



The 'Jancourt System' Bassoon

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The 'Jancourt System' bassoon

After receiving the above letter from Dr Gillissen, I passed his query on to our Archivist, Mr William Waterhouse, who kindly steered me in the right direction for finding further information - though a lot more still remains to be discovered. It appears that this ring mechanism is attributable to Eugène Jancourt (1815-1901), of Paris. Langwill records that: 'about 1845 Jancourt obtained the collaboration of Buffet-Crampon, the noted Paris makers, to carry out certain modifications . . .'.¹ A brief biographical entry in Waterhouse (1993) for Jancourt has: 'Bassoon player, teacher; from 1850 onwards worked with Triébert, Goumas, Gautrot Aîné to improve bassoon by adding keys, 'brille' mechanisms . . .'.²

A 'Jancourt System' bassoon is depicted in a painting by Degas (dated 1868) entitled *Les musiciens de l'orchestre*, which shows several players in action, in the Paris Opéra Orchestra. This is reproduced in G. Joppig (1988), with the comment that the bassoonist was Désiré Dihau (1833-1909), 'playing a French Jancourt system bassoon'.³

In 1847 Jancourt published his *Méthode théorique et pratique de basson*, and then later, after his appointment in 1875 as professor of bassoon at the Paris Conservatoire, a further *Étude du Basson Perfectionné à anneaux mobiles, plateau et 22 clés*. This contains a fingering chart which depicts exactly the same three ring keys as in Gillissen's Fig.1, above. But whereas the chart shows *three* rings, only *two* rings, and a plate, are mentioned in the Introduction - as indeed also in the title of the work.⁴ What is shown in the chart as a ring for R3 is here referred to as a plate: 'Two rings, one for the right hand and one for the left hand give more sonorousness and equality to the weak notes of the middle octave: a plate under the third finger of the right hand on the bottom joint by altering the hole of the old A, the position of which was mathematically wrong, makes this note safer and better in tune, as also the F# in the 3rd octave, this plate has moreover the advantage of diminishing the stretch of the fingers.'⁵

Under 'Advantages of the perfected bassoon', Jancourt continues: '1. The quality of the tone of the Bassoon is not in any way altered. 2. Two rings for the right and left hands respectively closing two extra holes give to the notes of the middle octave such as E \flat and E \natural (left hand) and B \flat with the fork (right hand) more tone and equality, they also do away with the necessity for using the A \flat or G# key for the C# and D# of the 3rd octave; this simplifies the fingering; the B \flat in the 2nd and 3rd octaves is better in tune without the assistance of the B \flat key.'

The same three ring keys are also shown in the chart on p.8 of Jancourt and Bordogny's *Grand Method for the Bassoon* (London: Lafleur & Son).⁶ No publication date is given. Perhaps it was earlier than the 1879 *Étude*, because the chart refers to only 19 keys, not 22: the instrument is

referred to as 'the improved 19 keys and ring bassoon by Jancourt'. The same London firm of Lafleur also apparently manufactured their own ring-key bassoons. Their catalogue (of about 1870) advertises - besides 'ordinary bassoons' with 12 or 15 keys, or 'Triébert's make' with 17 or 19 keys or Boehm system: 'Our own make, improved ordinary system, 19 keys 3 rings, maple, G.S. mounted. The following notes are perfectly free: C#, D and Eb, 3rd octave, without the Ab key. B natural of 2nd and 3rd octaves, without the Bb key.'⁷ The ring system was also adopted in Italy: Langwill (op. cit., p.46) cites a report of a 'System Jancourt, as made by Maino & Orsi, Milan (with 22 keys).'

Langwill goes on to note that Jancourt issued a final chart, published by P. Goumas et Cie, Paris, which shows the Conservatoire Model with 22 keys which became more or less standardised. However, he adds that 'the rings were later abandoned'; and he remarks (significantly) that 'the sequence of progressive alteration in the French key-mechanism is difficult to follow as no fingering chart is ever dated' (ibid., pp.61-2).

DAVID RYCROFT

NOTES

¹ L. G. Langwill, *The Bassoon and Contrabassoon* (Edinburgh, 1965), p.61.

² William Waterhouse, *The New Langwill Index* (London, 1993), p.192.

³ Gunther Joppig, *The Oboe and Bassoon* (London, 1988), plate facing p.97.

⁴ Copies of certain pages were kindly shown to me by William Waterhouse. The Introduction has parallel French and English text.

⁵ According to Langwill (1965), p.61: 'In 1850 Jancourt and Triébert decided to move the A hole (which Almenröder had done 30 years previously). They fitted a plate for R3.' But the question of why the chart should show a ring if it was a plate; or why the text calls it a plate if it was a ring, remains obscure for the present. William Waterhouse tells me he believes that this and later charts were all copies of one that was originally published soon after Gautrot's *Certificat d'addition* (1857), and before 1862, as that was the year when Jancourt stopped working at the OC. (Letter to me dated 29 September 1995).

⁶ J. B. J. Willent-Bordogny (1809-52), a bassoon professor at the Brussels Conservatoire, published a *Méthode . . .* in 1844. Waterhouse suggests that, after Bordogny's death, some of the studies and pieces from that work might have been blended with Jancourt's, by the publishers, for the new combined *Grand Method*.

⁷ Cited in Anthony Baines, *Woodwind Instruments and their History* (London, 1957), p.337.