

THE SACKBUT AND PRE-REFORMATION ENGLISH CHURCH MUSIC

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In the mid-1530s the household account books of the Royal Court in London showed that as many as twelve trombone players were in receipt of regular fees. If these accounts signify all expenditure on Court music at that time, it can be estimated that an eighth of the wages bill for this part of its activities went to trombone players. The 1530s were something of a high point in this respect, but it remains the case that for the whole of the 16th century a corps of trombonists were, in effect, salaried members of the royal musical establishment.¹ Yet, not a single piece of English music from this period is explicitly linked to the trombone. This in itself is not significant, as the labelling of parts at this time was rare,² but the illustration draws historians of brass instruments to a neat focus. Throughout the 16th century trombonists occupied a regular and important place in English musical life. The players were professionals, probably fine and distinguished performers: What did they play and when did they play it? In this article I address some issues concerning the deployment of trombones in the first half of the 16th century.

It is worth stressing that musical practice in England in the 16th century was sufficiently different from the rest of Europe to merit special attention. As I explain below, the accession of Henry VII marks what many historians recognize as a watershed in British history. The death of his son Henry VIII in 1547 marks another. While England was not entirely isolated from the rest of Europe its island existence and its political, religious, and cultural idiosyncrasies made it distinct. For example, the English Reformation had a different impetus, cause, and effect to the wider European movement. It was not, at least not primarily, the product of religious upheaval due to a reinterpretation of theologies. Rather, it was occasioned by political expediencies.³

The word "trombone" appears to have been virtually unknown in England in the 16th century. Though there is a tendency in modern times to use "sackbut" somewhat casually to mean any early trombone, it is something of a misnomer. "Sackbut" was used only in England, and even there the spelling "sackbut" was less frequent than its variants "shagbut," "shakbush," "sacbut," and so on. To compound matters further "sackbutt" also had an entirely different meaning. Literally, it was a "butt" (barrel) of "sack" (wine),⁴ so scholars researching documents relating to 16th-century revels, for example, should take care that payment notes in account books for "sackbuts" are for musicians and not, as they credibly could be, for wine. This dual meaning was not lost on contemporary writers who contrived puns on it right into the 17th century. For example, Fletcher's *Rule a Wife* contains the line "in th' cellar he will make dainty music among the sackbuts."⁵

While "sackbut," with its variants, is by far the most common name for the early English

trombone, there are two other names that were used less frequently for the same purpose. Sources relating to music in Scotland in the opening years of the 16th century contain references to the *draucht trumpet* ("drawn trumpet"). The Treasurer's Accounts for the Court of King James of Scotland,⁶ for example, mention a payment on 6 Nov. 1505 "To the draucht trumpet to fe [*sic*] him a horse to Dunfermline." The player in question may well have been Julius Drummond, one of an important family of Scottish musicians who emigrated to Italy and returned to Scotland late in the 15th century. Indeed, one might speculate that it was the Drummonds who introduced the trombone to Scotland—quite independently of its introduction to England? This hypothesis is not entirely without substance. The Drummonds were briefly in Italy at about the time that the trombone was gaining wide popularity and it seems less likely that the instrument referred to was a Renaissance slide trumpet. The idea that the "draucht" trumpet was a trombone is also given credence in a source dated more than thirty years later when the single slide trumpet, if it was used at all in Scotland, would surely have been something of an anachronism. The source, which describes festivities that greeted the arrival of Marie of Guise to Scotland in 1538, seems to make a clear distinction between the "draucht trumpet" and the "weir [*war*] trumpet"—an instrument, presumably, with a fixed length.

the king resawit [received] the quen in his
palice to the denner quhair [where] there was
great mirth schallmes draught trumpattis and
weir trumpattis witht playing and phrassis
efter denner ⁸

The other term that is linked with the trombone is *tuba ductilis*. This too is found rarely, almost always in documents written in Latin throughout and associated with ecclesiastical foundations. Galpin was the first writer to research the etymology of *tuba ductilis* in an attempt to associate its meaning with the trombone.⁹ His famous paper, which forms the basis for a great deal of subsequent scholarship on the instrument, is as helpful in this respect as it is in others. Galpin was unaware, however, of *The Custom Book of St. Omer*, an early 17th-century source which provides a clear indication of what the term was taken to mean at that time. The book is a manual outlining musical practice at the English Jesuit School at St. Omer, France; in it are listed instruments that were taught there and the functions for which their use was appropriate. It is explained that the cornett and trombone required more lung power (*pneumatica plus*) than other wind instruments and leaves no doubt as to what the Latin names mean: *Tuba ductilis (vulgo sacbottom) et Tuba cornea (vulgo cornett)*.¹⁰

That the English used words similar to the Franco-Portuguese *sacquebote* to mean trombone and not the Italian *trombone* or the Germanic *Posaune* is informative for two reasons. First, it tells us (and this is consistent with other indicators of the English court's cultural history) that it was probably from France or Burgundy that the first players came.¹¹ Second, it strongly suggests that from the first time that "sackbut" or similar words were used, they can be taken to mean a slide instrument rather than a more general and vague

description of a brass instrument. Whereas *trombone* and *Posaune* have their etymological root in words that mean trumpet—both literally mean a large trumpet—"sackbut" has its origins in words that contain an allusion to a moving, as opposed to a static mechanism. Thus, notwithstanding evidence for the existence of a single-slide trumpet, it seems likely that in England by the last decade of the 15th century, a sackbut was a brass instrument with a double U-shaped slide—the type that we recognise today as a trombone.¹²

The earliest reference to the trombone in an English source is found in the Privy Purse Expenses of Henry VII. It mentions the following payments :

Item.

To 9 Trumpets for their wags	£1 8.0.0
To 4 Shakbushes for ther wags	£7.0.0
To 3 Stringmynstrels for their wags	£0.100.0 (rid) ¹³

Henry VII, the first Tudor king, came to the throne in 1485 following the Battle of Bosworth. Henry was not merely a successful warrior, he was a shrewd politician with a refined intellect. Most historians characterise him as the first "modern" English monarch. Through a number of carefully schemed maneuvers he established a dynasty that was to last for more than a century and elevate English political and cultural life out of the prevailing medievalism. He recognized the value of music as an ingredient in a broadly based, sophisticated court culture and its potential as an adjunct to diplomacy. Musicians were occasionally employed from the early years of his reign. Several of them appear to have been from France.

The 1495 reference may not be indicative of the first occasion when trombonists were employed at the English court, but it is doubtful whether they were brought to London much earlier. It is also uncertain whether these payments were for regular wages or fees for casual work. Early in the new century, however, the trombone appears to have been more established as a part of musical life at court. The records of the court of Charles of Austria provide details of a fee paid to two players, Hans Nagel and Hans Broen, who are described as players of the sackbut to the King of England (*jouers de sacqubutes du roy d'Angleterre*).¹⁴ Little is otherwise heard of Broen, but Nagel is, presumably, the same man who is referred to as Han Naille and is one of five trombonists who received livery allowances for the funeral of Henry VII's wife Queen Elizabeth in February, 1503.¹⁵ Also among this five were John de Peler and Edward Peler (father and son perhaps), who are described as "Johannes and Edward shakbotters" in the same year when they received fees and livery allowances for their work at the marriage of Princess Margaret (daughter of Henry VII) to James IV of Scotland.¹⁶ Sources showing payments to trombonists in the reign of Henry VII are not abundant, but this is most probably because comparatively few records from the period have survived, rather than a reflection of the extent that trombonists were employed. An impression of musical life at court, perhaps indicating the instruments that were regularly used there, is found in Stephen Hawes' epic poem *The Passetyme of Pleasure*. Hawes was born in Suffolk in 1475 and died in London in 1523. He was widely travelled and well educated. Around 1500 he joined Henry VII's court as groom to the King, a position which would

have given him intimate contact with all levels of cultural life at court. *Passetyme with Pleasure*, which is dedicated to the King, describes court life in fine, if flowery, detail. It was published in 1509 by Wykyn de Worde and was sufficiently popular to be reprinted by the same publisher in 1517. One verse contains Hawes's description of musical life.

There sate dame musyke/with all her mynstralsy
 As taboures/trumpettes/with pype melodyous
 Sakbuttes/organs/and the recordes swetley
 Harpes/lutes/and crouddes ryght delysyous
 Cyphars/doussemers/wt clarycymbales gloryo
 Rebeckes/clavycordes/eche in theyr degre
 Dyde sytte aboute theyr Ladyes mageste.¹⁷

Hawes' poem was first published in the year that Henry VII was succeeded by his eighteen-year-old son, Henry VIII. During Henry VIII's reign the court musical establishment grew on an unprecedented scale. Between 1509 and 1519 four, sometimes five, players of the "shawms and sackbuts" were in regular receipt of wages. Distinguishing between shawm and trombone players (or those who played both instruments) is difficult, but it seems likely that in the first part of this period at least two and perhaps as many as four of the group were trombonists. The leading player seems to have been Alexander Massu (or possibly Manseno; both names are given in the account books) who is usually referred to as "Alexander sakbusshe." A sign of the importance and permanence of trombonists in the Royal musical establishment at this time is that they were in receipt of "New Year's Gifts." These "gifts" were additional emoluments provided by the sovereign to those who had shown good, regular, and long service. Between 1509 and 1516 the sum given to "the shakbissches in rewarde" on New Year's Day was always 50s—suggesting that there was little change in the constitution of the group.¹⁸

There seem to have been two occasions in the reign of Henry VIII when a set of new players were taken into the Court band. In April 1516 appointment warrants were issued for three new sackbut players for the King's Music. The appointees were John van Herten (van Artain), John van Inle, and Nicholas Forcivall (Clays de Forteville).¹⁹ These players, who were almost certainly recent immigrants, subsequently received regular wages for many years; they were certainly listed as "sagbuts" in the 1532 account books. By that time, indeed by the 1520s, another new group of players had arrived from Italy. Among this group were members of the Bassano family who, having emigrated from Venice, settled in London to form one of the most influential musical dynasties of the 16th century." By 1532 the payment books contain the names of players who had been Royal musicians for the best part of two decades and those of the new generation whose offspring were to be in service to Elizabeth I. The King's Boke[sic] of Payments for that year indicate regular outgoings to twelve named players.

Item for John van Vinle sagbut 55s.6d.

Item for Nicholas Forcival sagbut 55s.6d.

Item for John van Harton sagbut	55s.6d.
Item for Lewis van Winkle sagbut	40s
Item for John Antony sagbut	40s.
Item for Mark Antony sagbut	40s.
Item for Peregrine sagbut	40s.
Item for Ipolit de Salvator sagbut	40s
Item for Jasper Bernard sagbut	40s.
Item for Peter Mary sagbut	40s.
Item for Nicholas Bollenger sagbut	40s.
Item for John Bollenger sagbut	40s. ²¹

Additionally there are references to New Year's gifts. These gifts show status of the different players.

Rewardest given on New Years day.

Item to the kynges olde sagbuttes in rewarde	50s.
Item to the six new sagbuttes in rewarde	£422

While the Royal Court was by far the most important employer of trombonists it was not the only foundation to do so. The London Waits were probably the first organization outside the court to have a trombone player in their ensemble. The Repertory of the Court of Aldermen of the City of London for 1526 (the minute book of the city council) includes the entry

And yt ys agreed [insertion in the same hand:—"at humble petition of the wayts of this cite"] that Mr Chamberleyne shall at the coste of the [city] pay for an instrument called a sackbutte for the wayts of this cite...."

The scribe made several attempts at penning the name of the instrument. After a number crossings-out, perhaps indicating that the word was unfamiliar to him, he settled on "sackbutte." David Lasocki has suggested that the London Waits, with just one exception, did not employ foreign musicians.²⁴ If this is the case the man who performed on this instrument may have been the first native-born English trombone player.

Several provincial cities employed waits, but I know of no waits band other than the London Waits which regularly employed a trombone player before 1550.²⁵ The only other type of provincial foundation that might have employed trombonists, the cathedrals, did not do so, though some modern scholars have claimed that they did. The use of trombones in English cathedrals in the first half of the 16th century has been the subject of a great deal of confusion and it is worth clarifying the issue here. The first point of confusion may originate in Galpin's claim that the statutes of the Canterbury Cathedral in the time of Henry VIII included a decree to the effect that two cornettist and two trombonists were granted places "in perpetuity." Le Huray infers that Canterbury might have included provision for the employment of trombonists in their statutes in 1532.²⁶ Other writers have

