

Silver or Gold: The Color of Brass Instruments in the Late Middle Ages

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The purpose of this article is to lay out some details I have gathered about brass instruments during the late Middle Ages as a way of requesting assistance from the readers of this journal. As will become immediately evident, I am using the word “brass” in its meaning as a synonym for “cup-mouthpiece instruments,” because my question has to do with the actual material the instruments were made of. In the process of researching the activities of the civic musicians of Florence during the twelfth to the sixteenth centuries, I have encountered considerable confusion about the material used for trumpets and trombones, and about the symbolism intended by the use of particular metals. Here is what I have found.

The earliest reference to the employment of civic musicians in Florence is from government documents of 8 February 1292¹ naming six trumpet players (*tubatores*) along with a player of the *cenamella* (probably a double reed) and another who played *cimballella* (undoubtedly the cymbals). The civic ensemble, known as the *trombadori*, was part of the ceremonial presence of Florence, participating in all official functions such as the frequent processions welcoming distinguished foreign visitors to the city, civic celebrations in honor of saints’ days, or assemblies in which the governing executive appeared in public. The *trombadori* also accompanied the military in the field, and acted as representatives of the city of Florence by participating in celebrations in other cities. The earliest reference is as follows:

... regarding the provision and election, by the lord priors of the Guilds, to a term of and for a term of three years, beginning on the kalends of the previous January [1292] of the 6 *tubatores* and one *cenamellario*, and one *cemballellario*, . . . The names of these *tubatorum*, *cenamellari*, and *cemballellarii* are: Guillemus Niger; Catena Deotaiuti; Pacinus Ubertini; Guillemus Jacobi; Balduccius Buoni; Matheus Niccole; six *tubatores* of the commune of Florence. Gianuccius Niccole, of the parish of St Laurentius, *cenamellarius*; Lore, called Anghara, of the parish of St. Felice in Piazza, *cimballellarius*.²

The city officials were rather fussy about the appearance of their resident musical ensemble, and so they provided them with cloaks emblazoned with *giglio*, the fleur-de-lis emblem of the city, and a set of banners (*pennone*) that also bore the city emblem, which were to be suspended from their instruments. And in 1295 they specified the material that was to be used for their trumpets:

. . . and it has been shown by the same Priors and Standard Bearer of Justice and approved and considered that these men are more than sufficient in these offices, duties and business. And by law they must present themselves to the said commune with silver trumpets which they will have at their own expense for the honor of the commune.³

The details of the obligations of the *trombadori* were written even more clearly a few years later in the Civic Statutes of 1325, where their total number has been augmented from eight to ten by the addition of a player of nakers (*nacchere*) and a small trumpet (*trombetta trombetta*). The seriousness with which the civic government took this ensemble can be seen in the amount of detail that was included in the Statute:

Concerning the *tubatores* of the Commune of Florence:

The *tubatores* of the Commune of Florence are to be six good men, skilled in the trade; with one *cenamellis*, one *cembalellis*, one *naccherarius* and one *trombetta*, all who know how to play the said instruments well. 15 days before the end of their office they are to be reappointed for one year by the Lord Priors of the Guilds and the Standard Bearer of Justice. Each of the *tubatores*, *cembalellarii*, *naccherarii* and *trombetta* are to be paid 4 pounds every month of their term of office and the *cenamellarius* 5 pounds. Should they go with the army or cavalry on behalf of the Commune, the treasurers are to pay each of them 15 *soldi* per day in addition to the aforesaid salary, and moreover they are not to receive the pay until they have returned. All of them are to have horses from the cavalry and the army. And when for any reason they go outside the city of Florence on behalf of the Podesta and the Defender and Captain, if they arrive, perform, and return to Florence on the same day (as often happens), the treasurers will pay them each 4 *soldi* for their horses, in addition to the established salary, notwithstanding any other constituted agreement with the Commune. These *tubatores*, *cembalellarius*, *cenamellarius*, *naccherarius* and *trombetta* are all to have each year from the commune two wool cloaks, one in the winter and the other in summer, the value of 10 pounds, and they are not to receive money in place of the cloaks or anything other than the cloaks. They are bound to wear those cloaks with the lily of the Commune so that they may perform their duties more honorably for the commune of Florence. If, during the time in which they must wear the cloaks, they sell or pawn them, they are to be expelled from office and they are not to be taken back. Every four months the chancellors must provide them with new banners which they carry on the *tubatores*, *cenamellarii*, *cembalellarii*, and *trombetta* so that they may appear respectable at the assemblies and other events of the Commune where it is necessary for them to be present. They must give sufficient satisfaction while exercising their office, and if anyone infringes on this he is to be punished with a fine of 10

pounds. The aforesaid *tubatores* must have and possess silver *tubas*, and the *trombetta* player must have a *tubectam* of silver. They themselves, not others, must serve the Commune of Florence under penalty of 10 pounds for each and every transgression, and according to the Executor of the Regulations concerned with Justice they will be dismissed from office by the Lord Priors of the Guilds and the Standard Bearer of Justice, and replaced by another.... It was added in 1329, third indiction, 20th day of March: they must have *tubas* and *tubectam* of silver by the coming month of May and from that time henceforth to serve as was written, under the aforesaid penalty.⁴

There are minor changes to the statements of appointment in the various government documents over the following 150 years, but all of them specify that the official trumpets—both the large instruments (*tubatores*) and the small one(s) (*trombetta/trombecta*), are to be made of silver. One can assume that, since in 1329 a terminal date was given for the purchase of silver instruments, not all of the musicians had yet complied with this requirement that had first appeared in the civic documents of 1295. It would be of interest to know what was the material in the instruments of those who had not yet purchased the silver trumpets, but no details have been found. Clearly not all available trumpets would have been made of silver, otherwise there would not have been a reason to specify silver in these instances.

Lest it be thought that silver trumpets were the exclusive sign of just this one group, it was also true of the other civic ensemble that carried trumpets, the six civic *bannitores* or town criers, whose job it was to appear in all of the piazzas of the city and to ride into the nearby villages in order to announce the various civic proclamations: the official decisions, notices, obituaries, and banishments. They heralded their presence and assembled the citizens by playing trumpet calls, and those instruments also were required to be made of silver. In the early fourteenth century, therefore, all thirteen civic employees who played “brass” instruments in Florence—six *trombadori*, six *bannitores*, and the *trombetta* player—were required to perform on instruments made of silver. And when in 1386 the city instituted two additional musical ensembles, the *pifferi* and the *trombette*, the requirement for silver instruments was extended to include them; the *trombette* eventually grew to six, and by 1450 the *pifferi* included a trombone or perhaps a slide trumpet.⁵ There also were four trumpets attached to the Parte Guelfa, the strongest political faction in Florence during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but their statutes do not mention the material.⁶

Florence is not an isolated case. The earliest-known document to record an order for trumpets in Italy is from the year 1240, when Frederick II, the Emperor of Tuscany residing in Arezzo, had four silver *tubae* and one *tubecta* made to order.⁷ In Siena there were at least two workshops of silversmiths who were entrusted to make instruments for the city: in 1412 the Siennese government ordered two silver trumpets for the Palace trumpeters from silversmiths Giacomo d'Andreuccio del Mosca and companions, for which the exact weight of the silver was specified. Two years later two additional silver trumpets were ordered to match the earlier pair, this time from a different workshop run by Mariano d'Anbrugio and Goro di ser Neroccio. In 1470 the Palace's silver trombone was sent for repair to Francesco

di Antonio and company, goldsmiths, who used silver from an older instrument to repair the new one.⁸

It is well known that beginning in the late fifteenth century, the city of Nuremberg became a center of music instrument making—especially trumpets and trombones—selling their products to many of the European courts and cities including Prussia, Poland, Venice, Leipzig, Lyon, Denmark, and the court of Maximilian II.⁹ Not all of the records of instrument orders include mention of the type of material, but many of those that do, specify silver: in the early sixteenth century Hans Neuschel was commissioned to make a silver trombone for Leo X (Pope 1513-21), in 1545 a different Nuremberg trumpet maker received a commission to make twenty-four silver trumpets (twelve “deutsche” and twelve “wälsche”) for the King of Poland,¹⁰ and the trumpet made by Anton Schnitzer 1581, now in the Vienna museum, is of silver.¹¹

It would be convenient to be able to conclude at this point simply that in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, “brass” instruments were made of silver; but that is not always the case. Other Nuremberg documents from as early as the fourteenth century record brass trumpets as well as those made of silver.¹² And both documents and surviving Nuremberg instruments from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries indicate that even at that late date both brass and silver were still in use for the manufacture of trumpets and trombones.¹³ In France, although silver was required in Toulouse (mentioned in the records from 1330-1434 as *las trompas del argent de la vila*), in Lyons the specified material was brass,¹⁴ and the Guitbert trumpet, from Limoges in 1442, is made of brass.¹⁵ The situation in England is not clear. Although quite a bit of work has been done on the use of trumpets in the late Middle Ages and Renaissance, only a few details have survived concerning the material used. In 1346 The Black Prince bought two silver instruments for his trumpeters, although an instrument owned by one of his minstrels was made of latten, a mixture of copper, zinc, lead and tin. And Edward I’s inventory listed two trumpets of silver,¹⁶ while the oldest extant European trumpet, the so-called Billingsgate instrument dating from the fourteenth century, is made of copper alloy.¹⁷

The supporting evidence from iconography is similarly ambiguous and also often unreliable. Paintings and manuscript illuminations exist that show both silver and gold color, but we should be quite wary of placing too much confidence in many of the surviving iconographic images due to the penchant for museums to restore works that have suffered the ravages of time. One could assume that a conscientious restorer would simply touch up a damaged image with the same color that was in the original, but in many cases it is not possible to know what was the original color. Silver is especially vulnerable to decay over time; after approximately a hundred years it often completely disappears from a painting, or else turns black.¹⁸ A probable slide trumpet in the cassone painting “Generosity of Scipio,” in the Victoria and Albert Museum is completely missing from the painting,¹⁹ but we can guess that it was a slide trumpet both from context and from its resemblance to another image; it appears with three shawm players, and the hand positions of the performer are similar to those of a player of a visible slide trumpet in the Taddeo Crivelli painting in a Modena manuscript, which is silver.²⁰

The odd-shaped trombone-like instrument in the so-called “Adimari Wedding Cassone” painting has been seriously over-painted and “restored” on numerous occasions (many of them unrecorded), which has led me to suggest that it was originally a slide trumpet and probably painted silver.²¹ The earliest certain depiction of a trombone, the mural painted ca. 1490 by Filippino Lippi in the Carafa Chapel in the church of Santa Maria Sopra Minerva in Rome, is brass colored, but there are some questions as to whether it appears in its original state.²² The instrument as it is now seen has a bell flare that is not found until several hundred years later, rather than the more modest flare depicted in all other early paintings of a sackbut and found on extant instruments from the period.²³ Since most trumpets and trombones from the seventeenth century forward were made of brass, a restorer from the later centuries would have as a visual image that these instruments are gold colored, and thus it is easy to believe that a damaged painting would have been restored as gold—especially when the color has turned to black or disappeared completely. There is no way to know how many of the paintings of trumpets and trombones presently colored gold may have originally been silver.

As a separate issue, many of the references to silver trumpets and trombones—both those referred to above and those implied in the iconography—are in conjunction with representations of authority. The musicians playing these instruments represent a city, a ruler, a political party, or even a nobleman with stature and power. The implication is that silver was symbolic of authority or power, but this kind of symbolism is usually traditional, reaching back many centuries. In that case, what was the tradition and from where did it come? And why was it not shared by all European regions? Further, at some point many civic musical ensembles that had employed silver trumpets must have changed over to trumpets and trombones made of brass. When and why? Was it merely economic or was there a different force at work?

Any information readers can provide that would help clarify the questions about instrument material and symbolism would be greatly appreciated.

Timothy McGee is a specialist in the performance of Western music before 1700. His most recent publications include The Sound of Medieval Song: Vocal Style and Ornamentation According to the Theorists (Clarendon Press, 1998); and “Music, Rhetoric, and The Emperor’s New Clothes,” in Music and Medieval Manuscripts: Paleography and Performance: Essays in Honour of Andrew Hughes, ed. John Haines and Randall Rosenfeld (Ashgate, 2004). He is currently working on a book about the civic musicians of Florence in the late Middle Ages.

NOTES

¹ Because the Florentine calendar year began on 24 March, all documents with dates between 1 January and 23 March do not coincide with present-day dating. I have silently translated the dates to the modern calendar in the text.

² Archivio di Stato, (henceforth ASF): Provvisioni Registri 3, 8 Feb. 1291, fol. 50r.

³ ASF: Provvisioni Registri, 5, 28 Sett. 1295, fol. 134v.

⁴ Statuti No. 6, 1325. Transcribed in Romolo Caggese, ed., *Statuti della Repubblica Fiorentina, Statuto del Podestà dell'anno 1325* (Firenze: Stab. Tipografico E. Ariani, 1921), vol. 2, Rubric XIV.

⁵ On the membership and duties of the Florentine musical ensembles see Keith Polk, "Civic Patronage and Instrumental Ensembles in Renaissance Florence," *Augsburger Jahrbuch für Musikwissenschaft* 3 (1986): 51-68; Timothy J. McGee, "In The Service of the Commune: The Changing Role of Florentine Civic Musicians, 1450-1532," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 30 (1999): 727-43; and McGee, "Dinner Music for the Florentine Signoria 1350-1450," *Speculum* 74 (1999): 95-114.

⁶ The duties of the four *trombetti* and three *pifferi* for the Parte Guelfa are spelled out in ASF: Capitani di Parte Numeri Rossi, No. 4, Statuti 1420, fol. 21r.

⁷ Curt Sachs, *The History of Musical Instruments* (New York: Norton, 1940), 281.

⁸ See Frank A. D'Accone, *The Civic Muse* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 449-50; 553-54.

⁹ Fritz Jahn, "Die Nürnberger Trompeten- und Posaunenmacher im 16. Jahrhundert," *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 7 (1925): 34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 26, 34-36.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹² See Keith Polk, *German Instrumental Music of the Late Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 46.

¹³ Robert Barclay, *The Art of the Trumpet-Maker* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 60.

¹⁴ I am indebted to a private communication from Gretchen Peters for the information about trumpets in France.

¹⁵ See Pierre-Yves Madeuf, Jean-Francois Madeuf, and Graham Nicholson, "The Guitbert Trumpet: A Remarkable Discovery," *Historic Brass Society Journal* 11 (1999): 181-86.

¹⁶ Cited in George Richard Rastall, "Secular Musicians in Late Medieval England" (Ph.D. diss., Manchester University, 1968), Chapter IV. For other work on English trumpeters and minstrels see Richard Rastall, "Some English Consort-Groupings of the Late Middle Ages," *Music & Letters* 55/2 (1974): 179-202; and idem, "The Minstrels and Trumpeters of Edward IV: Some Further Thoughts," *Plainsong and Medieval Music* 13 (2004): 163-69.

¹⁷ On the Billingsgate trumpet see Graeme Lawson and Geoff Egan, "Medieval Trumpet from the City of London," *Galpin Society Journal* 41 (1988): 63-66; and 44 (1991): 151-56; and John Webb, "The Billingsgate Trumpet," *Galpin Society Journal* 41 (1988): 59- 62.

¹⁸ I am grateful to Florentine art restorer Luisella Pennucci for this information.

¹⁹ Reproduced in Timothy J. McGee, "Misleading Iconography: The Case of the 'Adimari Wedding Cassone'." *Imago Musicae* 9-12 (1992-95): 150.

²⁰ Reproduced in *ibid.*

²¹ I present my evidence in *ibid.*

²² In private communication art historian Jonathan Katz Nelson, a specialist in the work of Filippo Lippi, has confirmed that the painting has been restored, although how much has yet to be determined.

²³ Private communication from Stewart Carter.