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Author(s): David J. Rhodes

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Franz Anton Pfeiffer and the Bassoon

IF skill united with grace constitutes the great artist, then Pfeiffer belongs to the ranks of these. He manages the greatest difficulties with arpeggios and double-tonguing on his bassoon; but with just as much soul, just as full of feeling, and with an intervening vigour and energy, he performs the passages which really belong only to the heart. And then—through the long sustaining of his tone, and the various mezzo shades of forte and piano, which he adds during this sustaining,—how much he refreshes! How much he confirms the ancient truth, that half of the charm of the musical art falls back on to this intelligent distribution of light and shade, on to the tasteful application of forte and piano.

THUS wrote C. L. Junker in 1783¹ about Franz Anton Pfeiffer, one of the great virtuoso bassoonists of the late 18th century. Born in 1752, Pfeiffer became a double-bass *Akzessist* or unpaid assistant in the famous Mannheim Hofkapelle, before going to Munich c.1772 to study the bassoon with the virtuoso Felix Rheiner (1732–1783). Pfeiffer rapidly established himself as one of the leading bassoonists of his generation, and already by the time of his first recorded public appearance in December 1776 the advertisement for the concert gave him the appellation of virtuoso.² Following brief periods of employment with the theatre companies of Theobald Marchand and Abel Seyler in Frankfurt and neighbouring towns, he entered the Hofkapelle of the Elector of Mainz on 1 March 1778 as principal bassoonist, remaining there until Easter 1783, when he was appointed *Kammervirtuos* in the Hofkapelle of the Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin at Ludwigslust. He died there in October 1787.³ As a composer Pfeiffer wrote mainly for his instrument, his extant compositions consisting of seven bassoon concertos, one concerto for oboe and bassoon, eight bassoon quartets, one bassoon trio, two bassoon sonatas, with only one other work not for bassoon, a short dance movement 'Engloise' for orchestra.

Pfeiffer undoubtedly learned to play the bassoon on the standard four-keyed model of the day. A portrait of his teacher Rheiner by P. J. Horemans (1774) is reproduced in *The New Grove* as part of William Waterhouse's article on the bassoon (ii, p. 274). It depicts Rheiner holding a four-keyed instrument, but with the interesting

addition of an extra left-hand key operating a crook key, according to Mr Waterhouse the earliest evidence of a pinhole in the crook of a bassoon (a feature not to come into general use until the 19th century). Pfeiffer's first bassoon is likely to have been a four-keyed basic model. However, by the time of his death he was playing a bassoon that included an octave key and also a hand rest.

In the 1780s the five-keyed bassoon was fairly standard, with a sixth key following later. The addition of a seventh—octave—key on the wing joint to facilitate the performance of high notes (*a'* upwards) was of greater significance, being seemingly developed in France, the earliest depiction being in Ozi's *Méthode* of 1787.⁴ However, its adoption in Germany before the end of the 1780s is considered rare, and even Koch in 1802 regarded the device as still new to Germany, writing that the octave keys were only to be found on modern bassoons.⁵ There is evidence, however, that Pfeiffer was playing a bassoon with an octave key as early as 1787 (and probably before), possibly the first documented appearance of the key in Germany.

The evidence for Pfeiffer's bassoon comes from the impression of his personal seal as found on his Last Will and Testament of 22 October 1787 (the day of his death). The document is preserved in the Staatsarchiv at Schwerin, GDR, in the 'Hofstaatsachen: VIIIter Bündel' of the 'Geheimes und Hauptarchiv Schwerin' material, inside a fascicle containing correspondence between Pfeiffer's widow and the Duke of Mecklenburg-Schwerin regarding the settlement of Pfeiffer's estate and the guardianship of his daughter. The correspondence dates from 1790–1791 but it includes the original copy of the Will, which was handed over by his widow to satisfy a demand made by the Duke over some legal matter arising from the correspondence. The Will (document number 511) is written on a bifolio page with the two verso sides blank. It is signed and sealed by Pfeiffer and seven witnesses. Pfeiffer's seal depicts a bassoon in minute detail, whilst the seals of the seven witnesses are very simple, each consisting of a monogram of its owner's initials.

Pfeiffer's seal impression measures 1.8 cm across (from one side of its frame to the other) and 2.1 cm vertically. An enlargement, made photographically from a negative supplied by the Staatsarchiv Schwerin, is reproduced (Pl. X). On it is depicted a radiant sun with smiling face, above a lyre on which is inscribed 'concert / von / F. A. Pfr.' above a fragment of music:



This rests on the back of a square-topped pedestal with decorated side (as seen at the bottom of the seal). A bassoon (Pfeiffer's?) rests on the front of the pedestal top, with a reed lying separately by its side. Visible are a hand rest, a single hole and key below this on the butt joint, one hole in between two keys on the long joint, with an ornamented ring on the bell, and a wing-joint key (the octave key in question). A long crook (bocal) completes the instrument. The separate reed is not depicted on the same scale as the instrument, the obvious result of trying to reproduce something so small with any degree of accuracy. There can be no doubt that the seal is an accurate reproduction in miniature of a contemporary bassoon, rather than an engraver's fanciful imagining of one, and it may be supposed that Pfeiffer's own bassoon was the model used by the engraver. As such the seal thus remains an important piece of iconographical evidence for the development of the bassoon in Germany in the late 18th century. Unfortunately, the date of the seal's manufacture is not known, and it is therefore impossible to deduce how long Pfeiffer possessed a bassoon with an octave key before his death in 1787.⁶ Neither Pfeiffer's bassoon nor his original seal are known to survive.

That Pfeiffer himself did possess a bassoon with an octave key is also demonstrated in several of his works for bassoon in which high notes predominate in melodic circumstances. Although these passages may have proved playable without the octave key, it seems unlikely that they would have been written had such a key not been available on the instrument, as reflected in other works by Pfeiffer, where such high notes are comparatively rare. Two examples from Bassoon Concerto 'No. 2' in B \flat ⁷ are worthy of particular note.

Ex. 1. Adagio (second movement): solo version of the main theme at bars 39ff, taken from the middle of the movement.



EX. 1

Ex. 2. Presto section of the Finale (third movement): solo passage at bars 174ff, showing the huge leaps covering the entire compass of the instrument as then available to Pfeiffer.



EX. 2

The occurrence of similarly high passages of music for bassoon in works by composers contemporary with Pfeiffer may also indicate music written with the bassoon complete with octave key in mind.

Much is learned from contemporary accounts of Pfeiffer's playing, as well as that of his teacher Rheiner, as to how the bassoon was played in the late 18th century, with particular emphasis on tone and technique. Of Felix Rheiner, Dr Burney wrote,⁸ 'His tone is sweet, and execution neat, and he must be allowed by every competent and impartial judge, to be a very able and pleasing performer'. However, Schilling⁹ wrote of Rheiner that it was repeatedly asserted that his art had misled him to handle the bassoon more blusteringly than gently, quite against its character, adding, however, that when Rheiner gave a concert in Rome in 1760, everyone admired not only his round, full tone and his splendid dexterity on the instrument, but also particularly his tender expression and execution.¹⁰

The advertisement for Pfeiffer's public concert in Frankfurt in December 1776 mentioned above, includes the statement:¹¹ 'this virtuoso will be heard particularly in the Adagio with a triple harmony, or blowing three notes at the same time, instead of the cadenza'.

Unfortunately no critique of the concert survives, but (as Anthony Baines has since told me) the possibility of making several harmonics sound simultaneously as a chord has been well-known to bassoon students, and long before the present 'multiphonics' came in.

The *Theaterjournal für Deutschland*¹² describes Pfeiffer's playing as having a full, moving tone, a good execution and much dexterity, and a report of June 1783 in Cramer's journal¹³ states that his tone, his extraordinary skill and his execution make him one of the foremost bassoonists. However, Pfeiffer had his critics also, and another report in Cramer,¹⁴ of 7 March 1783, includes the comment: 'Herr Pfeiffer is a most distinguished bassoonist, his skill and taste combined to the same degree. Only in the view of his tone were opinions [at the concert] divided; since many persons prefer the biting tone on this instrument to his indeed smooth but somewhat dull tone.

From the above accounts it appears that two types of tone seem to have existed side by side during the late 18th century, with public opinion divided as to which represented the 'true' bassoon sound. Ironically, both Rheiner and Pfeiffer were criticised for playing with the one sound or the other—Rheiner the more harsh, blustering [breathy?] tone, Pfeiffer the sweet, round, full tone that some found dull. Pfeiffer's execution was widely praised, his technique fully capable of playing the most difficult passages, with no tonguing problems. This last point may partially explain the frequent lack of any articulation in passages of rapid semiquaver movement in works by Pfeiffer and his contemporaries: although a certain amount of slurred articulation may have been added during performance, the modern method of adding long slurs or 'slur-two-tongue-two' types of articulation wholesale to such passages in 'performing editions' may be totally invalid. Finally, Junker's comments at the beginning of this article about Pfeiffer's powers of cantabile playing tell us something about the late 18th-century performing attitude to slow-moving passages, whether expansive themes in fast movements or slow movement melodies, with the addition of mezzoforte and mezzopiano shades of dynamic appearing to be universally regarded as the height of good taste, especially since such things were obviously not notated in the solo instrumental part. Pfeiffer's depth of feeling in such places may possibly not be as far removed from modern practice as might be supposed.

NOTES

1 C. L. Junker, *Musikalischer Almanach* (Freiburg, 1783) p. 51: the original text reads: 'Wenn Fertigkeit mit Anmuth verbunden, den grossen Künstler ausmacht, so gehört Pfeiffer in die Klasse derselben.

Er macht auf seinen Fagott die grössten Schwierigkeiten mit dem Harpeggiren und der Doppelzunge; aber eben mit so viel Seele, eben so empfindungsvoll, und mit einer eingreifenden Stärke und Kraft, trägt er die Stellen vor, die nur eigentlich fürs Herz gehören.

Und denn—durch das lang[e] Aushaltende seines Tons, und die verschiedenen Mezzotinten von forte und piano, die er während dieses Aushaltens aufträgt, —wie sehr erquickt er! Wie sehr bestätigt er die uralte Wahrheit, dass der halbe Reiz der Tonkunst auf diese kluge Vertheilung von Licht und Schatten, auf die geschmackvolle Anwendung von forte und piano zurück falle.'

2 Carl Israël, *Frankfurter Concert-Chronik von 1713–1780* (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1876) p. 60: an advertisement for a public concert on 27 December 1776.

3 A fuller biography of Pfeiffer is given in the article in *Grove*, 6th edn., and also in my dissertation, *The life and works of FRANZ ANTON PFEIFFER (1752–1787) with an edition of his music* (University of Belfast 1983).

4 Etienne Ozi, *Méthode nouvelle et raisonnée pour le basson* (Paris 1787).

5 H. C. Koch: *Musikalisches Lexikon* (Leipzig, 1802), p. 550: the octave keys 'die man nur an neuern Fagotten findet'; a second octave key had been added later to facilitate the playing of *c''*. The keys were sometimes added to existing instruments.

6 The impression of this particular seal of Pfeiffer's does not appear on any other extant document in the Staatsarchiv Schwerin that bears his signature. However, three other seal impressions do appear on earlier Pfeiffer documents, and these suggest that the above seal does date from between late 1786 and the time of Pfeiffer's death in 1787. The first two are simple non-personal seals, but the third not only incorporates Pfeiffer's monogram but also the top portion of a bassoon, this idea being thus developed further in the later seal above. Although one of these seal impressions does appear on a later document, it may be assumed that one seal superseded another as Pfeiffer's personal fame and fortune increased in stature, even over so short a period of time as this.

All three earlier seal impressions appear on letters contained in Kabinett I, Vol. 838. The first is on the envelope of a letter from Pfeiffer to Duke Friedrich Franz I of 3 February 1786 (document 39/41): a winged heart above a globe that is surmounted by a cross, the globe resting on 'earth' (with blades of grass), the words *TOUT POUR VOUS* around the upper edge of the seal (size: c.1.95 x 2.5 cm.). The second is on a letter (which was folded over on itself and sealed, without the need for a separate envelope) from Pfeiffer to the Cabinet Secretary Johann Michael Földner around February or March 1786 (document 42–43): a male figure leaning against an upright barrel, with a tree and a pitcher to the left (size: 1.1 x 1.6 cm.). The third seal is on a letter from Pfeiffer to Földner of 23 October 1786 (document 47–48): Pfeiffer's monogram *FAP* is interlocked inside the frame of an elaborately decorated coat-of-arms in the centre of the seal. A pair of outstretched wings above a helmet surmounts the frame of this, and above the wings is the top of a bassoon, showing the bell and top of the long and wing joints with a crook attached (possibly with reed—the size of the seal is too small to indicate anything other than a slight bulge at the end of the crook; size: 1.9 x 2.3 cm.).

Another interesting modification to the bassoon is reported in C. F. Cramer, *Magazin der Musik* (Hamburg, 1786) p. 1000, where a report of 3 December 1786 on instruments and makers from Brunswick recounts the following:

The Kammermusik Hoffe here has made such a modification to the bassoon, that this instrument now perhaps excels all wind instruments. He has changed the keys somewhat, and made use of a clarinet mouthpiece. The duke has given him an annual increase of 100 Thaler, when he was heard with it for the first time.

The original text reads:

Braunschweig, im Mai, 1786. Der Cammermusik Hoffe allhier hat an dem Fagott eine solche Abänderung gemacht, dass dieses Instrument nun vielleicht alle Blasende übertrif[f]t. Er hat die Klappen etwas verändert, und bedient sich eines Clarinettenmundstücks. Der Herzog hat ihm eine jährliche Zulage von 100 Thaler gegeben, als er sich zum erstenmal damit hören liess.

7 Bassoon Concerto in B \flat major (shelf-mark 4198). Music extracts reproduced by kind permission of the Wissenschaftliche Allgemeinbibliothek des Bezirkes Schwerin (GDR).

8 C. Burney, *German Tour* (London, 1775), ii, pp. 60–61.

9 G. Schilling, *Universal-Lexikon der Tonkunst* (Stuttgart, 1835–1837): ‘ihn seine Kunst verleitet habe, den Fagott, ganz dessen Charakter entgegen, mehr brausend als sanft zu behandeln’.

10 Schilling, *op. cit.*: ‘jedermann bewunderte nicht nur seinen runden, vollen Ton und seine glänzende Fertigkeit auf diesem Instrumente, sondern vorzüglich auch seinen zärtlichen Ausdruck und Vortrag’.

11 C. Israel, *op. cit.*: ‘. . . sich dieser Virtuoso besonders in dem Adagio statt der Cadentz mit einer dreifachen Harmonie, oder drei Töne zugleich zu blasen, sich wird hören lassen’.

12 *Theaterjournal für Deutschland* (Gotha, 1777–1784; 1778 edition) V, pp. 76–77: ‘hat einen schönen, vollen, rührenden Ton, einen guten Vortrag und viel Fertigkeit’.

13 Cramer, *op. cit.* (1783 edition) I, p. 830: ‘Sein Ton, seine ausserordentliche Fertigkeit und sein Vortrag machen ihn zu einem der ersten Fagottisten’.

14 Cramer, *op. cit.* (1783 edition) I, p. 1384: ‘Herr Pfeifer [*sic*] ist ein sehr braver Fagottist, der Fertigkeit und Geschmack in gleichem Grad vereinigt. In Absicht seines Tons nur waren die Meinungen getheilt; indem viele Personen den schneidenden Ton auf diesem Instrument seinem zwar sanften aber etwas dumpfen Ton vorziehen’.



PLATE X

*The Seal of the bassoonist Franz Anton Pfeiffer
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