

HOW DO THEY STAND UP?

Three recorder professionals test three plastic recorders

Recorder players in this country, especially those just beginning, are blessed with a choice of at least three plastic altos of modest cost whose designs reflect an attempt to capture historical qualities in a modern, A-440 instrument. One is a model made by the Zen-On company, originally designed by Friedrich von Huene in the style of the maker Peter Jaillard Bressan, who worked in England from 1685 to 1731. Next is the Yamaha Rottenburgh, adapting the principles of the maker Jean-Hyacinth Rottenburgh, who lived in Brussels from 1672 to 1765. Most recently, the Aulos brand introduced a model based on the instruments of Richard Haka, a Dutch builder who lived from 1646 to 1705.

What separates these instruments from lesser plastic models, really, is their aspiration to be admired as concert instruments. While no professional is likely to replace his or her best hand-crafted wooden instruments for one in plastic, it is not unusual, under certain circumstances, to see professional recorder players using a plastic instrument in performance. Of course, none of these "historical" models plays at A-415, and this limits their suitability in "historically informed" performances.

Previous evaluations of plastic recorders in AR have concentrated on detailed

graphical analysis of each instrument's tuning, using mechanical blowing equipment. They were conducted on a wide range of models, from school instruments to concert instruments, without reference to the specific uses for which they were intended. This time, three instruments of similar purpose are put in the hands of three young professional recorder players in California—Marilyn Boenau, Frances Blaker, and Judith Linsenberg—to test them out as they would test any fine instrument, employing the instruments in musical selections and sharing subjective observations with the reader openly, just as they were made. Of course, as we listen in, we should keep in mind that the most expensive of these instruments, a wood-grain version of the Zen-On (this finish was not available to the testers, however), is only \$50. In many teachers' minds, the next step is a big one: to wooden instruments costing \$300 or more.

Boenau: We have four Yamaha Rottenburghs, two Zen-On Bressans, and two Aulos Hakas, one of them in a wood-grain finish. Why don't we start with a Yamaha?

Blaker: (Plays an arpeggio, repeating a few low notes.) I think it's nice on the low range. (Plays a scale up to high G.) High G going to F, though, seems to be a problem.

Boenau: Of course, that's not something you have to do very often.

Blaker: The sound of the Rottenburgh is nice and clear.

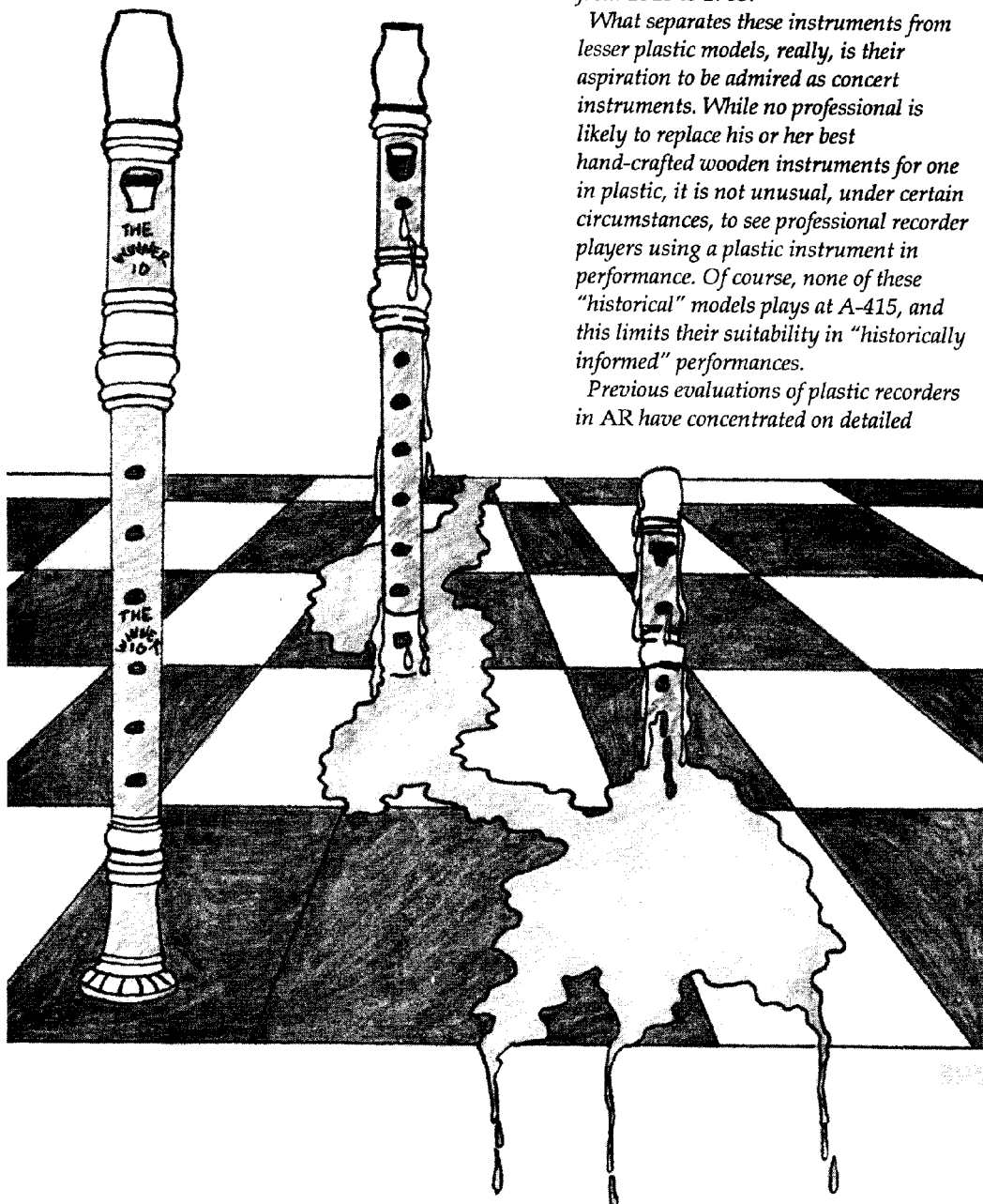
Linsenberg: I don't think it sounds very much like a real recorder, though. It sounds a little too "plastic."

Boenau: When I first picked it up, I thought the first octave C was a little unfocused. (Plays the C a few times.) Try yours.

Linsenberg (playing a few C's): Mine is even more so.

Boenau: When I was looking for an instrument to use with a 7th-grade class, the Yamaha was suggested to me because they were said to be mellower. How are they about clogging up?

Blaker: That's been the problem with the Zen-On. I like them in principle, but



they clog. What I like about this Yamaha is that it's clear; but as you say, Judy, it's not a real sound.

Linsenberg: I'd like to trade Yamahas. Yes, yours is better than mine. It's interesting that we find this much difference between examples of the same model instrument. (*Tries two more.*) Well, the fourth one is still different. This one is pretty nice. I don't mind it at all!

[ED. NOTE: Although it is commonly thought that all examples of a plastic recorder model will sound exactly the same, there are reasons this isn't true. Despite stringent quality controls, there can be some subtle variations in the way the plastic cools down after coming out of a mold. Further, the molds themselves have a lifespan. Instruments from the beginning of a batch may be somewhat different from those at the end of a batch. Further, the new mold, while intended to be perfectly consistent with the old mold, may vary slightly. These factors have always been a consideration when buying vinyl long-playing recordings, or wall paper for that matter. Finally, the manufacturer may purposely make improvements in the design when a new mold is introduced.]

Blaker: So summing up the Yamaha, it's a nice sound, but not a "real" sound. It's a usable instrument, but I wouldn't buy it because it's a copy of anything—even though it's called a Rottenburgh.

Boenau: We have two of the Aulos Hakas for comparison—one smooth and one wood-grain.

Linsenberg: The unfortunate thing about the smooth Aulos is that it is extremely ugly. We won't describe too graphically the shade of brown it is—use your imagination. On the other hand, the wood-grain model looks good. From a distance, someone might think it is wood, except that it says Aulos very prominently on the head-joint. [ED. NOTE: The Zen-On Bressan, by way of contrast, has the Bressan maker's mark on the front of the recorder, and only indicates that it's a Zen-On with small, raised lettering on the back.]

Blaker: And the advantage of the wood-grain is that it is not as slippery. If you have sweaty hands, it doesn't slide around as much. [ED. NOTE: The Zen-On Bressan was also released recently in a wood-grain finish, one that is redder than the Aulos Haka. See the June 1991 AR, page 25.] Here's the smooth. (*Plays some scales and arpeggios.*)

Linsenberg: Here's the wood-grain. (*Plays some scales and noodles.*)

Boenau: I'd say the wood-grain one sounds more authentic, more like a recorder. I kind of like it in the middle range.

Linsenberg: It's ok in the top range, but the middle and bottom are nicer.

Boenau: I thought the Yamaha was better in the very low range.

Linsenberg (*picking up and playing a few low notes on the Yamaha*): Very nice in the low register. True.

Blaker: The middle high register of the Yamaha isn't too bad. But the wood-grain Aulos Haka has a tone quality that I like.

Boenau: It has more color.

Linsenberg: Yes, and (*comparing two passages on the Aulos Hakas, plain and wood-grain*) the plain one is ok, but the wood-grain one feels better.

Blaker: It has a certain "quality." I like this (*plays first octave C up to F*), right there. It's got a good feel, more like a real recorder.

Boenau: Let's go back and compare the Yamaha and the Aulos Haka wood-grain again.

Blaker: Here's the Yamaha.

Linsenberg: Plastic-y

Boenau: It seems less centered. (*They try the plain Aulos Haka.*)

Blaker and Linsenberg: Definitely more centered.

Boenau: The Aulos has a little edge on it now; it's starting to sound a little "wet."

Blaker: I don't feel any clogging problem, though. (*They try both Aulos recorders in the high register.*)

Linsenberg (*playing softer in the high register*): If you don't blow as hard in the high register on the wood-grain Aulos, it sounds better.

Blaker: If I were buying one, I'd buy the wood-grain version and alter my technique a little to get a clear sound in the upper register.

Boenau: Of course, if we could, we should try five or six of the Aulos Hakas, since there seems to be that much difference between the plain and the wood-grain.

Linsenberg: Now should we try the Zen-On Bressans? (*Plays a few scales and arpeggios.*) It's fuzzy in the lower register, but you know what? I played an original Bressan when I was in England, and it had a lot of this same sound characteristic. A lot of high overtones, an airy sound. Of course, not as much as these plastic ones. [ED. NOTE: Many people would call the Zen-On's first octave as reedy rather than fuzzy—a lot of wind resistance and a lot of overtones in the manner of a Chinese membrane flute—and point to this characteristic as evidence of its historical design.]

Boenau: The Bressan has more wind resistance than the other two, but I have a feeling that you can't do as much with this sound, whereas with the Aulos, I feel you could do things with the sound.

Linsenberg: These two Zen-Ons are very similar.

Boenau: Very consistent, they are very consistent. But they clog quickly, and they are a little flat.

Linsenberg: We all agree that, tone-wise, we like the Aulos best.

Boenau: But the Yamaha does have a nice, mellow low range.

Linsenberg (*playing low notes on the Yamaha*): Yes, the low register of the Yamaha is nice. (*Carefully playing notes in the middle register, and then the highest notes.*) The top is pretty easy and smooth. It's the middle register that is the weak point.

I would say it's next-best in tone to the Aulos.

Linsenberg: What about articulation?

Blaker: Although the Zen-On plays with the most resistance, the Yamaha appears to have the smallest wind-way, at least at the top.

Boenau: The Aulos has the biggest of the three. If the Zen-On clogs the quickest, you'd expect it to have articulation problems in the upper register.

Linsenberg (*playing rapid high-note repeated figures on the Zen-On*): Yes... it would be difficult in the fastest passages.

Boenau: Perhaps, but I have seen

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many wooden recorders that don’t speak as quickly. I have students with recorders that are sluggish just getting the note out. But it makes it more difficult to hear really interesting tonguing.

Linsenberg: That doesn’t bother me as much as the repeating notes.

Blaker: And that seems to be connected with the clogging problem.

Boenau: Yes, right, if you’re using the Zen-On in a class for demonstrations, it can be a problem. You’re sitting there and somebody’s talking to you, and then you pick up the recorder and play. Bingo, it never works.

Linsenberg (*trying the Yamaha with high repeated notes*): If you use duh-guh tonguing, it’s not as good as if you use did-d’ll.

Boenau: I think it does better than the Zen-On.

Blaker: Let’s try the Aulos. (*Plays fast repeated staccato scales.*) It’s easier than on the Yamaha. (*Tries some specific combinations, from high D^b.*) Yet again, the Aulos comes out on top. (*Tries lower notes.*) Yes, speaking on the low notes is good, too. Do you think students would have trouble with the Aulos high F?

Linsenberg: No it’s not difficult at all.

Boenau: It’s a little chuffy, though.

Linsenberg: But so is each of these models.

Boenau: So, let’s go on to tuning.

Blaker: First we need to find out where they are in general, high or low. (*Marilyn and Judith play first octave C together.*) The two Aulos Hakas seem to be in tune with each other.

Boenau (*trying against the tuner’s C*): They’re somewhat high, but they’re pretty warm now. Let’s pull out a bit.

Linsenberg (*trying the C octave*): It’s a little wide, but you can correct it if you blow exactly the same way for the high

C and D as in the low octave. If you blow more, as some people do, then it goes sharp. If I just keep my breath the same, let’s see—no, it’s still a bit high.

Boenau (*listening to Judith*): That D octave is big, and the E octave is a little wide, wider than the F octave. We should remember that we’ve pulled the instruments out, and that will tend to widen the octaves. Maybe we should just test them pushed in, and allow for the fact that it’s better in a lot of situations to have an instrument that can play a little high.

Blaker: Yes, the A for all kinds of instruments seems to be going higher and higher. It’s a problem, especially dealing with pianos.

Boenau: Yes, I’ve had Zen-Ons that couldn’t match a sharp piano.

Blaker: The low F on the Aulos Haka plays naturally at about A-442. That seems to be the natural pitch of the whole instrument. What I’ve found in Denmark is that they tune the pianos there at about 442...and then they push them up against a radiator!

Boenau: We should check A’s.... They’re ok.

Blaker: The high B^b is good, but I feel that the low one is on the high side.

Boenau: Low octave G, A, and B^b can be a little high. But adjustable.

Blaker: I’d still say that these intonation problems are small. They are within a range that you can adjust for.

Boenau: Shall we do the Yamaha Rottenburgh next? This one is warm.

Blaker (*listing to Judy playing C*): It’s at about 444.

Boenau: Shall we play octaves?

Blaker: The C seems a little low, but the D is quite high. Overall the instrument is pretty high.

Boenau: There’s a big difference be-

tween how you have to play the upper C from the upper D, and that isn’t good. There’s a big step between C and D in the upper octave.

Blaker: I find it more difficult to tune than the Aulos.

Boenau: It’s harder to hear.

Blaker: And it’s harder to place.

Boenau: The F octave is ok.

Linsenberg: The E seems a little high.

Boenau: How are the A’s?

Blaker: It’s one of the octaves that make me cringe. It’s very difficult to place.

Linsenberg: Let’s check the tuning on the Zen-On Bressan.

Boenau: One thing I’ve noticed with the Zen-On before is that it seems a little flat. (*Plays against the tuner.*) Well, after saying that they are flat, as it turns out, when they are really warm, they are right on A-440!

Linsenberg: The high C is too high, and I’m hardly breathing into it.

Boenau: What about the interval to D?

Blaker: It’s the opposite problem from the Yamaha Rottenburgh. The high D is low and the high C is high—they’re too close.

Boenau: The more you play and hear the problem, the more you correct it.

Linsenberg: Yes, but I have to correct for a lot of notes on the Zen-On. And, for me, the other qualities—tone, articulation, and their tendency to clog—don’t really compensate for these problems.

Boenau: So, shall we try them all in a piece of music? We’ll try the three Yamahas first. Let’s do the Largo from this Telemann trio.

Linsenberg (*after they finish the Largo*): In spite of everything we said, it seems pretty easy to play these Yamahas in tune.

Boenau: Yes. Interesting.

Linsenberg: The D’s were stable, and the F’s, too.

Boenau: It was a little difficult for me to tune the long, high D, though. Do you two want to switch to the two Aulos Hakas? I’ll continue on my Yamaha, and we’ll do the same music.

Linsenberg (*after the Largo ends*): The Aulos mouthpiece seems big in comparison to the Yamaha, a little clunky. I also noticed that it was harder for me to do that low F[#] on the Aulos than on the Yamaha. You have to hit it more lightly and exactly right, really softly. Also, the instrument is somewhat heavier in the hands. It’s a little more uncomfortable

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for someone like me with small hands.

Blaker: The position between the last two holes is a little large and angled strangely. There's something about the way the foot-joint is cut that makes it difficult for me to find the G hole.

Boenau: It is important to say that the Aulos Haka does have more of a stretch on the last two holes, and that people with small hands should be aware of that.

Linsenberg: But I have the smallest hands of any adult I know, smaller than the hands of many children. The Haka is a little bigger, but it's a minimal problem, even for me.

Boenau: Of course, with small hands, you are used to stretching a lot. For a kid that's playing alto for the first time, that wouldn't be true. For some people, the Aulos would be big.

Blaker: And the fact that the cut-outs for the lowest notes are shallow makes it a little trickier. But really, I consider this a minor problem compared to all the advantages.

Linsenberg: Of course, and you'd get used to that.

Boenau: Oh, yes. And you know, the sound was much nicer when we substituted the two Aulos Hakas.

Blaker: Well, I found myself freer...

Linsenberg: Freer to be expressive.

Blaker: Definitely—who knows why.

Boenau: We should try the Zen-Ons next. Let's try an Aulos on the bottom part and two Zen-Ons.

Linsenberg (after the final cadence): I'm tired of this piece!

Blaker: How did you feel?

Boenau: The low notes on the Aulos sounded better than the time before—more substantial.

Linsenberg (after playing some more on the Aulos Haka and then picking up a Yamaha Rottenburgh): Well, this is interesting. The Yamaha feels like a small, somewhat insubstantial instrument after you've played the Aulos for a while. So, we like the Aulos Haka best.

Boenau: Even the shiny Aulos.

Linsenberg: The wood-grain definitely looks the best, but then again do we buy instruments for their looks or their sound qualities?

Boenau: And although we thought the Haka mouthpiece felt clunky in comparison to the Yamaha, after playing it for a while, we didn't notice it. We did think that the bottom notes on the Aulos were a little weak, but it didn't seem to bother us while playing.

Linsenberg: I'd also say that the Aulos Hakas sounded more like wooden recorders.

Boenau: Were they easier to tune?

Linsenberg: Yes, although, of course, when we played the Yamahas, there were three of them together and they were exactly in tune with each other.

Blaker: I think the Aulos was easier to tune, even if there were some small problems. It was easier to hear the tuning.

Boenau: And when we played the Yamahas, we found that it was difficult to find the high D's. We would also say that while the Yamahas are "friendly" sounding, they aren't special. They are more mellow than the Zen-On, though.

Linsenberg: But I really don't like the sound of the middle-range of the Yamaha.

Blaker: I would say that if I were using these instruments for students that the Yamaha was certainly usable, but that the Aulos would be preferable.

Linsenberg: We are all in agreement here.

Boenau: And the Aulos comes with that clip-on thumb-rest!

Blaker: It's an ingenious invention. I like it, it's movable; you don't have to glue it on like the Zen-On.

Boenau: Is it comfortable for the thumb?

Blaker: Yes, it's quite comfortable. It's got this edge, here, but that doesn't seem to be a bother.

Boenau: Of course you don't have to

use it at all, if you don't want to.

Linsenberg: Can it fit on other instruments? Yes, it fits fine on these others.

Blaker: But it only comes with the Aulos.

Linsenberg: Where can we buy these thumb-rests separately?!

Boenau: So both the Aulos and the Yamaha are very good for what they are. Is the Aulos good enough for you as a professional to practice scales on?

Linsenberg: Yes.

Blaker: Certainly, and I would use it to practice music. One consideration is that the wood-grain finish makes it less slippery. This is an instrument that has many uses for students and adult beginners.

Boenau: All adults.

Blaker: Yes, people who have an idea of tone and what kind of tone they want.

Below, left to right, Marilyn Boenau, Judith Linsenberg, a guest judge for upper partials, and Frances Blaker pose with the three recorders. Ms. Blaker, a student of Eva Legêne and Marion Verbruggen, primarily teaches in Denmark. Judith Linsenberg, with a diploma from the Vienna Academy and a doctorate from Stanford, teaches and performs in the Bay Area. Marilyn Boenau has a soloist degree in recorder from the Schola Cantorum in Basel and performs on recorder and Baroque bassoon with San Francisco's Philharmonia Baroque.

