

BRIEF STUDIES and REPORTS

BRASS INSTRUMENTS IN COLONIAL AMERICA: THE NEWSPAPER SOURCES

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The purpose of this article is to provide researchers with excerpts from colonial American newspapers that can either suggest topics for research, or illuminate a heretofore dark corner in research already underway. All of the information comes from *Performing Arts in Colonial American Newspapers*,¹ a CD-ROM publication containing full texts concerning the arts from the 60,000 issues of newspapers extant up to 1783. The texts include “reports, advertisements, stories, and announcements covering public ceremonies and celebrations with dance and music; theatrical and musical performances; itinerant actors and musicians; allusions, metaphors, song lyrics, and other representations of the performing arts.” It is important as a research tool for the history of brass instruments in America.

The newspaper sources

Early American newspapers were from two to four pages in length. To the publishers, “news” meant reports of events in Europe, copied either from foreign newspapers or from personal letters. Such reports arrived in the United States as much as six months after the fact. However, non-news matter was also included, and it is largely from this material that information about the performing arts was extracted for this research tool. Such material included merchants’ advertisements, announcements of concerts, and ads for runaway slaves who performed on a musical instrument. Boston published the first newspaper, *Public Occurrences*, in 1690, but publication was aborted after the first issue. Then a new paper started in 1704, the *Boston News-Letter*, and another pair began in Boston within twenty years. Andrew Bradford founded Philadelphia’s first paper in 1719, and his father, William Bradford, published New York’s first paper four years later. The three cities that pioneered America’s journalism continued to add new newspapers. Maryland’s first newspaper dates from 1727, and Virginia’s from 1736. South Carolina and Rhode Island also began publishing papers in the 1730s.

Between 1704 and 1775, seaboard towns grew and colonies increased their population many times. About 3,000,000 people were living in the thirteen colonies at the outbreak of the Revolutionary War. This meant that there were more potential readers of the newspapers and [there was] more demand for news. Hence by 1775 forty-eight newspapers were coming from presses, each colony having one or more newspapers, with Massachusetts and Pennsylvania leading with seven English-language newspapers each.²

Information on American performing arts increased a great deal in the newspapers of the 1770s. This was due to the increased scope of the papers, the increase of population, the growth of literacy, and the merchants' recognition of the commercial advantages of printing ads. The database covers newspapers for the years 1690-1783.

For this article the author has culled from the CD-ROM all the references to single brass instruments and bands which include brass instruments. In the first category, the French horn had the highest number of citations, especially in the 1770s. The trumpet ran a close second, although many of the references were metaphorical or graphic. Bugle-horns were cited only in connection with those captured by Washington at Yorktown. The word "bugles" in advertisements could often refer to glass beads by that name. Thus it was never clear whether "bugles" in the ad meant musical instruments or beads, especially when dry goods, spinet wire, and Roman fiddle strings appeared within the same ad! There were no references to trombones except a metaphorical reference to *Posaunen* in the *Gemeinnützige Philadelphische Correspondenz*. Since all musical ensembles were referred to as "bands," those that did not specifically indicate that brass instruments were included were weeded out of the present survey. Some typical excerpts for each instrument are quoted below.

French horn

Before 1750 the French horn was cited only six times. One interesting citation in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* for 3 December 1747, suggests that a musician might be accessory to the practice of privateering. It describes the horn performer's share of the "take":

articles of agreement, made this 11th day of November 1747, between John Farrell, commander of the James Frigate...and the ships company of the other part. Imprimis, that whatever shall be taken during the said voyage, one half thereof (besides the wages agreed on) shall belong to the said ship's crew, and the other half for account of the owners...5th, That the carpenter's, gunner's, and boatswain's mate, as also the Captain's clerk, and French horn man, or trumpeter, shall each have one and a quarter share.

In the 1750s there were a number of ads soliciting French horn performers for ships, ads offering French horn instruction, an ad for the sale of a "pocket French horn," and an announcement of a solo on the French horn at the production of the *Beggar's Opera* in Annapolis. Concert appearances increased in the 1760s as did the number of Negro slaves who learned to play. We learn about the latter from ads for runaway slaves or ads such as this in the *New York Gazette & Weekly Post-Boy* for 7 March 1765:

Likewise to be sold, by Edward Bardon, on Wednesday, the 27th instant, by publick vendue, or at private sale, a likely Negro man, about 28 years of age, can play very well on the French horn, and trumpet, fitting to wait on a gentleman, or do any work about a house.

News of the French horn abounded in the 1770s. Not only did French horn soloists perform in regular concerts, several of them performed standing on horses or on the slack wire. In the *South Carolina Gazette* for 2 November 1773 we read,

By permission of his Honour the Lieutenant-Governor, will be exhibited at Mr. Pike's Long-Room ... a great variety on the Slack Rope, by the celebrated Mr. Johnston, just arrived from England....He balances a French horn on the wire, and plays a tune upon it at the same time.

A frequent performer in "regular" concerts, was Mr. Stotherd. In the *New York Journal* for 2 February 1770 we read,

By particular desire, for the benefit of Mr. Stotherd, at Mr. Burns's Room, on Friday the 9th of February will be perform'd, a concert of vocal and instrumental music...Act 1st,... a French Horn Concerto by Mr. Stotherd....Act 2d....a French Horn Concerto by Mr. Stotherd....After the concert, there will be a ball.

In Boston news one encounters French horns frequently. Merchants sold them, and concert performances included multiple horns at times, as seen in the *Boston News Letter* for 16 May 1771:

For the benefit of Mr. Flag, at Concert-Hall on Friday evening next, the 17th instant, will be perform'd a Grand Concert, of vocal & instrumental music, accompanied by French horns, hautboys, &c. by the Band of the 64th Regiment.

This notice also shows that the military bands participated in community musical events. From 1781 to 1783 the French horn is cited only nine times.

Trumpet

The database describes a woodcut of a mounted rider with a "straight trumpet" appearing as masthead of many colonial newspapers. But perhaps this instrument is actually an English posthorn, according to an illustration in Anthony Baines' *Brass Instruments, Their History and Development*.³ The word "trumpet" is used metaphorically many times (such as "Fame sounding her trumpet") in the poetry and speech recorded in the database. The sound of the trumpet is cited at the beginning of almost all military ventures reported. Of references before 1750, several catch the eye. In the *American Weekly Mercury* of 8-15 September 1737, the following news came from New York:

On Saturday last came on the election of a representative to serve in General Assembly for the city and county of New-York, in the room of Capt. Garrit Van Horn deceased. The electors appeared in the field (the usual place of election) about 9 o'clock with drums beating, colours flying, trumpet sounding and violins playing.

References during the 1750s included “at the sign of the Black Boy & the Trumpet” in Philadelphia, mastheads of papers with the post-rider, and poetic metaphor. When the Stamp Act was repealed in 1766, the *Newport Mercury* of 2 June reported a celebration by the Sons of Liberty in which celebratory toasts were made, and

At every toast the trumpet sounded an air, and five cannon were discharged.

In the 1770s we begin to see that there were men making and repairing brass instruments. In the *New York Journal* for 22 April 1773 we read,

David Wolhaupter, at the upper end of Fair-Street, makes and repairs drums, trumpets, fifes, and all sorts of musical instruments....

News during the Revolutionary war was chiefly of military interest, although a surprising amount of theatrical and musical entertainment continued. In 1778 newspapers reported on the numbers and salaries of the American army newly established by Congress. The *New York Packet*, which moved from New York City to Fishkill during the Revolution, reported on 25 June 1778:

In Congress, May 27, 1778. Establishment of the American Army. Infantry ... 1 Drum Major, 9 dols. per month; 1 Fife Major, 9 ... [Artillery] 1 Fife Major, 10 39/90ths dols. per month, 1 Drum Major, 10 38/90ths ... [Cavalry] 1 Trumpet Major, 11 dols. per month ... 6 Trumpeters, each 10 dols. per month ... [Provost] 2 Trumpeters, each 10 dols. per month.

There were many interesting developments in the 1780s. Instruction in trumpet and French horn and merchants selling trumpets were advertised. The complete list of instruments captured by Washington at Yorktown in 1781 was widely reported by the papers with few discrepancies in the numbers. The majority of papers listed 179 drummers and trumpeters captured.

Bands

The word “band” or “bands” appears 1215 times in the database. As mentioned in the introductory paragraphs, the term “band” was used for most music ensembles, so this survey includes only those ensembles, such as military bands, known to have had brass instruments.

Bands had an important presence in communities. They participated not only in patriotic events but also in community events. One of the community events is described in the *Boston News Letter* of 28 June-5 July 1739:

On Tuesday the 26th of June past, the Society of Free and Accepted Masons in New-England walk'd in procession from the South End of this town to the Royal Exchange Tavern, where they had an elegant entertainment. The order of their procession was as follows: First, a band of musick, consisting of trumpets, kettle drums, &c.

In Philadelphia music was always an important part of the university's commencement. The *Pennsylvania Chronicle* reported in its issue of 16-23 November 1767,

On Tuesday last was held the public commencement in the College of this city....
The band belonging to the 18th, or Royal Regiment of Ireland, was kindly permitted
by the Colonel to perform in the instrumental part.

The *Virginia Gazette* in Williamsburg printed the following advice either for military formations or drill and ceremony in the issue of 17 February 1776:

To the Army. Directions how to perform the manual exercise by music. First, let a march, such as God Save the King, Carbinier's or the Dorsetshire, be fixed for the above purpose; but any other tune may do that is set to music in common time, i.e. having four crochets (or other notes equal thereto) in a bar.

[It continues in great detail, specifying the type of instrument, the number of bars of the tune, and the manner of performance, i.e., volume, speed, and pauses, to be used for each action.]

As might be expected, until the Revolution the bands took part in all the royal festivities: the king's birthday, the anniversary of the king's coronation, and so forth. As late as August 1780, in New York, hotbed of Tory sympathy, a band participated in the celebration of the Prince of Wales' birthday. But in 1774 commercial interests had taken precedence over loyalty to the crown. The *Boston Gazette* reported on 2 May that New Yorkers had blocked unloading of a cargo of tea, and a band had escorted the captain back to his ship.

In 1777 a rather unusual event occurred in Philadelphia. The *Independent Chronicle* for 24 July 1777 reported,

Philadelphia, July 8th, 1777. Last Friday the 4th of July, being the anniversary of the Independence of the United States of America, was celebrated in this city with demonstrations of joy and festivity ... The Hessian band of music, taken in Trenton the 26th of December last, attended and heightened the festivity with some fine performances, suited to the joyous occasion, while a corps of British deserters, taken into the service of the continent by the State of Georgia, being drawn up before the door, filled up the intervals with feux de joie.

Some of the British musicians apparently stayed in America after the Revolution. In 1771 newspapers described a band concert in Philadelphia listing Phillip Roth as "master of the band belonging to his Majesty's Royal Regiment of North British Fusileers:" and twelve years later an ad in the *Pennsylvania Packet* of 23 September 1783 reads,

Mr. Roth, Master of Music ... acquaints his friends in particular and the public in general, that he has lately returned from the southward, to teach the ladies the Harpsichord, Guitar, and gentlemen the Harp, Flute, Houtboy [*sic*], Clarinet, French Horn and Basoon [*sic*] ... and likewise to be sold, Violins and Flutes with three middle pieces, and French Horns and Basoons.

Although everything described above relates to the use of brass instruments in the American colonies, there is also much information on this CD-ROM about events in Europe, especially in England. There is a particularly detailed description of a procession upon the arrival in England of Princess Charlotte of Mecklenburg and another for the subsequent royal wedding of Princess Charlotte and King Georg III. Publishing such news from abroad was most common during the early years of journalism in the colonies, when almost all news was extracted from newspapers imported from England.

The newspapers of the colonial period in America are essential to research in eighteenth-century American performing arts. They are often the only source for such research. Oscar Sonneck realized this, and after years of working with newspapers available only in far-flung American archives, he produced the landmark *Early Concert-Life in America*.⁴ It is his work which inspired the production of *Performing Arts in Colonial American Newspapers*.

NOTES

¹ Mary Jane Corry, Kate Van Winkle Keller, and Robert M. Keller, *The Performing Arts in Colonial America, 1690-1783, Text Database and Index* [CD-ROM] (New York: University Music Editions, 1997).

² Sidney Kobre, *The Development of the Colonial Newspaper* (Gloucester, MA: P. Smith, 1960).

³ Anthony Baines, *Brass Instruments: Their History and Development* (London: Faber & Faber, 1976), p. 172.

⁴ Oscar Sonneck, *Early Concert-life in America (1731-1800)* (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1907; reprint, New York: Musurgia, 1949, 1959).

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