

CORRESPONDENCE

Cornetti and Renaissance pitch revisited

Prompted by John McCann's excellent consideration of cornett decoration in the last *Historic Brass Journal*, I would like to make a correction and add some further comments to my article "Cornetti and Performing Pitch of Choirs in Northern Italy."¹ In this article, I attempted to explain the 16th-century Italian terms *mezzo punto* and *tutto punto* as designations of pitch, and then by analyzing the pitches of the population of surviving cornetts with the "rabbit ears" mark, determine approximately what these pitch standards might have been. Unfortunately, the terms were reversed for the article so that *tutto punto* appeared to be the higher pitch. Although I corrected this for a later revision and expansion of my work, I fear that most readers of the *Historic Brass Journal* probably never saw the second article.²

I selected the "rabbit ears" instruments for the study because most people considered them either to be all of Venetian origin (McCann and numerous others) or as the production of the English and Venetian branches of the Bassano family (Lasocki and myself, following on his work). In either case, they should correlate to the pitch standards advertised by Giacomo Bassano in his 1559 contract with members of the Venetian *piffari*³ and referred to by Giovanni Morsolino and Constanzo Antegnati in their discussions about North Italian organ pitches in the late 16th century.⁴ *Mezzo punto* refers to the higher pitch then employed in Italy and elsewhere for concerts, according to Morsolino.⁵ By elsewhere, Morsolino is presumably thinking of the Bavarian court

1. Douglas Kirk, "Cornetti and Performing Pitch of Choirs in Northern Italy and England," *The Early Brass Journal*, No. 4, July 1987, pp. 3-9.

2. Douglas Kirk, "Cornetti and Renaissance Pitch Standards in Italy and Germany," *Le Journal de Musique Ancienne*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 1989, pp. 16-22.

3. Giulio Ongaro, "16th Century Venetian Wind Instrument Makers and Their Clients," *Early Music*, Vol. 13, No. 3, August 1985, pp. 391-397.

4. Morsolino's letter, dated Sept. 24, 1582, is reproduced in *La Musica in Cremona nella seconda meta del Secolo XVI*, Vol. 1, pp. xvi-xvii, ed. Gaetano Cesari, 1939. Antegnati's treatise, *L'Arte Organica*, Brescia, 1608, has been edited by Renato Lunelli, Rheingold-Verlag, Mainz 1958. The pertinent reference is on p. 72.

5. "...poi che tutti gli organi che ho visto a vita mia et in Italia et fuori et massima ove si fano concerti con huomini rerissimi tutti dico gli ho trovati nel tuon del cornetti di mezo punto..." Morsolino, p. xvi.

under Lasso, where he had previously been organist, and of such imperial cities as Vienna, where he had frequently played in the duke's entourage.⁶ This pitch standard must be about 490 Hz., an average of the highest pitches found on original cornetts. Morsolino does not specify where *tutto punto* is to be found as a pitch standard. He simply says that it is "not a tone lower than *mezzo punto*."⁷ This must approximately equal the average pitch of the middle group of cornetts surveyed: about 469 Hz. It is possible to identify today some musical centers of the 16th century where *tutto punto* was the pitch standard in use. One was the basilica of Santa Barbara in Mantua. The organ there, pitched at *tutto punto* according to its original letters of specification, was built in 1565 by Graziadio Antegnati and thereafter maintained by him or his son, Constanzo.⁸ (Performers might consider taking this into consideration in "Mantuan" performances of the Monteverdi *Vespers*.) Another center employing a *tutto punto* standard seems to have been the *Accademia Filarmonica* in Verona, to judge from the somewhat varying reports of instrumental pitch in the collection there.⁹ The final North Italian pitch referred to by Morsolino is the transposition down a tone from *mezzo punto*. This was necessitated because *mezzo punto* was considered too high for the singers of the capella.¹⁰ Morsolino says that good organists simply accommodated themselves to this transposition. It seems to have been routine for him in Bergamo as well as for the organist of San Marco in Venice (Andrea Gabrieli, at the time of Morsolino's letter). It was certainly this practical necessity that also lay behind Giovanni

6. See James Haar, "Munich at the Time of Orlande de Lassus" in *The Renaissance*, ed. Iain Fenlon, Prentice Hall, N.J., 1989, p. 249.

7. "...il quale è nel tuon del cornetto di tutto punto; che non è un tuon più basso dell'altro di mezzo punto." Morsolino, p. xvi.

8. See the documentation cited and also referred to by Iain Fenlon, *Music and Patronage in Sixteenth Century Mantua*, Cambridge University Press, 1980, pp. 109 and 188.

9. See the commentary on the Verona cornetti in Edward Tarr, "Ein Katalog erhaltener Zinken," *Basler Jahrbuch für Historische Musikpraxis*, vol. V, 1981, pp. 228-247. The conflicting data seem to be those of Rainer Weber, also reported in his own article, "Some Researches into Pitch in the 16th Century with particular reference to the Instruments in the Accademia Filarmonica of Verona," *Galpin Society Journal*, vol. 28, 1975, pp. 7-10.

10. "Onde avviene che non volendosi scomodar gli organi per il riguardo de gli stromenti da fiato, si lassano nel detto tuon di mezzo punto il qual vien troppo alto alli cantori nelle capelle: per ciò usasi sempre ò la maggior parte delle volte che gli organisti son sforzati suonare fuori di tuon più basso per accomodar li cantori; et così si fa in San Marco in Venezia; così qui sul mio, et sopra la maggior parte degli organi ove sono organisti di qualche valore." Morsolino, p. xvi.

Paolo Cima's discussion of retuning mean-tone to facilitate keyboard transposition in his 1606 publication, *Ricercari & Canzoni alla francese*.¹¹ The small population of surviving original cornetti pitched around 440 Hz. may be witness to the desirability of having instruments built for use with choirs at this lower standard,¹² or they might have been considered alto instruments pitched in g at *mezzo punto*. For a cornett player like Giovanni Bassano, whose responsibility it was to accompany the capella rather than play canzoni like Girolamo dalla Casa, it might have been very useful indeed to use one of these larger 440 Hz. instruments rather than constantly transpose down a tone. In any case, the practical result of these changing performance pitch levels for a work such as the Monteverdi *Vespers* is that, although ostensibly the original pitch standard was higher in Venice than in Mantua, the sounding pitch was now lower. Thus, by the time the *Vespers* might have been performed in Venice after Monteverdi's arrival, it would very likely have been performed at a lower pitch (c. 440 Hz.) than in Mantua (c. 468 Hz.).

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11. See Clare Rayner, "The Enigmatic Cima: Meantone Tuning and Transpositions," *Galpin Society Journal*, vol. 22, 1969, pp. 23-34.

12. The 1605 Christ Church, Oxford, cornetts are an example of this, albeit from a completely different locale.