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Cornetti e tromboni in the high Renaissance and Baroque

This review focuses on cornett and trombone ensembles or soloists because they are prominent in each of the CDs considered. The word 'sackbut', which is used ubiquitously in modern times to denote any pre-romantic trombone, is potentially misleading. Words of the 'sackbut' type were used in England, France and Hispanic countries before the late eighteenth century, but the instrument (which had most of its modern features by the late fifteenth century) was always called *trombone* in Italy and *Posaune* in German-speaking countries. The bore of the tubing was narrower, the terminal flare less pronounced and mouthpieces were appropriately sized, but otherwise it had much in common with some nineteenth- and early twentieth-century instruments. The important point here is that while reproductions of early trombones are of obvious importance, an understanding of the way they should be played is clear only because we now understand the sound and idiom of the cornett: the instrument with which it was most frequently paired. The rediscovery of the idiom of the cornett has been one of the great achievements of the period performance movement.

Even in the 1970s players were making important compromises: trumpet mouthpieces were often seen in cornetts, and trombone players took all manner of expediences to limit the distance between modern and period performance at a time when almost every player relied for the major part of his or her income on work played on the modern instrument.

This is no longer the case. The American cornettist Bruce Dickey and the group of students and other like-minded performers attracted to his cause have been especially influential. The sound world of the cornett/trombone ensemble makes musical sense only because the cornett is played well and its players are instinctively faithful to its conventions.

Each of the recordings reviewed here reveals fine, nuanced playing by knowledgeable experts. But a more interesting revelation is that while this corner of the early music world owes its development to the towering presence of a small group of brilliant players (many of whom have taught or been taught at the Schola Cantorum Basiliensis), it has not resulted in cloning. Put somewhat differently, the gratifying feature that emerges from a comparison of the recordings is the differences they reveal: differences that come from the stylistic and other musical preferences of the performers rather than the proclivities of recording engineers. These differences hint clearly and refreshingly at the various regional performance styles that must have prevailed in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

The cornett/trombone ensemble cannot be dated much earlier than the late 1530s, and the sources that suggest its existence before the seventeenth century are relatively thin. From the late fifteenth century both instruments were ubiquitous in European courts and civic groups such as waits and *Stadtpfeifer*, but the exact manner of their musical deployment is not consistently clear. Later in the sixteenth century, iconography, vivid narrative descriptions and the character of the repertoire with which the instruments were linked provide greater clarity and any remaining doubt is resolved by sources that describe practices throughout Europe, but particularly those of Venetian musicians. Performers attach canonical importance to the repertoire contained in Giovanni Gabrieli's *Sacrae*

Symphoniae of 1597 and the *Canzoni e sonate* of 1615. Three of the six CDs considered here are centred on this repertoire and the remaining three are but a few steps away from it.

The recording that probably set the standard for period instrument performance of this repertoire and was influential on ensemble performance for these instruments more generally was the 1990 recording of *Giovanni Gabrieli, Canzonas, Sonatas, Motets* (EMI CDC 7 54265 2) by the Taverner Players with Andrew Parrott. Here I should declare a minor interest. I played on that recording, but in mitigation I can say that I was but one of many, and several of the performers who are the subjects of this review were on those sessions too. The Taverner recording was important because it was one of the first major projects to draw on an international group of cornett and trombone players (still a relatively small number at that stage) and to be faithful to the sources. To my ears the Taverner CD continues to compare favourably, but the competition offered by some of these recordings is very strong.

Gabrieli Sacred Symphonies (CDA6957, rec 2012, 66') brings together two of Europe's major and pioneering cornett and trombone groups: Concerto Palatino and His Majesty's Sagbutts and Cornetts. On this recording they are joined by Ex Cathedra, and the whole is under the direction of Jeffrey Skidmore. It is an all-star line-up and does not disappoint. The recording ambience is just right and the playing consistently tasteful. It is a recording that is difficult to fault and the playing and singing is superb. The *cori spezzati* technique is not over-stated as it sometimes is in both live and recorded performances. It is also worth noting that John Wenham's liner notes are unlikely to be bettered as a brief introduction to this repertoire.

Also satisfying is **Giovanni Gabrieli: Sacrae Symphoniae** (ACC 24282, rec 2012, 61') in which the instrumental group Oltremontano is combined with the Gesualdo Consort of

Amsterdam. The director is the trombonist Wim Becu, who is also the subject of closer attention below. The ensemble playing in the *Sonata pian e forte* is superb, the tempo is well-judged, and the imitative voices avoid the forcefulness one sometimes hears in performances of this piece. Becu, like Skidmore on the Hyperion disc, wisely avoids the temptation to over-play the *cori spezzati* idea by concentrating on contrasts of timbre rather than less tasteful effects.

The other recording to give some focus to Giovanni Gabrieli is **Venise sur Garonne** (FLORA 3314, *rec* 2014, 79'). This features the French group Les Sacqueboutiers. Most of the pieces are drawn from the *Canzoni e Sonate* (1615). I found this CD particularly absorbing. It too contains superb performances and the recording ambience is well-judged, but the contrast it offers to the two discs previously mentioned is striking. Like Concerto Palatino and His Majesty's Sagbutts and Cornetts, this group has been together for a long time and includes some influential performers, especially the cornettist Jean-Pierre Canihac (who directed the recordings with Philippe Canguilhem) and the trombonist Daniel Lassalle. Les Sacqueboutiers has developed a distinctive sound and style. One struggles for words to describe it, but it is less restrained than other groups, often it favours slightly but discernibly faster tempos than others, and there is a tinge of brassiness at the edge of the trombone sound. In all, the approach is distinctively robust and unrestrained, but there are also moments of great subtlety, particularly in the cornett playing, which at one point brings vividly to mind Mersenne's famous description in *Harmonie Universelle* (1635) of cornett sound : 'like a ray of sunlight in the shadows when we hear it among the voices in cathedral churches or in the chapels'.

Giovanni Battista Fontana, Giovanni Gabrieli: Sonate & Canzone (ACC 24250, *rec* 2013, 78')

is performed by another French group, Le Concert Brisé, under the direction of the cornett player William Dongois. Here, works of Gabrieli are in the minority, with the greater number being taken from the collection of Fontana's works published in 1641 by Battista Reghino. It is indeed the Fontana pieces that draw the attention, mainly because they reveal something of the way the idiom of the instruments developed in the couple of decades after Gabrieli's death. Dongois himself plays beautifully as a soloist and in the smaller ensemble pieces with two trombones and continuo.

L'Arte dei Piffari: Cornetts and Sackbuts in Early Baroque Italy (PC10332, *rec* 2013/4, 63')

also features Dongois and some of the players named in the Le Concert Brisé recording, but here the group is labelled Ensemble Ventosum. The word is *Piffari* (sometimes given as *pifferi*) was used loosely at different times to mean a type of wind instrument and eventually any player in a wind band, or indeed a wind ensemble. They were commonly attached to Italian municipal authorities, but also to courts. The *pifferi del Doge*, was just one of at least seven such groups active in Venice in the late sixteenth century. One of the most detailed studies of a *piffari* is found in Frank D'Accone's *The Civic Muse: music and musicians in Siena during the middle ages and the Renaissance* (Chicago 1997) and it reveals how central such groups were to musical life in Italy. We know they were ubiquitous and that some were especially celebrated, but what exactly was their art? The liner notes do not really address this; in fact the word *piffari* isn't mentioned beyond the title line. There are eighteen pieces (two anonymous and the remainder by Italian sixteenth and seventeenth century composers). Most have two cornetts and up to four trombones, but there are some pieces for cornetts or trombones alone. Clearly the players are excellent, and some of the tracks are especially well played, but the ensemble is sometimes uneven and so is the

recording. Most pieces are transcriptions of vocal pieces; this, of course, is what one would expect, but I was not consistently convinced that the best idiomatic choices had been made.

The first two recordings mentioned in this review include in their ensembles the brilliant trombonist Wim Becu. His influence on the ensembles in which he plays can usually be easily discerned. **Trombone Grande: Music for bass sackbut around 1600** (ACC 24263, *rec* 2012, 66') features him as a soloist and again as director of his group Oltremontano. Becu is primarily a bass trombonist, but he also plays the tenor instrument. The tenor trombone had a nominal pitch of A and was the standard-sized trombone in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. It is this instrument that is illustrated in Virgiliano's unpublished *// Dolcimelo* (c.1600) which contains the earliest known diagram of trombone slide positions. But the bass instrument was also available in various nominal pitches and was probably used more often in mixed consorts than was the tenor instrument. The disc contains fifteen pieces by (mainly) Italian composers and it is interesting, educating and enjoyable. It includes the best performance I have heard of *La Hieronyma* of 1621 (here transposed down a fifth for the bass instrument) by the cornett player and composer Giovanni Martino Cesare, one of only two known solo works from the seventeenth century that is labelled for the trombone. The really interesting and enjoyable thing about Becu's playing is the sound he draws from the bass instrument. There is a phenomenon well known to music acousticians called 'brassiness'. It is a change of timbre that occurs at different dynamic and pitch points on brass instruments. It is probably most obviously noticeable when (for example) natural trumpets are played loudly high in their range; here the sound is shrill, but this is just one manifestation of it: the phenomenon occurs in different ways on brass instruments of different shapes and sizes. The early bass trombone is one of the

instruments where brassiness occurs on low notes at quiet dynamics. It is a very subtle and nuanced timbre: Becu's sound illustrates it perfectly.