to mythmaking. Some information based on hidden or lost documents nevertheless was considered. Non-verifiable information is not included, although it contributed to the legend of one of the first itinerant horn players, a key figure in the development of the instrument.

Both the *Method* and the *Daily Exercises* that Punto published in the 1790s are addressed in detail in chapter 2.

The investigation of the written information in these tutors, reveal almost forgotten aspects of playing the period horn, especially on the subject of diversified articulation.

At the end of chapter 2, I go deeper into the musical material and one of the most prominent aspects of the *Méthode*, embellishment. During Punto's lifetime, the second half of the eighteenth century, musical decoration was not only accepted, but also required of the performer. Punto's *method* proves that even the unruly horn, in the hands of the virtuoso player, is suitable for this defining aspect of performance practice.

Chapter 3 highlights a special way of adorning music for horn, with the use of multiphonics. A description of the extended technique, and the laws of nature that underlie it, is accompanied by some very scarce examples of written multiphonics from the time of and immediately after Punto.

In chapter 4, I explore Punto's influence on Ludwig van Beethoven. I will look specifically at 2nd horn solos in some of his orchestral works, trying to find evidence that the composer expected them to sound different from the 1st horn.

The sound and performance technique of the cor basse, Punto's specialty, is further described and explored in chapter 5 in relation to the musical works I recorded as part of this research project.

Analysis of the horn parts of one of Punto's horn concertos, and of sonatas by Beethoven, Danzi and Ries, serve as examples of the characteristics and the virtuosic use of the low horn between the 1770s and 1811.