

Sinister Dexterity

Jeremy Montagu

Why do we handle instruments the way that we do? The question came up as a query from Prof. Helen Rees of UCLA: ‘One thing that has puzzled me for some years is why European woodwind instruments developed to be played with the left hand at the top’, and she wondered whether I had any thoughts on this.

Thoughts I had indeed, but neither answers nor even logic. We batted emails to and fro for a couple of days and the more I thought about it, the less logic or reason there seemed to be. Certainly in the Middle Ages there was no uniformity. We can see, in the manuscripts, carvings, and so on, that some people were playing left over right and some were playing right over left. We see transverse flutes held either way, we see left-handed keyboards – Jack Schuman, a student of mine many years ago, wrote a whole article on left-handed organs in mediaeval manuscripts, both positives and portatives, and only a few years ago John Rawson exhibited one at the Early Music Exhibition in London (I can’t remember whether it was single manual harpsichord or a fortepiano).

One notable difference comes between harps and zithers. Harps have higher-pitched strings nearer the body, whereas zithers (psalteries, dulcimers, koto, etc) most often have the lower strings nearer the body, but on both of them the right hand usually take the higher parts, just as on keyboards. The fingerboard zithers, on the other hand, tend to have the treble strings nearer the body and the left hand controls the fingerboard while the right hand plucks the strings.

All the early woodwinds duplicated the little fingerhole where relevant; baroque oboes always had a forked C-key and duplicated the E flat key, the foot joint of the recorder and the traverso was rotatable for just that reason, and those earliest clarinets that had a long foot key, put it at the back for the lower thumb for the same reason. It was, in fact, the clarinet, once it had acquired two long foot keys around 1800, that decided things; it was not practicable to duplicate them and the lower thumb had enough to do to hold the instrument, and as more keys be-

gan to be added to oboe and flute they also all settled on lefthand above. All the same, I have seen a 13-key clarinet built for a left-hander, playing with righthand uppermost.

Our brass players are different. They used normally to hold natural trumpet or horn right-handed, though when there were two of each, one usually mirrored the other – e.g. the Sharp Family horns in the Bate are one left-handed and one right-handed, and a pair of vernacular Spanish trumpets in my collection (made by the local tinsmith or blacksmith for an indigent Don) also are made, one with the mouthyard to the right of the bell and the other to the left of it, so that the players would stand each side of the gateway. But as soon as the horn players hand-stopped they mostly held the horn in the left hand (there is a right-hand-held horn in the Bate) and hand-stopped with the right, and when valves were added, all save the horn players took the right hand to them. Horn players kept the right hand in the bell because some notes still need stopping. Trombonists took the slide in the right hand. Of course there are occasional exceptions to these examples – some early Italian valve horns had the valves on the right because the right hand had produced non-harmonic pitches with that hand and therefore went on doing so with valves. Why do brass players differ in this respect of using their right hands to select pitches whereas string players use their left? The string players came first so we need not ask why they differ from brass players.

With string instruments, before the fiddle bow came along, the left hand most usually was responsible for finding the notes, the right hand for plucking, then usually with a plectrum rather than complex work with fingers, and when the bow arrived things just stayed the same way. When finger plucking came in on the lute and cittern, with more complex passage-work, things still stayed the same, and perhaps right-hand dexterity came in useful there. But initially, it was the left hand that did the more important work, flying up and down the fingerboard, just as it is on the violin etc today – why?

Why are our soldiers drilled ‘Left, —, left, —, left, right, left’? I served in the army and I was always drilled that way. Thoinot Arbeau certainly worked that way, too. In his *Orchésographie* of 1546 he is very firm that the left foot leads and that the side drummer must emphasise that. Once I became a drummer, several

years later, I automatically set up the kit with the bass drum pedal for my left foot – I had been drilled that the left foot was on the strong beat so that’s why I did it that way, and if, as happened occasionally, I had to share the kit that was already set up, I was in difficulties, as was anyone who deputised for me. In England we have the low timp on the left – in Germany the low timp is on the right – why?

Is there any difference in required dexterity? The upper part of keyboard music seems to require rather more than bass parts – more often the melody lies up there and any variations of it and what we might call the flashy bits. How about the woodwind? Is there any difference between the lower three or four holes and the upper three and thumbhole? As Helen Rees points out, dealing with the thumbhole on the recorder is probably the trickiest, and that’s usually the left thumb. Pipe and tabor players seem always to have played the pipe in the left hand and the tabor with the right; I can’t remember ever seeing a mediaeval illustration the other way round, so that suggests some priority for the left hand even on the six-finger-plus woodwind. And for fiddle players, finding the notes probably needs a lot more finger dexterity than handling the bow, just as note finding needs more than string picking for the plucked instruments.

East African xylophone players share an instrument – one player on each side and a third on the uppermost notes, and they seem quite happy with one player playing left-handed and the other right-handed as it were.

On the whole, across the wider world, other cultures also share our left-right bias. Gamelan instruments are usually bass to the left, as are xylophones in both Africa and Asia. String instruments are bowed and plucked with the right hand and fingered with the left. Woodwind instruments are usually played left-hand uppermost, though there are exceptions with self-taught transverse flutes and shawms in China. On the whole, though, conservatoire-taught players are uniformly left above, and also in Japan.

So why does the left hand take this leading role when the majority of the population is right-handed?

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