

As Like as Two Peas
FoMRHIQ 92, July 1998, Comm. 1588

Alec Loretto says in a Comm also in this Q that ‘Some recorder bores of different makers are so incredibly similar that I wouldn’t be surprised if they were able to obtain pre-reamed blanks, even that many years ago.’ This reminded me of the following Comm which I started nearly fifteen years ago and for some reason never got round to finishing (though I have spoken of it to various people, hence the reference to its subject in the *New Langwill Index*). So I mentioned it to Alec and later the same day (the wonders of email), he encouraged me to put it in the same Q as his Comm, saying that he had also been mulling over this idea for quite a while but had never put it into print before.

What caught my eye, not long after we had acquired the Edgar Hunt Collection at the Bate, was the outside, not the inside of two of the recorders, but it produced exactly the same reaction as Alec’s: were there eighteenth-century makers turning out recorder blanks to the trade? It would not be surprising if there were. We know that there were eighteenth-century key makers, John Hale for instance; many instruments with other names on their bodies have keys whose undersides, where they can’t be seen unless you take them off the instrument, are stamped IH for John Hale and other marks for other makers. It is possible, of course, that IH meant that Hale had made and wholesaled the instrument itself, as he probably did my ‘Goulding’ six-key bassoon. Similarly Potter wholesaled flutes to Clementi, as did Prowse in the next century.

The two instruments concerned are rather earlier. One is the famous Bressan treble recorder, which has inspired so many modern copies, and the other is the Urquhart treble. Bressan is, of course, well-recorded as a maker (eg in the Talbot Manuscript – see Tony Baines in *GSJ I* – and by Maurice Byrne in *GSJ XXXVI*). Urquhart, on the other hand is a much darker horse, and nothing is known of him save that he made, or anyway sold, this and at least two other recorders, and one transverse flute. His name, and the use of a thistle on his stamp, have suggested a Scottish origin or domicile, but this may have some quite different reason, just as Bressan’s Tudor rose indicated his London address rather than a York or Lancaster origin.

Externally these two instruments are all-but identical. Save for two very small points, every detail of their turning, every ring, every groove, and every angle are not merely similar but identical, so much so that it would seem that one hand turned both of them on the same lathe and with the same tools. The two differences are, one in the radius of the curvature where the foot ring turns into the upward line of the foot; the other that the ivory ferrule over the socket of the head joint extends a couple of millimetres higher on the Bressan than it does on the Urquhart.

One day John Willman brought another Urquhart treble into the Bate, one that he was restoring for Gordon Saunders, so we compared all three. There were two slight differences of turning between the two Urquharts, and those two differences were those noted above: the Saunders Urquhart was identical with the Bressan, rather than with the Hunt Urquhart.

In finish the Hunt Urquhart and the Bressan are quite different [I am ashamed to say that at this distance of time I cannot remember the finish on the Saunders Urquhart]. The Bressan is plain stained box, the Urquhart is stained in the pattern sometimes called tiger-striped. The finished bores are also different. The Urquhart is a good average recorder, but the Bressan is one of the world’s wonders.

So who turned them? Were both Bressan and Urquhart trained by the same master (presumably in Bourg-en-Bresse, whence we know that Bressan came) whose training was so strict that both his pupils made every detail the same? Clearly not, for one thing such identity is impossible and for another there are many other Bressan recorders which are quite different in

such details. Did Bressan churn out blanks to the trade? Surely not, for the same reason. Did Urquhart do so, and finish and put his own VRQVHART stamp on a few of them? Perhaps. Or was there 'a little man', sitting in a small back-street workshop with a lathe, knocking them out for any maker who wished to save time by starting with a shaped body and a pilot bore. To me this seems the answer. I remember just after the War, before Birmingham was flattened by the planners far more disastrously than the Luftwaffe had ever managed to do, that one could get parts for pretty well any machine or object one wished in one back alley or another. Little workshops everywhere. And I'd be willing to bet that the eighteenth century was not so different.

Whoever he was, he was a master craftsman with an unerring eye for beauty of shape and curve. Perhaps we should follow the example of the art historians who have to give a name to the illuminator of a manuscript or the painter of a masterpiece, and refer to him as the Master of the Bressan Recorder.

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