

PART TWO

Early Instruments

In Modern Reconstructions

XI

INTRODUCTION

TO

EARLY

INSTRUMENTS

The distinction must be drawn at the outset between early instruments as they *were* and as they *are*. Although standards of authenticity are continually rising, it is doubtful that modern reproductions will ever altogether give up modern materials or be built in numbers proportional to their historical use. The harpsichord, for example, was for most of its history a four-octave instrument with only one or two ranks of strings, but it is unlikely that such instruments will ever form more than a minority of modern harpsichords or that plastic quills will ever be abandoned in favor of authentic crow feathers. Furthermore, modern “early” instruments come with far fewer variants than their historical models. This is particularly true of medieval instruments, of which historically there were probably no two exactly alike.

Performers of early music will find in this chapter a practical guide to the instrumentation of that music, which its composers have left indeterminate, but in general we are concerned here not with the history of instruments or instrumentation but only with modern forms and uses. The instruments here discussed are *modern* copies, used in modern realizations of early music and also, increasingly, for *new* compositions. Once the old instruments were reintroduced, it was inevitable that composers would start to put them to new uses. Part Two of this book is therefore largely aimed at the composer and arranger, not the scholar and historian. It is important to remember that the instruments are here described in their modern state: for example, not one of the woodwind fingering charts in Chapter XII agrees in every particular with historical fingering patterns.

Many early instruments never had music written specifically “for” them, so it is impossible to cite specific musical examples of their use. Readers are urged to consult one of the recorded guides to medieval and Renaissance instruments in order to learn the sounds of the

individual instruments, and then to listen to some appropriately performed ensemble music, chansons, or the like to hear how those instruments fit into a musical context.

As the current early-music boom continues it is virtually certain that all these instruments will be made in ever-more-authentic versions and in forms representing all stages of their histories. It is just as certain that they will all rapidly become more widely available, especially those here designated "rare" or "very rare."

Finally, let it be observed that the special effects described for these instruments, as well as most of the wind-instrument "extension" ranges, are for the benefit of modern composers and are *not* to be used in performances of early music. It has proven impossible for me completely to delineate all the special effects of which these instruments are capable; much experimentation remains to be done. The upward extension ranges for strings mostly reflect individual instrumental differences in number of frets and/or length of fingerboard.

It is customary in speaking of early instruments to use a three-tiered system: Renaissance, Baroque, modern. This terminology is deceptive, in that the instruments do not in fact coincide with the musical periods in any pat way. With the important exception of the violins and viols, "Baroque" instruments belong not to the Baroque period as such (1600–1750), but to the eighteenth century, including the Classic period: the stretch from 1660 to 1715 saw the first appearance of the "Baroque" forms of flute, recorder, oboe, bassoon, rackett, horn, harpsichord, clarinet, and piano, and all but recorder and rackett were still being used in very similar forms in 1800.

The Baroque forms shade off gradually into the modern, of which they are direct ancestors. This book ignores the Baroque flute, oboe, bassoon, organ, brass, and percussion (as well as the early clarinet and piano) as being too much like their modern descendants to be of much interest to composers. It also ignores such early instruments as tromba marina and panpipes, which were probably never used in any serious musical context.

INSTRUMENTATION OF EARLY MUSIC

The instrumentation of early music is left to custom and to the performers. Not every possible choice is historically believable, musically viable, or in good taste, and the following is an attempt to provide some general guidelines. Of necessity in a book of this sort, the presentation can be neither very scholarly nor completely exhaustive; it is, however, a reliable practical guide for the vast majority of the music of the period, based on the best current understanding of the practice of those times.

Above all it is necessary to avoid anachronism. For each instrument discussed in the following chapters, approximate dates are given for its appearance and disappearance from Western art music. Note that these are not dates of invention and extinction. Many instruments spent their earliest or latest days either as folk instruments or as amateur household items, with no more relevance to the art music of their time than the ukulele, autoharp, and bugle have today.

Gregorian chant. The division of this music into solo and choral chants is well understood and widely documented. Women's voices would have been used only in convents, and then only sometimes. Only three instruments are known to have been accepted in medieval churches: the organ, the organistrum, and small sets of bells. All should be used sparingly

and conservatively in this repertoire, the organ and organistrum in strict unison with the chant. The use of bells should be strictly colotomic, marking off phrases or verses with a single stroke. Bells are specified in certain liturgical contexts, particularly in the Sarum rite, and to be on the safe side they should probably be used only in those places. Reasonable pitch choices would be to double the pitch sung at the moment when the bell is rung or to ring the final or dominant note of the mode of the chant.

Secular monophony. Any and all instruments of the time* may be used in heterophonic accompaniment of the sung line. The melody is sung by a soloist, though occasionally two people may sing in dialogue. It is probably unwise to use more than four or five instruments in such a song.

Medieval dances. Any combination of instruments may be used. Monophonic dances should be performed heterophonically.

Early organum. Performed by two solo male singers, unaccompanied.

Notre Dame organum. The *tenor* is sung by a small number of singers, massed or *alternatim*, with or without organ or organistrum doubling. The duplum and (if present) triplum and quadruplum are solo lines. Male voices only.

Polyphonic conductus. Solo male voices (*not* choral). Instruments *may* double discretely. Avoid percussion and drones.

Motets (thirteenth century). Each line may be taken by any *solo* male voice or instrument of the appropriate pitch, or by voice and instrument in unison or at the octave. "Normal" practice is to sing all texted parts (with or without instrumental doubling) and use instruments for untexted lines. If an untexted line is sung, solmization syllables are used. Instruments should be of contrasting timbres. Shifting or changing instrumentation in mid-stream is generally not in good taste, nor is the use of percussion or drones.

Polyphonic songs (to 1450). Same as thirteenth-century motets.

Mass movements, etc., before 1400. *Solo male voices only*, possibly with organ doubling. This includes Machaut's *Messe de Notre Dame*. The earliest composer whose liturgical polyphony may legitimately be sung chorally is Ciconia.

Motets (fourteenth century). Solo male voices. Untexted *tenor* may be played or sung. Discrete instrumental doubling of other lines acceptable. Avoid drones and percussion. Do not shift or change instruments during the course of a piece.

Abstract instrumental music (to 1450). Heterogeneous ensembles, usually one to a part. No percussion or drones. If octave transposition is used, all lines must generally be treated the same; do not, e.g., read one line at 4' while others are at 8'.

Renaissance masses, motets, mass movements, etc. (except those of Spain, Northern Italy, and Southern Germany). Small chorus (men and boys) *a capella*. *A capella* repertoire may legitimately be performed by a "whole" (unbroken) instrumental consort, but not *together* with voices or in broken consorts. Such mixed ensembles were occasionally used at the time but do not represent the best practice, as the music is certainly not conceived for mixed timbres.

Instrumental ensemble music, 1450–1520. Generally one to a part, and without changes during the course of a piece. Mixed timbres still usual, but they should be chosen to blend well with each other, and "whole" consorts are generally acceptable. Keyboards and other chordal instruments may play continuo-like chord progressions. Percussion should be

* Except the large and positive organs, which were found only in churches.

used only in dance music, and there only occasionally, for boisterous numbers. The fifteenth-century *basse danse* repertoire was typically played by an ensemble of two shawms and slide trumpet, the latter taking the *cantus firmus*. In non-dance instrumental music, voices may take any or all of the lines, using solfège syllables.

Chansons, 1450–1520. These differ from earlier songs in that instruments should blend well with each other and with voices. No percussion.

Frottole. As above. If there is only one singer, (s)he should take the superius, the other parts going to instruments.

Instrumental ensemble music, 1520–1600. The standard is to use “whole” consorts of instruments from the same family, though this is not absolutely inflexible. Cornetts and sackbutts consort together. The curtal can be used as the bass for any group of winds. Polychoral pieces should use contrasting consorts in each choir. A piece may be played by a 4' or 16' consort, if that is found to work musically, but do not perform at 2' or 32'.

For particularly splendid performances, especially of Northern Italian or Southern German repertoire, double consorts (unison or octave) may be used and may even alternate to create terraced dynamic effects. In that same repertoire, especially toward the end of the century, a keyboard or plucked string instrument may be added to each choir in a *basso seguente* role and the bass line may be reinforced.

English ensemble music of this period is almost all conceived for viol consort, though other whole consorts may be used instead.

Shawms, schryari, rauschpfeiffen (all of which consort together and with brasses), as well as citterns and rebecs, should be reserved for dances and other music of distinctly popular character. Percussion should be added only to boisterous dance performances.

Abstract ensemble music (canzone, ricercare, fantasias, In Nomines) may be *sung*, using solfège syllables.

Part-songs, 1520–1600. Generally *a capella*, and one to a part. Women's voices are accepted in this repertoire at least by the end of the century and probably much earlier. Those madrigals and other part-songs intended for festival or ceremonial use were performed chorally, sometimes with instrumental reinforcement. English madrigals may if desired be accompanied by lute and/or bass viol or curtal.

Masses, motets, etc., in Northern Italy, Southern Germany, and Spain. The “Venetian” style of Northern Italy and Southern Germany allows, even favors, the use of instruments in sacred choral works. Starting roughly with the works of Lassus and Andrea Gabrieli, instruments may be used in any polychoral work (except those of expressly penitential or sombre character), and in single-choir works intended for festive or pompous occasions.

Each choir should be assigned to either voices or instruments, though individual vocal lines or an entire vocal choir may be instrumentally doubled if this seems appropriate. The choirs should be balanced in loudness unless contrasting dynamic effects seem clearly intended. Instrumental choirs may be composed of mixed groups of instruments, but all those in one choir should be of basically similar sound and volume. Non-sustaining instruments should be used only to double a part already assigned to a sustaining instrument or voice. All parts of one, several, or all choirs should be doubled by one or two organs as a *basso seguente*, and any or all bass lines instrumentally reinforced—particularly by curtal or sackbutt. No percussion, citterns, or loud reeds (shawms, etc.) should be employed.

Spanish church music of the period used instruments in a somewhat different fashion. Here all parts should be sung and instruments be used only to double, but the instruments

most frequently used were a flamboyant ensemble of sackbutts and shawms. Even quiet or subdued works would be likely to have a curtal doubling the bass line.

Early keyboard music. Many pieces specify the instrument required, or it is possible to deduce this from external or internal evidence. Where this is not the case, the piece may legitimately be played on any keyboard instrument of the time. Pieces with a sacred *cantus firmus* are almost always intended for organ. Baroque works based on dances are for any keyboard *except* the organ; however, earlier pieces of this type might well be played on regal or chamber organ.

Continuo lines: orchestral. The bass line is played by a section of cellos doubled at 16' by a section of contrabasses.* Whenever reeds or brass are playing, a bassoon should be added to the continuo—even if there is a separate obbligato bassoon part—for the duration of the passage in question. The bassoon alone accompanies reeds or brass *solis*.

In concertos the *solis* passages are accompanied by a single cello on the bass line; thus also in recitative.

The chord instrument should be organ for sacred works and any others intended for church performance and harpsichord in all other cases.

Continuo lines: non-orchestral. The bass instrument should usually be of the same family as the melody instrument(s): bassoon for oboe, cello for violin, etc. For flutes use gamba, for recorders use gamba or (prior to about 1720) bass recorder at 4' pitch. For low-pitched solo instruments (bass voice, viola, cello, bassoon) a contrabass at 16' may be an appropriate continuo bass. For cornetts or horns use cello or curtal (later bassoon) continuo.

Choral sections of sacred vocal works may be supported by curtal (= bassoon), sackbutt (= trombone) or (in French works) serpent. The sackbutt (together with regal) is also used as continuo for demonic or underworld characters in early operas, and perhaps to support an ensemble containing obbligato sackbutt parts. Solo voices, where no obbligato instruments are present to give a clue, should be supported by cello or gamba on the bass line.

Pre-orchestral operas and related genres (monodies, sacred concerti, etc.) use a great variety of chord instruments. The various continuo-lutes were most popular, but harpsichord, positive organ, harp, and bandora were also used; the regal was used with sackbutt in demonic and underworld scenes. Harpsichord is favored for instrumental chamber combinations. After about 1660 the harpsichord is preferred for all secular music, the organ for sacred. The lute remains, up to about 1720, the traditional accompaniment for solo voices in pieces containing no obbligato instrumental lines beyond the continuo.

It is not absolutely necessary to use two instruments on the continuo line, but the use of a single instrument should be sparing and well-motivated musically. The single instruments best adapted to complete continuo playing are the continuo lutes (which can bring out the bass line on their own) and the gamba (which can to a certain extent play chords).

* If an obbligato cello line has been written, only contrabasses play the continuo.

POSITION OF EARLY INSTRUMENTS IN MODERN SCORES

There is of course no standard arrangement, but the old instruments should be kept near their modern counterparts.

The following order is suggested:

recorders
flutes
shawms
oboes
rauschpfeiffen
schryari
crumhorns, kortholt, etc.
clarinets
saxophones
racketts, sordunes
curtals
bassoons
cornetti
brass
percussion
keyboard idiophones

piano
clavichord
harpsichord
organ
dulcimer
psaltery
harp
lyres
citterns
lutes
guitars
viols
rebecs
fiddle
liras
viola d'amore, baryton
violins
hurdy-gurdies