

Remnants of Some Late Sixteenth-Century Trumpet Ensemble Music

Michael Gale

Introduction

“Past ages,” Reinhard Strohm has written, “have left more riddles than evidence: the one-way communication between them and us, which we call ‘history,’ is interrupted by silences.”¹ The history of the trumpet ensemble before the seventeenth century is a particularly good example of this, since verifiable facts only occasionally punctuate its largely conjectural narrative. Although countless archival documents attest to the employment of groups of trumpeters throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance, we cannot even be sure about basic organological issues, let alone more specific questions regarding their repertoire and its transmission. And while the earliest written sources, dating from the final quarter of the sixteenth century and into the seventeenth, provide us with some information, in many respects they pose as many questions as they answer. For example, we cannot say with any certainty when the tradition of ensemble performance represented by these sources first came into use, nor when it died out. Furthermore, owing to the incompleteness of its written form, most of this repertory can be reconstructed only conceptually, with but a handful of more completely notated examples permitting fuller realization. The purpose of this study, then, is to suggest some ways in which we might look *beyond* these written sources toward creating a more detailed picture of the ensemble’s musical activities.

The story so far

The main sources of information regarding the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century trumpet ensemble are the manuscript notebooks of Magnus Thomsen, Heinrich Lübeck, and Cesare Bendinelli (his *Volume di tutta l’arte della trombetta*).² The writings of Michael Praetorius and Marin Mersenne, along with Girolamo Fantini’s printed tutor *Modo per imparare a sonare di tromba* (1638), also provide us with some useful background information.³ Although a transcription and study of the Thomsen and Lübeck sources was published as long ago as 1936, it was not until relatively recently that their importance, together with that of Bendinelli’s book, has been realized. Prior to this, the triadic patterns⁴ that constitute most of these three sources’ contents were assumed to be monophonic signals.⁵ However, in the commentary that accompanied his facsimile edition of Bendinelli’s book, Edward Tarr outlined how this material actually represents the written foundations of a partially notated tradition of ensemble music.⁶ In the most extensive study of these sources to date, Peter Downey was able to show that they contain a good deal of common material, suggesting that these ensemble practices were widespread across Europe.⁷

To summarize briefly, the trumpet ensemble constructed its music from the single notated part, known as the *quinta* or *principale*, that formed the structural basis of each piece. This was sounded over two drone parts, one on the tonic and one on the dominant pitch. The *principale*, triadic in nature and generally employing only the fourth to eighth harmonics, was shadowed below by the *alto e basso* part at a distance of one harmonic. The ensemble was completed by an upper part known as the *clarino*, using largely the eighth to thirteenth harmonics, which either supplied pre-existing melodic material from memory or improvised diminutions according to well-known conventions.⁸

The fact that the predominant melodic part of this music was either improvised or memorized (apart from those examples notated by Thomsen and Bendinelli) obviously results in a thorny problem for the modern inquirer.⁹ So, given the limited textual evidence, how might one hope to gain further insights into such a repertory? The words of Howard Mayer Brown raise an important point:

We are tempted [. . .] to consider repertories for particular instruments quite separately from one another, without considering that they may all reflect common practices. The viol players among us, for example, seem only to want to look at music for viola da gamba, the lutenists at lute music and the recorder players at recorder music.¹⁰

This is perhaps something of an exaggeration; it is difficult to think of a scholar of lute music who is unaware of the vast overlap between his field and, say, the keyboard repertory. Nevertheless, such an attitude persists in some fields, and it is fair to say that trumpeters have tended to be excluded from accounts of more “mainstream” instrumental activity. Indeed, the trumpet ensemble sources discussed above are conspicuous in their absence from the “Sources of instrumental ensemble music to 1630” article in the latest edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.¹¹ Such marginalization could have arisen for a number of reasons, perhaps stemming from the notion of the trumpet corps as a primarily military institution and hence segregated from other court musicians. Alternatively, it could be that the trumpeters’ (perceived) semi-literacy has afforded their music “lowbrow” status in the eyes of some scholars; the harmonic and melodic limitations of their musical idiom certainly do not help matters in this respect.¹² However, this is a much broader historiographical issue than can be satisfactorily addressed within the parameters of this study, so for now I will be content to tentatively identify points of intersection between other repertories and that of the trumpet ensemble.

Another approach to a partially lost tradition

Before discussing connections between supposedly disparate repertories, it is useful to summarize some of those already highlighted by Downey. For instance, he notes how a number of *principale* parts by Thomsen and Bendinelli are altered versions of popular melodies, with any pitch unobtainable in the lower climes of the harmonic series altered to its nearest viable alternative. Thus, the *principale* retained an allusive contour of its original

model while the melody was overlaid (from memory) by the clarinist (Example 1).¹³ Furthermore, Downey has identified one of Bendinelli's sonatas as having been designed for *alternatim* performance with the motet *Fit porta Christe* by Lassus, who was also employed at the Bavarian court. The *principale* of Bendinelli's sonata is a "natural-harmonics" version of the second-highest voice part, which occupies the equivalent position in the five-part texture of the motet.¹⁴ Downey also reveals a sonata commissioned for a wedding in 1584 to be a parody version of the somewhat Bacchanalian chanson *J'ai veu le cerf*.¹⁵



Example 1

- a. Melody to *Fux beiss mich nicht* (after Downey, *Trumpet*, 1:100)
- b. Excerpt from *Sonata von undten auf Fux beiss mich nit*
(Bendinelli, *Tutta l'arte della Trombetta*, f. 19)

In order to identify further crosscurrents, we must approach our problem from the opposite direction by considering instrumental music that could have been used by the trumpet ensemble. One interesting area of enquiry is the plethora of "battle" pieces dating from across the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Many of these make stylized references to the sound of trumpet, often during the course of a programmatic scheme. Such allusions tend to be triadic in nature, whereas the military signals preserved in extant notated sources use mainly the second to fourth harmonics, with the triadic register coming into use only in the later court signals. Exact quotation, at least so far as we would recognize it, is generally eschewed in favor of musical effect.¹⁶

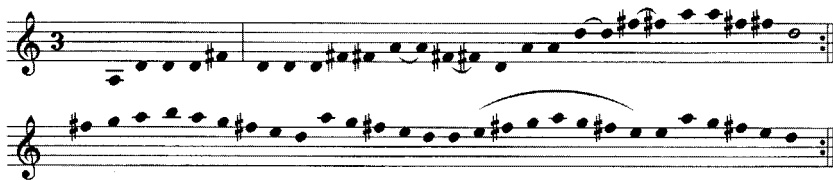
Many of these "battles" also feature quotations of folksongs, something that Warren Kirkendale, in a fascinating study of two of these, describes as "an almost obligatory component [of the genre], representing the singing of the opposing troops on the march."¹⁷ I will focus here upon the regular quotations of *La Girometta*, since Gioseffo Zarlino includes a curious version of it in his *Sopplimenti musicale* (1588).¹⁸ His setting consists of a treble melody, featuring a xenophobic text worthy of any battlefield, which is superimposed over drone parts on *c*, *g*, and *c'* (Example 2). Notably, Zarlino includes *trombe militari* on a short list of instruments that might perform the song in this manner, raising the intriguing possibility that this material may have been adopted for use by the trumpet ensemble.



Example 2

Girometta melody (from Zarlino, *Sopplimenti musicale*, p. 284; barlines supplied editorially; text omitted)

Besides Zarlino's remarks, there are other reasons to suppose that this was the case. First, the same melody makes an appearance in a number of "trumpet" pieces, that is, pieces for other instruments that depict the sound of trumpets. These include a *Trombe* for violin preserved in a diatonic tablature manuscript (that is, one in which each number represents a degree of the diatonic scale rather than a chromatic step) of Italian provenance.¹⁹ Although the nature of this notation renders any attempt at transcription approximate at best, with a "trumpet" piece one at least has the luxury of opting for major-mode transcription over minor with a high degree of confidence. And, despite the vagaries of the notation, one can nevertheless discern the distinctive contour of the *Girometta* tune in the final section of the piece (Example 3).²⁰



Example 3

Trombe, D-Ngm Hs. 33748, fasc. 7, fl. 1v (rhythmic values omitted)

Another such piece, a keyboard *Trombetta* ascribed to Gio[vanni] Batt[ist]a Ferrini, employs a tonic-dominant ostinato throughout, presumably in reference to the lower parts of trumpet ensemble.²¹ The upper parts alternate between triadic "signaling" and more melodic material that is largely restricted to the notes of the harmonic series, except in the more florid divisions towards the end (we can permit Ferrini some compositional license!). A *Girometta* statement is woven into this tapestry between measures 28-37, presumably still accompanied by this tonic-dominant ostinato, although the left-hand part is unwritten after

