



Pierre Gabriel Buffardin (24 March 1693, Toulon – 13 January 1768, Paris) was one of the most famous flutists of his time and the pioneer of the Flûte Traversière in Germany. In 1710, he travelled together with the French Ambassador to Constantinople where he became the teacher of Johann Jacob Bach, Johann Sebastian's youngest brother. From 1715 to 1749, Buffardin was the flutist in the Dresden Hofkapelle, which was one of the finest and best-known orchestras of that time. Musicians such as Pisendel, Veracini, Weiss, Zelenka and Quantz were among his colleagues. The latter also became one of Buffardin's students. It is very likely that there were also contacts to Johann Sebastian Bach, certainly to Friedemann, who also enjoyed flute lessons. It is documented that in 1728, Buffardin persuaded Friedrich, the Crown Prince and later King of Prussia, to learn the flute and presented him with a "Buffardin'sche Flöte" [Buffardin-style flute]. Obviously, Buffardin was also involved in the construction of flutes. The development of the screw cork as well as the foot register were attributed to him in 1759 by Antoine Mahaut in his "Nouvelle Method..." and support this assumption.

Thoughts on the "Buffardin Le Fils" flute

Martin Wenner, Oktober 2018, revised August 2019

One day in October 2017, I received an unexpected visit to our workshop: a friend came together with my American colleague Rod Cameron. We had never met each other before, and so it was a fun and very interesting encounter. The two had some old flutes in a bag with them, one of which immediately fascinated and captivated me. It was a four-piece flute made of boxwood, which was very nice and beautifully made with the signature BUFFARDIN LE FILS on every part. The instrument had appeared on eBay in 2015 (old flute) and had been bought by a German flutist. What a lucky coincidence!

The flute is of excellent craftsmanship, which was not carried out by a layman, but is a testimony to masterly work: its profiles are precisely turned and fine, the design mature and well-proportioned, yet individual and independent. The wood employed is boxwood of the finest quality; the rings are made of ivory and the key of silver. The ivory rings, which encase and seem to frame the socket, are striking. I had never seen this specific construction feature on a baroque flute before.

Like many surviving eighteenth century flutes, the "Buffardin Le Fils" flute has not been preserved without alterations and damage. The embouchure is slightly enlarged and the outer edge is sanded down to approximately 9.5 mm, so that the original size cannot be determined. Furthermore, the middle joint has obviously been shortened and in addition is very ovaly distorted. The result of these changes is that the instrument presents only a limited indication of its original qualities and plays at a high pitch.

Nevertheless, the instrument radiates an uncommon fascination, since typical characteristics of French and equally German flute-making culture combine here. The inner bore tapers dramatically in the lower joint and foot, which can only be seen with instruments of Potsdam flute-making by masters such as Freyer, Martin and Kirst, but also with Quantz. Moreover, the undercut of the fifth finger hole, which is of decisive importance for the tone F and F-sharp, is large. These design features made a clear difference between F and F-sharp, with the disadvantage that the fundamental tone D is flat. French features include the outer design and the round embouchure, which was probably much smaller than it is today.

For our version, the original length of the middle joint had to be reconstructed first, as well as the original embouchure size, resulting in the original pitch. This was of course difficult, as there are no comparable instruments with the same signature and construction. Nevertheless, the original length can be calculated by means of proportions (golden ratio) and the original size of the embouchure can be determined by experiments. As a result of these considerations and experiments, we came to a pitch of around 415 Hz, which admittedly sounds very "practical". On the other hand, this pitch is recorded in Dresden around 1750.

The "Le Fils" signature was initially a puzzle to us because a son of Buffardin (possible birth from 1733 onwards) could not have made this instrument before 1750 or later. However, recent findings and meticulous research have shown that the father of Pierre Gabriel Buffardin, Jean Joseph Buffardin (1664 - 1726), is mentioned in documents as a turner and instrument maker. The additional words "Le Fils" in the signature now, of course, take on a new meaning and make the famous flutist Pierre Gabriel Buffardin himself the maker of this instrument. Whether the addition "Le Fils" was used by him only until 1726 or also later is unclear.

The dating of the flute is difficult and could only be achieved using further facts and comparative instruments. The aforementioned addition to the signature might suggest that the flute was made before 1726. Construction features such as the proportioning of the individual parts, the inner bore, the relatively large keyhole and the undercuts of the finger holes, however, point to a later date of origin, perhaps around 1740.

Despite all these ambiguities and open questions, perhaps precisely because of them, this instrument radiates a special fascination that led us to venture to make a reconstruction. After more than a year of hard work, innumerable attempts and failures, a flute has now been created that has an independent character and special charisma, a warm and at the same time extremely stable sound, which offers secure intonation.

Incidentally, it should be mentioned that sonatas attributed to Pierre Gabriel Buffardin have reappeared and are due for release. Special thanks to Wim Brabants, who did so much research.

