

## INTERVIEW WITH ADRIAN BROWN

**Paul Richardson**

I first met Adrian in 1987 at the Brugge festival and instrument exhibition. After playing almost all of the recorders at the exhibition I felt that Adrian's were some of the best if not the best. During the years some of his recorders have passed through my workshop for minor repairs and I feel that they have improved even more since 1987. Many consider Adrian, a multilingual multicultural maker to be one of the best in the world. He started making instruments at an early age after finishing his training at the London College of Furniture. Perhaps this early start combined with a continuous study of original instruments has led to the acquisition of a historical perspective that only wisdom, and not mere knowledge, can grant. He has written a fundamental guide book, "The Recorder, A Basic Workshop Manual" which gives a lot of very valuable information for recorder players and although it is out of print I have been told that a new edition will appear this year. For those that are interested in renaissance recorders I would recommend a visit to his web site in order to check out the database that he maintains. During the last few years he has measured and made plans of all the renaissance recorders in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna for the preparation of their new catalogue which the direction there has assured me will be published in the near future. Lastly, I would like to point out one admirable characteristic, which is the fact that he so generously shares information with others.

**Paul Richardson:** I understand that you began your recorder making career by en-rolling in a wood wind instrument making course in the London College of Furniture and at a very early age?

**Adrian Brown:** Yes, I was 19 when I enrolled at the LCF, I think it was an advantage to start relatively young, I could live on subsistence wages, and didn't have to worry about paying the mortgage and so on.

**PR:** You have had the opportunity to see and play a lot of original recorders. Which are some of the best and why?

**AB:** I think that the Denner alto in Copenhagen

still takes a lot of beating, I have played some very nice Bressans and one or two by "minor" makers which I've found absolutely superb.

**PR:** Did these "minor" makers have names and what exactly was absolutely superb?

**AB:** Probably 95% of all the baroque recorders made today are based on one of the Denners, or Stainesbys, Bressans, Rottenburgs and the reputation of these makers is quite justified, because so many of their instruments work well, but there are other examples of very good instruments by Heitz, Oberlander, Gahn, Eichentopf and so on.

**PR:** Do you think that you or any other contemporary makers have been able to reach the level attained by Bressan or Denner?

**AB:** It's very difficult to judge this, our instruments today have to be far more evenly balanced and respond to very different ways of playing, because of the demands of modern players. They want to play everything on their instruments and it means that we build instruments that are "straight down the middle" to cope. To give an example, I know of some wonderful original baroque sopranos whose charm is precisely that they are very uneven, need a lot of shading and because of their small holes, are almost impossible to play in tune, away from c major. On the other hand, their sound is unbelievable. The dilemma is, how do you interpret that, given today's conditions where somebody is probably going to want to play the top line of a Bach organ trio sonata?

**PR:** So recorder making nowadays is a bit different than when compared to earlier the periods?

**AB:** Successful instrument making is always about dealing with these compromises and interpreting them for the players of the day. Also, because most of the playing of original instruments has to happen these days in the comfy surroundings of museums, there is also the "museum" factor to take into account, (most museums have unbelievable acoustics, which can be very misleading.) The only original recorder I've ever had in my workshop (a Bressan) was a real pig!

**PR:** You play in a recorder consort.. What instruments do you

use and what repertoire do you have?

**AB:** Actually I'm not much of a player and I usually only play in a family consort about once a year (Christmas!) My own preference is playing the Cantus firmus lines!

**PR:** What do you feel are some of the most important aspects in making a good recorder consort or quartet?

**AB:** I think that the whole thing should be made as an ensemble, the tuning and voicing should always be done in relation to the other instruments in the consort. It's easy to say, but rather harder to do in practice.

**PR:** The technical level of performance of recorder players has definitely increased over the last decade or so. Do you think that the musical level has been able to keep up the same pace?

**AB:** It's very difficult to say. Past a certain "musical level" it all gets very subjective I think. I would say that the technical level of recorder makers has increased in line with the players over this time. When I came out of college in 1982, the general level of making was pretty low, some of the things that could be sold then, wouldn't get past the scrap bin today. It meant that it was easier then to start as a maker than now, because the "entry level" was so much lower.

**PR:** You seem to be phasing out your production of Baroque instruments and concentrating more and more on the Renaissance Consorts. Do Baroque recorders no longer offer you a challenge?

**AB:** Yes they do, but I think there's nothing quite like a recorder consort and the additional problems of another dimension to the voicing and tuning (across the consort. I find this fascinating, but baroque recorders are still my bread and butter work.

**PR:** How do you feel about a renaissance consort in a=440hz as opposed to one in a=466hz.?

**AB:** I really think that the age of renaissance recorders in a=440hz is over, or at least it should be. Moeck do so reasonable recorders for primary school work, which is probably the only situation where they are likely to be used in combination with a piano!

**PR:** What are some of the problems with a consort in a=440hz.?

**AB:** The tenor is the biggest problem, because it's really too small to have a key for the VIII hole, and yet too big not to have one, without either resulting in a "see-saw" sound on the lowest two notes (c' and d') and/ or a horrible stretch for most humans!

The problem of stretch is present also on all the bass sizes, the holes are too big to be fingered and so need supplementary keys and the sound is pathetic compared to the same design in a=466hz.

**PR:** What about the difficulty of playing with other stringed instruments?

**AB:** Most players complain that it's the viol players who hold things up in the pitch department, being quite happy to use their late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century designs for renaissance music and not being prepared to make the necessary personal investment in stringing experiments and so on. The fact remains, that these instruments were built at these pitches for a reason, and if we don't respect this I think we do the instruments an injustice.

**PR:** So you feel that the stringed players as well as the other instrumentalists would have had their instruments pitched at around a=466hz in the period?

**AB:** This is a thorny subject! I think it's enough to say that if they weren't built to play at around this pitch, and they played together with recorders, then there must have been a degree of transposition involved! Practically though, just look at the possibilities of tuning that you have with stringed instruments, compared with recorders. Okay I'd admit that there is a certain amount of experimentation to be done with string dimensions, but I'd expect any string player to be competent with that anyway.

**PR:** Most recorder players are a bit hesitant of instruments in 466hz., aren't they?

**AB:** Yes, it's true that most amateur players are afraid of instruments in old pitch, but I think that part of our task is to educate and not blindly follow modern logic. If recorders in a=466hz were the only available instruments we wouldn't have this problem!!!!

**PR:** You are making a Renaissance Consort with some of the instruments pitched at a=520hz. That is a minor third above 440hz. and seems very high. Could you elaborate on this?

**AB:** This is going to be a bit complicated! It revolves around whether you call a basset in modern g# a g basset in a=466hz or a f basset in a=520hz. Given that recorders were always made in fifths, if you start from a great bass in F, you go to a bass in c, basset in g, tenor in d and alto in a. Now the lower three sizes are in a=466hz, right. Well as you can never consider a tenor to be in d or an alto in a, the top three sizes are a tone higher than the lower instruments, or at a=520hz.

**PR:** By the top three sizes you mean the basset, tenor and the alto?

**AB:** Yes that's right, but this also needs to be expanded upon, in the sense that although we call a recorder "basset in g" for clarity, this same instrument will be a bass, when playing the bass line, with two other sizes above, an alto or tenor, when it's the middle instrument, and reads either line or a discant when playing the top line, with two sizes below it.

Okay to return to the pitch question, if you start the cycle of fifths from the basset in f, tenors in c' and altos in g' (lets call this the "basic" consort.) Well If these instruments are in a=466hz, going down you get a bass in B flat C) and logically a great bass in E flat. This latter instrument is really too big, would have enormous finger holes and this may be why Praetorius here gives his great bass in F, a forth lower than his bass in B flat. Okay that's the reason that there are so many like instruments, a tone apart in the museums, and it depends on whether you go up from a great bass, or down from an alto. With the "Virdung" reconstruction, I didn't really have any choice, because of the size of the stretch and finger hole diameters, I simply couldn't have made a bass any larger and a=520 was the nearest "foothold".

**PR:** Now here you are talking about the "Virdung" cylindrical bore consort as opposed to the other conical bore consort?

**AB:** Yes, this consort has only the three basic sizes, alto, tenor and basset, for a typical f, c', c', g' four part consort.

**PR:** Also, I understand that these instruments have changeable "Ganassi" type bells. Could you tell us about these?

**AB:** Yes, it started with trying to reconstruct recorders based on the Virdung and Agricola illustrations. The bell-like ends I felt could have a function rather than being solely decorative, so I tried three possibilities: constricted (where the bore diameter is sharply reduced at the bell), parallel and flared. After reading and re-reading Ganassi, I had a feeling that the recorders he describes were not so different from those known by Virdung and I wanted to see how different the bells had to be to play with Ganassi's fingerings. As it turned out, only a slight lengthening was necessary and although these recorders are not a purely cylindrical, they still play most of his high notes. These recorders rest very experimental though. Up to the present time, I've only made four consorts and each has been very different from the last, incorporating each time, new ideas that I've had.

**PR:** Returning to the conical bore consort in a=466Hz. The size of the great bass would be impossible if the pitch were any lower? There are also problems of keys on the basses?

**AB:** Yes there's only one key on my Great Bass, and if it were any bigger, it would need extra keys for holes III and IV. The famous "Antwerp" Great Bass, is actually an extended F recorder. It has three extra keys for going down to C (8ft C). I tried to make this instrument myself but failed miserably, and I've never seen a copy of it that really worked. The original is quite ingenious, the bore has a "cave" near the top and several pieces of wood glued into the bell, so I imagine it must have been something of an experiment in itself.

**PR:** The basic Renaissance consort of 3 different sized instruments is a Basset in F, two Tenors in C and an alto in G, however you offer 10 different sized instruments. (Great bass in F, Bass in C, Bass in B flat, Basset in G, Basset in F, Tenor in D, Tenor in C, Alto in G, Alto in F, Soprano in C.) Do you offer two different consorts or perhaps only one selected to play 17<sup>th</sup> century music such as Praetorius?

**AB:** I think that the change to octave/fourth intervals must have occurred in the late 16<sup>th</sup> or early 17<sup>th</sup> century, when the music demanded a larger range than could be accommodated on a three size consort. Now the dilemma must have been this: do you add another fifth at the top,

(reading as a d instrument) with the accompanying problems of tuning and keys (you would be reading three sharps relative to the bass), or do you change to an octave/fourth combination, which gives you almost the same range, but a lot of practical advantages. I think both were probably tried but, the only original consorts built in octave/fourths date clearly from the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

As far as I am aware, there are no modern musicians who have tried to play in consort with four consecutive fifths. I made this experiment during a course with Peter van Heyghen in Essen this year, and we tried out both hypotheses. It was very interesting to compare the sound of the soprano line played with “open” fingerings on a c reading instrument, and the more covered sound of the cross fingerings on the d reading instrument.

However, For the majority of 16<sup>th</sup> century music, even with five or six parts, it is possible to play using only three sizes, and indeed this combination should +-always be tried first. With this in mind, you could logically choose either: F, c, g, d', a' or F, Bb, f, c, g' (as Praetorius), doubling or even tripling the middle instruments, to allow for more parts. Most players today though, go for the practical. And for a small consort, the obvious choice is f, c', c', c', f, g', g' and c". With this combination, you can really play almost anything, even though you should of course, never use the f and g altos together (that's why there are two g altos). The problems come when you want to use the low instruments, then you have to decide and the choice becomes very difficult (and expensive).

**PR:** What sort of combination do you personally prefer in a renaissance consort?

**AB:** I have a special feeling for the F, c, g, d', a' instruments, the basset in g and the tenor/alto in d', are such wonderful sizes, but I know that this combination would only appeal to the doggedly purist. The most commonly ordered combination for me is still: F, c, f, g, c', c', f, g' and c" and this probably represents the best overall compromise.

**PR:** Do you consider the Rafi type instruments you offer as medieval?

**AB:** It's only an idea. I feel these instruments in Bologna and Eisenach are more backward looking than forward looking, that they may offer some clues to the older traditions of recorder making.

**PR:** If so what is the difference in these recorders and the typical renaissance instruments?

**AB:** The bore is much more cylindrical with a choke much nearer the bottom of the instrument. The window is very square, with a larger distance from the blockline to the labium and a smaller windway width. This helps the pitch stability and allows great dynamics. The attack though, is very fast and noisy, but this varies depending on the overall sound I want to give the instrument.

**PR:** You moved about a year ago from the south of France to Amsterdam. How is the Early Music activity and life in general in Holland?

**AB:** It's difficult for me to say, because I'm not particularly in the “Early Music Scene” but I think it's probably no worse than anywhere else. The annual festival in Utrecht is very popular and There are many Early Music concerts in Amsterdam throughout the year. Where Amsterdam really is particular, concerning the recorder, is in the number of students studying modern recorder music, and this is reflected in the concerts and programs.

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If there are any questions, comments or any type of feedback please feel to contact me at: [www.prichard.arrakis.es](http://www.prichard.arrakis.es)