

# The sound of centuries past

The past 50 years have seen an energetic revival of the instruments that would have been played in Bach's day. Henrietta Bredin meets players fascinated by the noises Baroque composers would have heard



Above: *A Musical Evening* by Houasse. Facing page: Paula Chateaufneuf with her delicate theorbo, capable of producing a rich sound

**I**F writing about music is like dancing about architecture, then, in 816, Bai Juyi, a Chinese poet, made one of the boldest imaginative leaps in his *Song of the Lute* (translated here by Burton Watson). It describes hearing a woman playing from a boat, the sound drifting across the water:

The big strings plang-planged like  
swift-falling rain,  
The little strings went buzz-buzz like  
secret conversations,  
Plang-plang, buzz-buzz mixed and  
mingled in her playing  
Like big pearls and little pearls falling  
on a plate of jade.

Most musical instruments have evolved from earlier versions of themselves and alongside these are ancient—or original or historic (terms vary)—ones that hold a particular fascination for some of today's players. Of these, the lute is probably the most familiar, described by writers down the centuries and cropping up in poems by Anacreon in Greece in the 6th century BC, by Thomas Wyatt and Shakespeare in the 16th century, Emily Dickinson and Paul Laurence Dunbar in the 19th and Elizabeth Bishop in the 20th.

Lutenist Paula Chateaufneuf started off by playing the guitar, but, at university in Connecticut, US, she met a music professor who

happened to be mad about the viola da gamba, or viol, a family of stringed instruments played upright. The early-music revival was beginning and he'd formed a Collegium Musicum of players. 'I asked if I could join,' recalls Ms Chateaufneuf. 'He stood up, went into a back room, pulled out a lute and handed it to me.'

'The lute is a curvaceously beautiful instrument. They're also fragile—the back is like a boat, made up of tiny thin ribs of wood that are bent over a mould with heat,' she adds. Original instruments have to be preserved in carefully controlled conditions and a 16th-century lute is hardly ever in its original state; it will have been repaired, a new neck →



added, more strings. There are makers now who create faithful copies that can be played without fear of damaging them, although they're still delicate and do not travel easily.

Ms Chateauneuf also plays the theorbo, a version with an elongated neck—the strings can be as long as 6ft—which was developed to produce a bigger sound; the neck supports a set of bass strings to give it a greater range. 'Last year, I invested in a folding theorbo, which is a truly brilliant invention. The maker devised a way for the neck to fold with a roller over the strings so that the long strings are protected and stay under tension. If one string comes loose for 10 minutes you could spend an hour or more getting it to stay in tune.'

A sackbut, precursor of the trombone, is perhaps more robust. Susan Addison is sackbut royalty, a founding member of the ensemble His Majestys Sagbutts and Cornetts, which celebrated its 40th anniversary last year. It is named for Baroque composer Matthew Locke's 'Five-part things for His Majestys Sagbutts and Cornetts', thought to have been played at Charles II's coronation.

Ms Addison grew up in Louth in Lincolnshire and started playing the trombone in her teens, because 'it was the only instrument left in the school cupboard'. She joined the Market Rasen

brass band and received a county grant to study at Boston College. Despite thinking that she'd end up with 'a good, solid career' in the Armed Forces, she won a trombone scholarship to the Royal College of Music.

'My grandma and auntie put their savings together to buy me a proper instrument. I had lessons from a marvellous man called Arthur Wilson, who was old school, very well respected and always trying to give up smoking, but never managed it—he used to balance his fag on my music stand,' Ms Addison recalls. 'He encouraged me to see other teachers and that's when I became exposed to earlier music. We were being trained to be symphony orchestra players, but that didn't really suit me—the traditional way of playing was somehow like bricklaying, putting building blocks together. The phrasing and flexibility of early music was so appealing, and the changes of colour you can achieve through dynamics and articulation are quite something. Most important for me is how closely aligned the sackbut is to the human voice.'

Although she is now professor of sackbut and trombone at the Royal Northern College of Music, sackbut lessons weren't available when she was at college and she didn't have

an instrument. 'I got a modern trombone and sawed the bell off—it wasn't too bad. Now, you can get sackbuts that are made by hand, with beautiful, ornate detail, using exact measurements from the originals.'

The best makers, she suggests, are probably Egger in Switzerland and Ewald Meinel in Germany, but they don't come cheap—a bass sackbut would be about £10,000. 'Although I still love the modern trombone and the dark, fat sound it can produce, it's become a bit of a monster. It's a sackbut on steroids, too big for a lot of music.'

The word violone embraces a wide range of bowed string instruments, but the clue is in the Italian ending '-one', meaning 'big'. 'It encompasses a huge time period and lots of different tunings,' explains violone and double-bass player Carina Cosgrove. 'What I am intrigued by is always looking for individual ways of working with early music, discovering what the composer's intentions might have been, thinking about the context of when and how the music was played.'

**'I am intrigued by what the composer's intentions might have been'**

'It makes for an incredibly rich experience and calls on you to be imaginative as a player. Finding the right instrument for particular music, working out how that fits in with an ensemble of other players,

it's a constant process of give and take.'

Opera and theatre, such as at Garsington in Buckinghamshire and the Globe in London, working up close with singers, actors and dancers, are her favourite gigs. 'I love so many different kinds of music and I tried a lot of different things—flute, guitar, piano. My first instrument, a gift from my uncle, was a bright-red recorder,' she recalls. 'I grew up in Bromley, where there was an amazing music service and it was through it that I started playing the double bass and joining ensembles. The experience gave me the courage to apply for music college. I had no idea how to find the right teacher, but Peter Buckoke at the Royal College had the funniest biography—I thought we'd get on and have a good laugh and we did. Luckily for me, he was very open-minded and also an Alexander Technique teacher, with a foot in both musical worlds, modern and historical.'

According to Paul McCreech, artistic director of the Gabrieli choir and period-instrument orchestra, it is 'somewhat arrogant' to suggest that every innovation in the making of musical instruments and playing →

**Music of the imagination: Carina Cosgrove relishes re-creating old, forgotten sounds**







**Sackbut royalty:**  
Susan Addison  
loves her Baroque  
instrument for  
how it chimes with  
the human voice

them represents an improvement—sometimes it has resulted in compromises to the colours and sounds. ‘Every composer writes in a way that best suits the instruments of their time, exploiting the sonorities of those instruments and celebrating their capabilities.’

If you look on YouTube, you can see an example of how closely the players, for instance the international Jupiter Ensemble with Thomas Dunford on lute, connect with the counter-tenor Iestyn Davies, recording *O lord, whose mercies numberless* from Handel’s *Saul*. The rapt and minute attention paid to phrasing, the performers moving and breathing almost as one. It’s an exquisitely organic process, the music sounding freshly made.

That brings us all the way back to Bai Juyi’s lute player on the lake:

She turned the pegs, brushed the strings,  
sounding two or three notes—  
Before they had formed a melody, already  
the feeling came through.  
Each string seemed tense with it, each  
sound to hold a thought,  
As though she were protesting a lifetime  
of wishes unfulfilled.  
Eyes lowered, hand moving freely, she  
played on and on,  
Speaking of all the numberless things  
in her heart. 🐉

## In search of authenticity

**Orchestras of the Baroque period—Bach, Handel, Vivaldi, Purcell—were smaller than those of the Romantic era onwards and would have included the harpsichord and pipe organ, the natural horn (a precursor to the French horn), the natural trumpet (a valveless trumpet, requiring considerable lip dexterity), woodwind, such as the oboe da caccia, and viols (bass, tenor and treble)**

The Academy of Ancient Music (*right*), which celebrated its 50th anniversary last year, was founded by Christopher Hogwood to make the first British recordings using old instruments; it claims to be the most listened-to period orchestra online. Its next concert is ‘The Art of the Italian Concerto’, in Cambridge on May 6 and Sherborne, Dorset, on May 7, followed by ‘Sons of England’ with countertenor Reginald Mobley (May 25–31, various venues; visit [www.aam.co.uk](http://www.aam.co.uk))

**The English Concert, directed by Harry Bicket from the harpsichord, has begun an ambitious project to record on film every single piece of music by Handel for a free online resource ([www.englishconcert.co.uk](http://www.englishconcert.co.uk))**



Florilegium, a period-instrument ensemble, is playing at the Bedford Festival on April 27, at the York Early Music Festival on July 7 and with the Somerset Chamber Choir at Wells Cathedral on July 27 ([www.florilegium.org](http://www.florilegium.org))

**The Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment (OAE) plays music on instruments for which it was originally written.**

**‘The sound world we get is amazing,’ says Cecelia Bruggemeyer, who plays a double bass that is about 300 years old and has strings made of uncovered gut. The OAE is in concert at Snape Maltings, Suffolk, on April 21, and plays Mendelssohn symphonies at London’s Southbank on April 25–26 ([www.oae.co.uk](http://www.oae.co.uk))**