Popular Oboes of the Mediterranean

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Throughout the Middle Ages and throughout Europe, the most important melodic instrument for all outdoor occasions and for all sorts of festivities was the shawm. In England it gave its name to the town band – they were known as the waits (a term which is still used for groups of carol singers who roam the streets singing at the Christmas season) for the shawm was the wait pipe – English wait derives from Mahgribi *ghaita* and Spanish *gaita* through the change from a guttural g to a throaty w. At Beverley Minster, a church which was the guild church for all the minstrels in the north of England in the Middle Ages, the only two musicians who wear swords are the two bombard or tenor shawm players. We assume that this is because they were the leaders of the band, not because the shawm makes so terrible a noise that they needed to defend themselves! The town band, which in Germany was called the *Stadtpfeiffer*, was an important organisation over much of Europe from the Middle Ages onwards, certainly into the seventeenth century and often much later. This is because, as well as playing music of all municipal occasions, and for many private functions such as weddings and so on, it often doubled as the watch, the precursors of the police, who patrolled the streets to guard against fire and theft. People expected to hear the watch, because this was proof that they were indeed patrolling and had not stopped somewhere for a drink or a sleep! How people tolerated shawms patrolling the streets all night, waking them up, I do not know, but there is evidence for this in many town records.

The mediaeval shawm had come from the East in the thirteenth century, brought both through Byzantium and into Spain from the Mahgrib. It was not a new discovery at that date, nor was it new to Europe.

The earliest trace that I have found is about 480 BCE among the Faliscans, a sub-tribe of the Etruscans in pre-Roman Italy. The normal wind instrument of this period was what the Greeks called the *aulos*, and the Romans later called the *tibia*. This was an instrument played in pairs, usually with a large double reed, and with a cylindrical bore, and therefore a fairly low pitched sound, somewhere in the lower to middle register of the clarinet, though its tone colour would have more closely resembled the sound of the *reclam de xirimìa* , if you are familiar with the sound of that instrument. The Faliscan version, however, appears to have had a conical bore. If this was so, the sound would therefore have been much higher and

much louder – compare in your minds the difference between the sound of the clarinet, or *reclam de xirimìa* and that of the *dolçaina* or *gralla*. We cannot be certain that the bore, the tube inside the instrument, was conical, but there seems little purpose in making the outside conical, and we can see that it was, unless the inside is conical, too. Think of the amount of wood that has to be turned or carved away to make the outside this shape – all wasted work and wasted wood unless the inside were the same shape. This becomes the more obvious with later Roman examples. Surely nobody would make the outside of an instrument this shape if the inside were a cylindrical bore – the internal bore must have followed the external shape.

Now comes one of the many frustrating gaps in trying to trace the early history of instruments. The shawm seems to vanish from Europe – I can find no illustration of it. So far I have found only one source between second-century Rome and thirteenth-century Byzantium. This was in Persia, among the later Sassanids, or their successors. It was, of course in Persia that many facets of classical culture of Greece and Rome survived, in both the arts and the sciences. In the eighth or ninth century, a silver vessel had embossed on its sides four instruments, all of them of considerable importance in organological history: on one side there is a lute and a Chinese mouthorgan. The shape of the lute seems to be a link between that of the Chinese *pipa* and the Arab and Mahgribi ‘ud, which was used also in 13th century Spain, for it shares characteristics of both; the Chinese mouthorgan does not reappear in European musicology until the end of the eighteenth century, when it became the ancestor of all our free-reed instruments, harmoniums, accordions, mouthorgans etc The other side of the vessel shows a harp, which became the typical harp of central and eastern Asia, and a shawm. These instruments show that the Silk Route, from China to Europe, was going srong in the Sassanid period!

So here is our link between the instrument of ancient Etruria and Rome, and that of the Middle Ages. It is also our link between the unknown and the known, for we have to admit that we know nothing whatever about the use of instruments in the ancient world of Etruria and Rome, nor about what sort of music they played nor even on what occasions. We know a great deal more about the mediaeval use. We know that shawms were used for dance music. We know that they were used by the town bands, the city minstrels, and thus we know that just as today they were used for festivities, ceremonies, street processions, and events of all sorts.

Now what happened to the shawm between second-century Rome and eighth to ninth

century Persia, and between then and thirteenth century Constantinople? The answer is quite easy – we don't know. OK, there are other Sassanid illustrations of the shawm, certainly from the sixth century onwards and certainly up to the tenth century. I've not yet found Byzantine evidence, but there probably will be some if one looks through enough Byzantine manuscripts; possibly some will turn up in Iberian Mozarabic manuscripts. Unfortunately most of these, certainly most that I have seen, illustrate either the Book of Daniel or the Apocalypse, and in neither of these texts is the shawm mentioned, and if it is not mentioned in the text, it does not get illustrated. Evidence from Islamic areas is more difficult because of the prohibitions against portrayals. However, there seems little doubt that it was there that it survived, just as there is little doubt over its dual route into Europe, as a souvenir brought home by returning Crusaders and as a standard instrument of the Muslims of Andaluz.

Thereafter, from the 13th century onwards, it became the instrument for all outdoor occasions – you have heard the Catalan *dolçaina* and the *gralla*, so you know why I specify outdoor – throughout Europe. There does always seem to have been some special Iberian involvement. One of the major uses of the shawm was in what was called the Alta Band, a combination of treble shawm, tenor shawm or bombard, and slide trumpet or later trombone. Most of the *basse danses*, which were the common music of the Alta Band, were improvised on a tenor, and one of the commonest tenors to be used for this purpose was *La Spagna*. One of the very few written-out examples is *La Danza Alta* by Francisco della Torre, I presume from his name someone from this part of the world. It is also a little way north of here that this combination, the Alta Band, still exists. The *sardana cobla* is now modernised. The *tiple* and the *tenora* are the most modern of all shawms, with similar keywork to that on the simple-system oboe, but they are still the treble and tenor shawm of the Alta Band. The brass have changed rather more, with the single trombone becoming a line-up of trumpets, flugel horns, and trombone, but then some mediæval illustrations show larger groups of shawms and brass instruments, and anyway some change can be expected over five or six hundred years!

The *tiple* and *tenora*, and the Alta Band, are not the only examples of the use of treble and tenor shawms together, and this style of performance is heard in many areas. A Macedonian pair in my collection is just one example from many. Macedonia was once part of the Ottoman Empire, an Empire which, at its greatest, stretched from its centre in Turkey to the gates of Vienna in one direction, and round the eastern Mediterranean to the Atlantic coast of

Morocco in the other. One of the many things that united this empire of many peoples and races was the use of the shawm.

Around 1500 Carpaccio painted the arrival of the Ottoman Turkish ambassadors to Venice with instruments that look so improbable and so unlike anything that one has ever seen that many of us assumed that these were a caricature, a Venetian painter trying to suggest the exotic, even the savage. However, when Laurence Picken published his great book on *The Folk Musical Instruments of Turkey* , there suddenly was an instrument that was recognisably what Carpaccio was painting. Obviously it was later than 1500, but how much later we do not know – Dr Picken suggests perhaps somewhere between 1700 and 1800.

It is an interesting instrument, a shawm carved and bored by hand. Most wind instruments are made by being turned on a lathe. The wood spins between two points, and a tool like a chisel removes wood evenly so that everything is smooth and exactly circular. This instrument is much simpler and perhaps it is a village version of the Ambassadors' instruments, and thus perhaps a survival of the early type of some two or three centuries before. Shaping the outside like this by hand is a laborious task, and takes long and hard work, but it is not difficult. Shaping the inside is different. If you have a cylindrical bore, a tube that is the same diameter all the way down, it is not so difficult. You can use a drill to make the hole, or even a piece of red-hot iron. The shawm, however, as I was saying earlier on with the Etruscan and Roman instruments, has a conical bore, and to shape this, one uses a tool called in English a reamer. This has a conical shape, exactly the same as that of the bore, and a sharp edge all the way along, not just at the point. One needs to have enough skill as a metal worker just to make the reamer exactly the same shape as the bore of the instrument before one starts to use the skills of a wood worker to make the instrument itself! It is the difficulty of making an accurate conical bore that explains why a modern orchestral oboe costs about twice as much as a clarinet.

It was somewhere in the Ottoman Empire that one man had the idea of making the cone only in the head of the instrument, and, except for the bell, the flared part on the end, which can easily be carved with a knife, either by hand or on the lathe, leaving the rest cylindrical, which is easy to make. The metal staple at the top, on which the reed is placed, is conical. There is then a cylindrical bore through the wood for five centimetres or so. Then comes a short step with a wider cylindrical bore. Then another step with a wider bore still. And then another step at the ends of the arms when we reach the full diameter of the bore.

Now you may say that this is not a cone – it is a series of steps, each one wider than the one before. However, a column of air is easily fooled, and cannot always tell the difference between a true cone and a stepped cone. A stepped cone would not be good enough for an oboe to take into the orchestra and play Beethoven or Albeniz, but it is quite good enough for a shawm. One can take a cylindrical tube and put a reed in it, and the sound is low-pitched and, if it will overblow to a higher register, it will jump a twelfth, an octave plus a fifth, exactly like a clarinet, which also has a cylindrical bore. But if you put three cylindrical bores together like a telescope, to make a stepped cone, the pitch is higher and, like an oboe or a shawm, it jumps up an octave. This has nothing to do with the type of reed, incidentally; it is solely a matter of bore shape. Conical bore reed instruments jump up octaves and have high, loud sounds: cylindrical bore reed instruments jump up twelfths and have lower, quieter sounds. A stepped cone like the fork in the top of the shawm produces an instrument that works just as well as Carpaccio's but is much easier to make.

This type of shawm, with this fork in the head, is used, still, over the whole area of what was the Ottoman Empire, from what we used to call Yugoslavia, through Turkey and the Near East, and round all the southern Mediterranean to Morocco.

However this idea never seems to have been copied in non-Ottoman Europe. Here we turn our shawms on the lathe, and we turn the bore conical with a reamer. In Italy the *ciaremella* is conical. Here in València the *dolçaina* is conical. In México, to which the shawm was taken by the Conquistadors, the *chirimía* is conical. To our north, the *gralla* is conical, and I am sure that there are other examples around the northern and western shores of the Mediterranean that I do not yet have in my own collection! Certainly all the more northern European shawms such as the Breton *bombarde* and all the shawms used in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance were and are lathe-turned conical.

Certainly, if we may spread our area further, there are many other shawms which derive from these of the Mediterranean. The eastern Ottoman instruments are mostly called *zurna*, *zurla*, *zamr*. From the same root as these names, though with the first consonant softened, the 'z' changing to 's', we have the *shah'nai* in India, whither it was taken by the Moghul invaders from Persia. We have the *sona* in China, which is the last stop on the Silk Route, the most famous of trade routes, which begins in the Near East on the shores of the Mediterranean. In Morocco we find *ghaita* as I was saying right at the beginning, and as well as the English wait-pipe which we saw then, we have *alghaita* in Nigeria and other areas

populated by the Hausa and the Fulani, for these peoples passed through the Mahgrib on their way from Central Asia into West Africa. Closer to us here in Valencia, we have in Galicia, the bagpipe *gaita gallega*.

For we must never forget that the bagpipe with a chanter of this conical shape is also a shawm, blown through a bag. In many parts of the world, the shawm is blown with circular breathing, breathing in through the nose at the same time as blowing out from the cheeks. This is a technique which is not difficult to learn. Children are taught with a straw and a glass of water; every time the bubbles stop, they get a slap on the ear, so that they learn quite quickly! The difficulty comes with keeping the air pressure steady, and thus the pitch, the tuning, steady. It takes time to learn to equalise the pressure from the cheeks with that from the diaphragm. Also, playing like this can be tiring, and it can cause distortion of the cheeks, which is why in Western Java, in Indonesia, the Sundanese shawm *tarompet* has curved wings to support the cheeks and prevent them ballooning-out too far. It is much less effort to put the shawm into a bag, and use the bag as a reservoir instead of the cheeks. There is then no problem about air pressure because this is controlled with the player's arm. The bagpipes, too, may have started on the shores of the Mediterranean, perhaps only a few miles and a few centuries from our first Etruscan shawm, for the earliest reference that we have to the bagpipe comes from Dio Chrysostom who, before the year 115 CE, referred to "a present-day king", who is taken to be the Roman Emperor Nero, as "playing the aulos both with his mouth, and also with the armpit, a bag being thrown under it, in order that he might escape the disfigurement of Athene" (ie the distended cheeks and so on). Whether this was really a bagpipe we cannot be absolutely certain, and as yet we have found no pictures or carvings of a bagpipe earlier than the thirteenth century, but it does seem very probable. The bagpipe, too, is, or was, for in some areas it has died out, used all round the Mediterranean, and indeed all over the world, sometimes by itself and sometimes as in Italy along with its ancestor, the shawm, as the *zampogna* and *pifa*, coming again here full circle, for this is the area which was once that of the Faliscans and the Etruscans.

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