

## **Thursday 10 May 2012: Michael Withers: Medieval Instruments:**

Was it really some 40,000 years ago that the first musical instruments emerged? Most of us who attended Michael Withers fascinating talk would have guessed at a thousand or maybe even two but we learned that remnants of flute like instruments, fashioned from bone, attest that it was so. Later instruments, he told us, were generally made from less durable materials such as wood and bamboo and so unfortunately less physical evidence remains. However the study of contemporary carvings, paintings and statues has proved to be an invaluable source of information about the structure of medieval instruments and when and how they were played. Despite the ravages of time examples do exist and Michael, ably accompanied by his wife Dorothy, demonstrated his amazing musicality by playing a piece on a bamboo flute dating from 1260.

He then moved on to a more detailed review of stringed instruments the oldest of which were generally plucked, the harp and lyre being good examples, while later ones were more often bowed. The lyre was once quite widespread but few early examples remain today although one was discovered on the Isle of Skye dating back some 2300 years. Interestingly ownership of lyres was common amongst the Viking invaders who apparently were not only required to be expert fighters but also were expected to be well versed in poetry and accomplished players of the instrument. Early harps also fell victim to the ravages of time and few examples exist today having either rotted or been used for firewood during periods of extreme hardship. Nevertheless in medieval times they would have been common across much of Europe and the Middle East.

The impossibly named crwth, the rebec, the medieval and renaissance viols as well as the fiddle are all examples of instruments which were normally bowed. The rebec had a pear shaped body with a rounded back and was usually played against the neck but at times it was fashionable to hold it vertically resting on the thigh. Luckily for us Michael had brought one along so we were able to enjoy its unique sound while Dorothy sang in accompaniment. Following this we heard a recorded piece played on the crwth an instrument which Michael described as being like a lyre but with a finger board and which over the centuries progressively changed to look more like a violin. Other stringed instruments of the period included the lute and the psaltery a picture of which showed it to be a rather odd looking box shaped instrument which was played by plucking like a harp. Then with Dorothy singing Michael went on to play Douce Dame on a medieval fiddle before moving on to talk about wind instruments.

Common woodwinds of the period included the recorder, the flute, pan pipes and the bagpipes which were popular right across Europe. Less well known today, although very common at the time, was the shawm a double reed instrument made from wood and in appearance reminiscent of the recorder and which apparently was the forerunner of the oboe. Michael once again demonstrated his remarkable versatility by playing a 13<sup>th</sup> century dance from the Chansonier du Roi on a fine example from his collection.

Michael brought an wonderful range of instruments with him and the next one to be revealed to us was a hummelchen dating from around 1400AD. Originating in Germany this early bagpipe apparently was at the time considered to be a chamber instrument. Michael proceeded to demonstrate its unique sound by playing a song entitled Stella Splendens from Libre Vermell de Monserrat delightfully accompanied by Dorothy. Following this we learned a little about the pibgorn, a single reed Welsh instrument, and the crumhorn, a double reed windcap horn with a characteristic curved J shape. The aptly named rackets, a somewhat larger and rather strange looking instrument, was normally made up of nine pipes joined at the ends and contained within a cylindrical structure. This produced a deep vibrating tone and Henry VIII may well have played Pastime With Good Company, his most famous composition, on one. It is well known that he was an accomplished composer and most of us believed that he also wrote Greensleeves but apparently this is just a widely held myth!

The final woodwind to be discussed by Michael was the recorder, an instrument which is all too often regarded as relatively simple and therefore suitable mainly for beginners on which to learn the basics before moving onto something more sophisticated. He pointed out that this is far from the case and in fact it is a family of instruments being available in base, tenor, soprano and sopranino versions. To prove his point he concluded his excellent presentation by playing a lively Neapolitan dance entitled Soltarello, a fitting finale to a most informative and entertaining evening given by an incredibly versatile and talented musician.

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