

A Brief History of the Recorder Orchestra

by
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Through the first half of the 17th century recorders were generally constructed in one piece and built in sets, each set with its own particular pitch. This makes it quite likely that only one recorder per part was ever used up to that point. The breakthrough that made the recorder orchestra possible was the introduction of tuning joints around the middle of that century, allowing several instruments of the same size to play at a single pitch since pitch was now adjustable. The first evidence of multiple recorders per part can be found in the Boismortier Concertos Op. 15 published in 1727 and the “Introduzione” found in Telemann’s *Der getreue Music-Meister* of 1728. Both works have “solo” (“soli”) and “tutti” markings in the parts indicating that more than one instrument was intended. In the “Introduzione” Telemann specifies alto recorders and shows how the written flute parts can be transposed to fit the recorder’s range. Boismortier is not as specific, but the transposition Telemann calls for was by then an established practice making Boismortier’s Concertos playable on recorders as well as flutes. During the 18th century recorders came in several sizes from soprano to bass, but there is no information as to whether a full consort of recorders (SATB) was ever employed. Given the existence of these various sizes, particularly the bass, it would seem likely that they were at times used in full consort, perhaps with more than one instrument per part, even though there is no documentation.

After being little used for roughly 150 years, there was a renewed interest in the recorder at the turn of the 20th century. Arnold Dolmetsch began making recorders around 1919 and introduced a full consort at the Haslemere Festival in 1926. This laid the groundwork for the recorder orchestra since the instrument was now being produced in sizes from soprano to bass and was on a par with other instrument families capable of forming a complete ensemble. After 1926, recorders began to be massed produced to satisfy the growing demand for the instrument in music education, and around 1930 Ferdinand Enke directed performances of a recorder choir at the Volksmusikschule in Germany. In 1937 The Society of Recorder Players was formed in England followed by the American Recorder Society in the United States in 1939. Because of the increasing use of the recorder during the 1930s for classroom education, massed recreational playing and as a “choral” instrument, the practice of employing more than one recorder on a single part gained acceptance and began to be viewed as a distinctive sound in its own right.

In 1947, Rudolf Barthel formed the Blockflötenchor Neukölln (now Das Blockflötenorchester Neukölln). This was the first permanent organization dedicated to performing music using an ensemble of recorders. It was also after World War II that the first modern compositions intended for a relatively large number of recorders appear. These include Barthel’s *Neuköllner Suite* (1947) as well as Benjamin Britten’s *Scherzo* (1955) and *Noyes Fludde* (1957). At the same time, recorders of high quality, notably those produced by Carl Dolmetsch, were becoming readily available, thus improving the intonation and tone quality of the instrument, and the bass recorder was becoming more commonplace. Despite the success of the Blockflötenchor Neukölln and growing popularity of the recorder during the 1950s, playing recorders in large groups was primarily an ad hoc affair.

This situation changed during the 1960s with the beginning of the recorder orchestra movement. In 1962 William Barnhart formed the Mid-Peninsula Recorder Orchestra. Performing regularly from its inception, this was the first organization of its kind to call itself a “recorder orchestra.” This was followed by the formation of the Blokfluitensemble Praetorius in 1964. The 1960s also saw the production of recorders of exceptional quality, notably those of Friedrich von Huene, that matched or surpassed surviving historical instruments as well as the appearance of professional recorder soloists. As a result, the recorder was regarded more and more as a legitimate musical instrument thus increasing its popularity and the overall level at which it was played. Great bass recorders, a staple of the recorder orchestra, became increasingly available during this decade as well.

The recorder continued to proliferate during the 1970s aided by the increasing interest in historical musical performance practice, and by 1979 at least two new recorder orchestras had been formed. It was also during this decade that a cadre of young professional musicians who were trained in the recorder appeared, and they were to become the teachers and directors of those playing in recorder orchestras for decades to come. In 1973, Dennis Bamforth devised an orchestral grouping of recorders that was to serve as a model for future recorder orchestras in England. This eventually led to the “English formula” whereby recorders from soprano to contrabass were usually divided into eleven sections with a specified number of instruments on each part. The 1970s also saw an increasing number of modern compositions written specifically for recorder orchestra. During the 1980s at least five new recorder orchestras were created and contrabass recorders became more available. During the 1990s published compositions and arrangements specifically for recorder orchestra increased significantly. At least eleven new recorder orchestras were created during that period, and it was becoming clear that the number had been growing more or less geometrically since World War II.

This was confirmed between 2000 and 2009 when no less than thirty-one new recorder orchestras came into existence. During this time, more recorder orchestras added sub great bass and subcontrabass recorders to their ensembles, and there was greater experimentation with incorporating instruments other than recorders. As the decade progressed, the recorder orchestra became an ever more important part of the overall recorder environment as well as an increasingly specialized branch of recorder playing, performance and repertoire. This was recognized as early as 2002 when a panel discussion devoted to the subject of the recorder orchestra was presented at the Berkeley Festival & Exhibition. By the end of the decade the recorder orchestra was being viewed by many as an essential part of the recorder’s future and one that could increase its popularity, overall level of playing and artistic possibilities.

As of mid-2012 there are at least fifty-five established recorder orchestras in eleven countries throughout the world. One came into existence in 2011 and another is now in formation. That the recorder orchestra has come to play a significant role in the present and future state of the instrument is reflected by the inclusion of two sessions that will explore this subject at the American Recorder Society 2012 Festival. Hopefully, these sessions will lead to a better understanding of what a recorder orchestra is, a more complete account of its history and a conception of how it needs to develop in the future.