

CORNETTS AND HISTORICAL PITCH STANDARDS

Bruce Haynes

As an indicator of historical pitch, the cornett has much to recommend it. Its one-piece construction makes it difficult to shorten without throwing internal intonation out of balance. Its basic design remained stable over a long period, and during that period, the majority of cornetts came from one place. Anthony Baines writes,

Among the [cornett] survivors in the big collections, those of Venetian manufacture predominate, which is appropriate, since Venice seems to have been the principal focus of design during the period. German courts, for instance, frequently bought their wooden wind instruments from Venice.... This, and the constant migration of players from one country to another, led to some degree of standardization in instrumental playing-pitch.¹

Cornetts made in Venice were frequently exported to other parts of Europe: a contract with the Bassanos in 1559 speaks of customers "qui dela cita come de fora."² Vincenzo Galilei said that the best cornetts of his day were made in Venice.³ Nuremberg, which in the 16th century had virtually no competition in selling its brass instruments, was not able to compete as successfully on the woodwind front. Ekkehart Nickel writes,

The Munich court, for instance, between 1550 and 1600 obtained most of its trumpets from Nuremberg, while the only woodwinds registered in the royal bursary records... came from Venice; likewise the court at Graz in about 1600 bought trumpets and trombones from Nuremberg, but cornetts and flutes from Venice. The Innsbruck court also purchased most of its trumpets and trombones from... Nuremberg, but ordered cornetts in 1585, a "Doltan" in 1588,...and a "large Concert Flaut" in 1591 from Venice.⁴

The fact that most cornetts came from a single city (and one with strong guilds)⁵ indicates a uniformity of design, and suggests that surviving instruments offer pitch information that is generally valid for the places cornetts were played.⁶ That the basic design of the curved cornett changed little in the course of the 16th and 17th centuries is also an indication of the stability of its pitch level.

The reliability of pitch information from cornetts

Two historical indications of the relative inflexibility of cornett pitch are Michael Praetorius' allusion to moving the mouthpiece in and out and Bartolomeo Bismantova's description of tuning joints for the cornett. Praetorius wrote,

