Renaissance Instruments

Shawm

The shawm is a member of a double reed tradition traceable back to ancient Egypt and prominent in many cultures (the Turkish zurna, Chinese so-na, Javanese sruni, Hindu shehnai). The reed of the shawm is manipulated directly by the player's lips, allowing an extended range into a second octave and some dynamic flexibility, although often shawm players cultivated the instrument's loud, bright capabilities for outdoor playing. The shawm was combined with brass instruments to form the principal ensemble of the wind band in the 15th and 16th centuries and was played into the 17th century before giving rise in the 1660's in France to the Baroque oboe.

Sackbut

The sackbut is the direct ancestor of the modern trombone and, of all the Renaissance winds, the closest in appearance and sound to its modern descendent. Most likely a development from the earlier slide trumpet, the sackbut played a prominent role in both loud and soft ensembles in the Renaissance due largely to its wide dynamic flexibility and more than two-octave range. The word "sackbutt" probably derives from the Old French "sacqueboutee," meaning "push-pull." The Italians called it "trombone," meaning "large trumpet."

Dulcian

The dulcian, or bajón, as it was known in Spain, was developed somewhere in the second quarter of the 16th century, an attempt to create a bass reed instrument with a wide range but without the length of a bass shawm. This was accomplished by drilling a bore that doubled back on itself in the same piece of wood, producing an instrument effectively twice as long as the piece of wood that housed it and resulting in a sweeter and softer sound with greater dynamic flexibility. The dulcian provided the bass for brass and reed ensembles throughout its existence. During the 17th century, it became an important solo and continuo instrument and was played into the early 18th century, alongside the jointed bassoon which eventually displaced it.

Deutsche Schalmei

Our standard shawms are the ones modeled after 15th and 16th century originals, but these *Deutsche Schalmeien,* as they're called, are instruments developed later in the 16th century and played well into the 17th. Our two sopranos are pitched in C, a modification (away from the D-pitched soprano Renaissance shawm) moving toward the more standard 17th century consorts of instruments from which the modern oboe derives.

Recorder

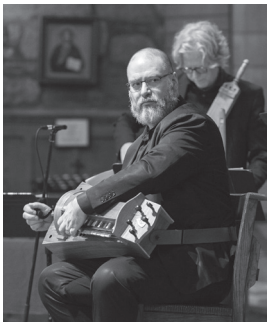
The recorder, probably dating to as early as the 14th century, is a whistle mouthpiece flute, a family with an ancient lineage found in most cultures throughout the world. By the second half of the 16th century the recorder family consisted of soprano, alto, tenor and bass. These instruments sound, however, an octave higher than the human voice of the same name. During the 16th century larger instruments called "great basses" were constructed allowing the tenor, bass, great bass and contra-bass recorders to perform music at vocal pitch. Renaissance recorders differ from their Baroque descendants in having a wide, cylindrical bore that favors the fundamental tones and limits the range to an octave and a sixth.

Lute

The lute was one of the most aristocratic instruments of Renaissance Europe, and court lutenists were held in great esteem. The lute had its origins in the Arabic Ud, and was probably introduced to Europe by the Moors. It is distinguished by its pear shape and characteristic rounded back, which is made of strips of wood glued together over a mold. The lute is strung in pairs of gut strings called courses, with a single top string known as the chanterelle, or "singing string.."

Flute

The Renaissance flute and the recorder were both called "flutes" in the Renaissance, the former often referred to as the "transverse flute" to distinguish it from the recorder. The Renaissance flute was often paired with other soft instruments, voices, or in consort with other flutes. Its very narrow bore and small finger holes make it a delicate and difficult instrument to master. Flutes came in descant, tenor, and bass sizes, and pictorial evidence seems to show the tenor being the most commonly played. The flute has a range of over two octaves, a much wider range than that of the recorder.



Hurdy-Gurdy

Aside from the organ, the hurdy-gurdy is the earliest of all mechanical instruments, both in the method of sound production and in the way the melody is produced. One hand turns a crank which revolves a wheel that vibrates the strings, and the other hand presses keys that push up against one of the strings, producing the notes of the melody. The untouched strings provide a drone. The hurdy-gurdy was generally associated, except for a brief elevation of status in the 18th century, with the lower classes. Illustrations often depicted blind hurdy-gurdy beggars, and it was thought most suitable as an accompaniment to dancing and the singing of ballads.

Organ

The "chest" or "continuo" organ is a small, portable cousin of the grander pipe organ. It is mainly used to accompany singers or other instruments, as a basso continuo instrument, or simply as a less expensive, portable alternative to a large, stationary organ. Like any organ, it consists of three primary components: a device which creates wind (usually a bellows), a chest of pipes, and a keyboard which directs the wind to those pipes. This organ has a single manual and a range of four octaves.

Krumhorn

The krumhorn, or "curved horn," had a brief though illustrious existence in the Renaissance, originating in the third quarter of the 15th century. As a testament to its popularity, it was found throughout Europe during the Renaissance before it became all but extinct by the middle of the 17th c. Its distinctive buzzing sound is produced by a double reed underneath a wooden cap into which the player blows. The player cannot manipulate the reed with his lips which limits the instrument's range to an octave and a second and disallows any dynamic flexibility.

BAGPIPES

The concept of inserting a reed into an airtight bag above a simple pipe is an old one, used in ancient Sumeria and Greece, and found in almost every culture since then. With a bag and separate blowpipe, the bagpipe can create a continuous sound. The bag acts as a reservoir, squeezed only when the player needs to take a breath. Many of the civic and court wind bands of the 15th and early 16th centuries include listings for a bagpipe or two, but later they became the provenance of peasants, used for dances and festivities. The bagpiper could be a one-person Renaissance band but frequently joined other bagpipers or a soprano shawm player.

THEORBO

By the end of the 16th century, the invention of opera and the desire for a more bass-heavy lute brought about the creation of the theorbo (or chittarone - "big guitar"). In the 17th and into the 18th centuries, the theorbo played a vital role as an accompanying instrument. It was one of the standard basso continuo instruments used in opera productions, along with organ, harpsichord, and harp. One half of the theorbo functions much like a big lute, played with frets, and the other half consists of strings strung over a very long neck, continuing the scale downwards.

CITTERN

The cittern is strung with wire instead of the gut strings of the lute. It is played with a plectrum, and this combination of wire and pick give it a harpsichord- or banjo-like quality. Through the early 17th century, the cittern was a solo instrument and a member of the English mixed consort; it was also an instrument well-suited for amateur music-making (it was commonly found hanging on barber shop walls). By the middle of the century, most source information from England has the cittern restrung, plucked with the fingers, and playing mostly popular music.