

Fagotto Col Basso: Using the Bassoon in the *basso* of the Pre-Classic Symphony.

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Abstract

Performances of Pre-Classic symphonies are often performed by orchestras comprising pairs of oboes, horns, with strings and maybe a harpsichord. The earliest symphonies of Haydn were performed by violins, violas, basso continuo together with the ensemble of the *Feldmusik* – a sextet of oboes, bassoons and horns. Eighteenth Century scoring conventions vary from those of modern editions. Earlier scores were organised with melody instruments above the bass instruments. Modern scores group instruments according to sound production; winds, brass, percussion and strings. Mozart, Haydn and their contemporaries did not specify on their scores which bass instruments to use. Copyists also used the generic term *basso*. Breitkopf und Härtel in the *Alte Mozart Ausgabe* as well as Bärenreiter in the *Neue Mozart Ausgabe* did not use the term *basso*, it was ‘translated’ to *Violoncello e Basso*. It appears that an assumption has been made that *basso*, perhaps because it is grouped with other string instruments at the bottom of the score is to mean cellos and double basses. This may be the reason modern performances have excluded the bassoon. Eighteenth Century treatises and music manuscripts provide evidence of the use of the bassoon and show how these practices can be adopted to offer contemporary audiences historically informed performances.

Slide 1 Title slide

Good afternoon everyone I’m Katherine Walpole, today I will be sharing with you my research *Fagotto col basso; using the bassoon in the basso of the pre-classic symphony*.

But first I’d like to acknowledge how blessed I am today to be on Whadjuk Noongar boodja next to Derbarl Yerrigan . I’d like to pay my respect to the Elders present and also to the elders past who during Haydn and Mozart’s lifetime took great care of this special land that we enjoy today.

In the Pre-Classic Era circa 1750-80, symphonies were written for pairs of oboes, horns, violins, a viola and *basso*. The exact instruments of the *basso* were not stipulated. I argue that the bassoon was a frequent *basso* instrument, I will explain why I believe the bassoon has been left out of performances of the early classic symphonies and I offer some suggestions about how the bassoon is to execute a *basso* line.

First of all, I'd like to set some context and background.

One of the factors which distinguish the pre-classic era from the mature classic era is the instrumentation of orchestras.

After circa 1778, let's call it the mature classic period, the instrumentation of symphonies increased and so parts specifically for bassoon were written consistently. In the pre-classic era parts for bassoon independent of the *basso* were rare. It is the ambiguity of this *basso* orchestration in the pre-classic which piqued my interest and lead me to a research journey.

Slide 2. Here is an autograph score typical of the pre-classic time. It's the *Sinfonia in G* written in Salzburg in 1772 by Mozart.... You can see the instruments listed, from the top, horns, oboes, violins, viola and *basso* at the bottom line.

Compare that with **slide 3**, the *Sinfonia à dice instrumenti* K 297 composed in 1778 (the mature classical period), is scored for, 2 violins, viola, 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, 2 bassoons and *basso*. Notice not only the addition of the independent bassoon parts, but the unstandardised score order.

I have explored a number of avenues to find evidence which show that the bassoon was an important member of the *basso* group in the early classic period. Some of these avenues include; 1. A letter 2. A report on the state of music in Europe and 3. a score with specific instructions.

Click slide 4. On the left is a letter written by Haydn in 1768 which accompanied the delivery of his *Applausus Cantata*. In the middle is an extract from a report written by Marpurg in 1757. It shows the members of the Mecklenburg Capelle; you can see it says 'Bässe' and it

lists the harpsichord and organ player, the two cellists, Herr Kornhusen who played bassoon and Herr Schürt who played violone, the ancestor of the modern bass. I like how the musicians who played the bass are grouped together in contrast with how instruments are grouped today; the bassoon was a basso continuo instrument, it was not a wind instrument. On the right is the beginning of the second movement of Haydn Symphony no 47. It is an example of specific instructions in the score which indicate use of bassoon. At the opening of this movement under the basso line, it states *Fagotto sempre col basso*. The instrumentation listed at the beginning of this score calls not for bassoon, just *basso*, but here in the second movement Haydn directs the bassoon to play throughout. Does that suggest the bassoon is already in the orchestra playing *col basso* in the previous movement?

Col Basso means the instrument being instructed, is to play the *basso* line. The autograph score of Mozart's Sinfonia in G K 110 composed in Salzburg 1771 [Slide 5](#) is scored for: 2 horns, next down 2 oboes, then 2 violins, viola and basso. The violas have been instructed to play *col basso* in bar 8.

This group of merry gents [Slide 6](#) is the *Feldmusick* or *Feldharmonie*. It is a sextet comprising pairs of oboes, horns and bassoons. They were military musicians who also played at court for outdoor festivities as well as on the battle field. Count Morzin for whom Haydn had his first post, had a *Feldmusick* ensemble with virtuosic bohemian wind and horn players. He wrote many Feld Parthia for this sextet. In 1761 when Haydn was newly employed by the Esterházy household, he straight away fired the Grenadier bassoonists and had them replaced with players of his choosing. He did the same with the oboes and horns in subsequent months. The *feldharmonie*, especially the bassoon, must've been important to Haydn at the beginning of his career, even before independent bassoon parts became the norm.

So beloved were the *Feldmusicker*, that they were invited indoors to play with the strings, making up the typical pre-classic symphony orchestra. Symphonies of Haydn and Mozart composed in the 1760s demonstrate how the wind instruments were added to the strings in orchestral writing. They played as a wind ensemble alone, as in this trio from Haydn Symphony no. 72. [Slide 7](#) Feldmusick with double serve of horns, very nice. They also played sustained notes making up chords as in this Symphony of Mozart [Slide 8](#) You can see

why the sextet was called a harmonie ensemble. And lastly, a more nuanced example from the same Mozart symphony, in which the bassoons play *col basso* for the first four bars and then step out of the *basso* for a few bars to complete the *feldharmonie* ensemble. [Slide 9](#)

Having set some context for this study, now a look at why I believe the bassoon is so rarely used in the *basso* of pre-classic orchestras today.

The Neue Mozart Ausgabe, NMA or New Mozart Edition by Bärenreiter is the go to urtext of Mozart's complete works. When transcribing the manuscripts to modern scores, the editors of the NMA swapped *basso* for *violoncelli e bassi*. What does *violoncelli e bassi* mean? Cellos and basses? Or that cellos are to join the *basso*? In which case, what does *basso* mean to modern musicians? What do you think?

[Slide 10](#) Here is the NMA edition of the G major symphony we saw four slides ago. Where are the bassoons?

NMA IV/11/3: KV 129

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Sinfonie in G
KV 129

Entstanden Salzburg, Mai 1772

Allegro

The image shows a page from a musical score for Mozart's Symphony in G major, KV 129. The score is for the first four bars of the piece. The instruments listed are Oboe, Horns in Soli, Violino I, Violino II, Viola, and Violoncello/Basso. The tempo is marked 'Allegro' and the dynamics are 'f' (forte). The score includes trills (tr) for the violins. The bassoon part is not present in this edition.

Having seen that bassoons were used in the *basso* in Mozart's time, why do the modern Bärenreiter editions exclude it?

I have a theory. They forgot the fagott.

Imagine you are to transcribe an autograph to a modern score.

Slide 11 autograph of Overture/Sinfonie K 74 in score order; 2 hn 2 ob 2 vn vl *basso*

It's easy, move the oboes to the top, then put the horns, and the rest is; violins, viola, and because the bottom section looks like a string section, cellos and double basses. And it would look like this

Slide 12 NMA of KV74

no bassoons at this basso party

Ok, now let's do the same thing with a symphony from one of his later works with independent bassoon parts.

Slide 13 Mozart's Sinfonia in C K 338 from 1780 In score order we have from the top; violins 1 and 2, viola, oboes 1 and 2, horns 1 and 2, trumpets 1 and 2, timpani, bassoon and *basso*. The bassoon isn't with the other wind instruments it's next to the *basso*. Nor is there a nicely grouped string section.

Which in the NMA looks like this:

Slide 14 Symphony in C KV338 1780 NMA The instruments are grouped according to sound production; winds, brass, percussion and strings. We have the bassoon no longer grouped with the other bass instruments.

If we go back to K 74, **slide 15** you can see how easily an editor would forget the bassoon Or that the bottom four lines of the system were not a string section in the modern sense.

Having just suggested that one of the greatest music publishing houses has performed a felony against bassoonists, I need to present some evidence to support my case.

Charles Avison was an English composer who studied with Gemaniani in London. In the preface of his op.3 from 1751 he wrote some performance instructions. On the subject of adding wind instruments to a composition for violins, he writes: **Slide 16**

As to the *wind instruments*, these are all so different in their *tone* and *register* from those of the *stringed kind*, besides the irremediable disagreement of their rising in their pitch, while

the others are probably falling; that they should neither be continued too long in use, nor employed but in such pieces as are expressly adapted to them; so that in the general work of concertos for violins, etcetera they are almost always improper; unless we admit of the *bassoon*, which if performed by an expert hand in a soft and ready tone, and only in the passages that are natural to it, may then be of singular use and add fullness to the harmony.¹

In Johann Joachim Quantz's treatise of 1752, he wrote a chapter discussing the qualities of an orchestral leader. He explains that to perform a composition well, the leader must ensure that the instruments of the orchestra are in the correct proportion. All orchestras require a harpsichord. The smallest orchestra comprising four violins needs one viola, one cello and one violone. An orchestra of six violins requires, a viola, cello and violone and a bassoon.

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An ensemble of eight violins requires two violas, two cellos, two violone, two oboes, two flutes and two bassoons.²

What did Haydn say?

In the letter we saw earlier, Haydn concerned for his reputation, included clear rehearsal and performance instructions for the cantata he was commissioned. He requested that the *basso* line include a bassoon. He said that it could be omitted if needed but would much prefer to include it due to the importance of the bass line. He continued to say that certain passages are not easy to distinguish if the continuo band comprises three cellos; yet replacing two of those cellos with a bassoon and a violone would result in a more easily distinguishable bass line as the sound quality of the bassoon compliments the violone. Slide 18 Haydn said that he would prefer the orchestral balance to include 3 bass instruments; one cello, one bassoon and one violone, this is better than than 6 violins with 3 celli.³

I also studied orchestral numbers of European orchestras. Of the eighteen orchestras I studied in the focus period, sixteen had 1- 4 bassoonists on the payroll. As orchestral literature composed specifically for bassoon in this period is limited, it is clear they were busy playing bass lines.

¹ Charles Avison, *Six Concertos in Seven Parts, Op. 3* (London, 1751).

² Johann Joachim Quantz and Edward R. Reilly, *On Playing the Flute*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001), 185.

³ Joseph Haydn, *Applausus*, ed. Georg Feder, vol. Band 2, Joseph Haydn Werke, (München-Duisburg: G. Henle Verlag, 1768).

For the final part of my presentation I would like to make some suggestions about how the bassoon is to play the *basso*.

Does the bassoon play the same as the cello and bass? The critical commentary in the NMA suggests that when the oboes play the bassoon should play. This would be a very nice simple easy to follow direction, yet the primary sources demonstrate that a much more nuanced case by case approach is required. The best approach is to offer some guidelines which can be considered for each performance scenario.

Avison suggested that the bassoon is to play ‘only in those passages that are natural to it’. Which passages are natural to the bassoon? In my research I have located an extant set of parts for the A Major symphony, the symphony no 29 from 1774. This find is very special because it has not been studied by any scholar in the literature. Quite remarkable considering it is Mozart. The other reason it is exciting is that it includes a part especially for bassoon crafted from the basso part. This bassoon part demonstrates how Mozart would’ve used the bassoon in the basso. The parts were copied from the score by Johann Traeg; a well-known copyist and publisher in Vienna who Mozart frequently used. And here’s a picture. **Slide 19**

I have transcribed the bassoon part and juxtaposed it with the violoncelli e bassi line from the NMA.

There are many, but for the sake of brevity, I’ll look at three examples of places to include the bassoon.

The first instance is in forte passages. In the development of the first movement Traeg has added and removed the bassoon to enhance the forte and piano contrast.

Slide 20 The top line is the Traeg manuscript and the underneath line is the NMA. You can see the contrast of the forte and piano sections enhanced by adding and removing the bassoon.

The second example shows how the crisp articulation of the bassoon adds clarity to passages of particular rhythmic interest.

Slide 21 In the minuet this lovely dotted motif is perfectly enhanced with bassoon.

The third example is in regards to treble bass balance. The basso accompaniment to the melody in the *Andante* movement is sparse, a walking type bass of quavers as well as quavers interspersed with quaver rests. Over the top, the upper strings play long muted legato lines.

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The contrast between legato melody and separated quavers in the accompaniment is evident when the bass is audible. Although the bass is to play piano, clarity of those piano quavers add definition to the architecture of the accompanying line.

In conclusion, standardisation of pitch, temperament and scoring conventions are a construct of the modern age, and so to create a list of precise rules on how the bassoonist should perform the basso would be mis-guided. This research has demonstrated that the bassoon can be omitted if needed but due to the importance of the bass line, it is preferable to include it. If there are no specific independent bassoon parts, the bassoonist (if in possession of an expert hand and a soft and ready tone) joins the *basso*. Drawing on the primary sources, I have demonstrated not only its valuable place in the orchestra but some suggestions about how the bassoon can play the *basso*.

What do we have in common with our Eighteenth century colleagues? Whilst tastes and attitudes have changed immensely, human bodies have changed little. We still have brains to think critically, ears to hear if it sounds good and hearts to feel if the music moves us. In the absence of distinctive rules, we can listen, think and feel in order to adapt each performance scenario so it honours the brilliance and beauty of the music.

I bid you; Go forth and furnish your basso with bassoon!

Reference List

Avison, Charles. *Six Concertos in Seven Parts, Op. 3*. London, 1751.

Haydn, Joseph. *Applausus*. Joseph Haydn Werke. Edited by Georg Feder. Vol. Band 2, München-Duisburg: G. Henle Verlag, 1768.

Quantz, Johann Joachim, and Edward R. Reilly. *On Playing the Flute*. 2nd ed. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001.