

Interview with Alec Loretto

Paul Richardson

Alec Loretto is a recorder maker that lives in New Zealand. During many years he has travelled the world over teaching recorder courses and giving lectures on the theoretical and practical aspects of recorder making. He has played, measured and learnt from some of the best original recorders in museums and private collection throughout the world. The knowledge that he has obtained over these many years is and has been passed on to the next generation through his courses. I would like to express my gratitude to him for all the help he has given me on recorder making and for doing this interview.

Paul Richardson – How did you become a recorder maker?

Alec Loretto - Many years ago I was a recorder teacher. One of my younger students sat on her plastic recorder and broke the body. I repaired it using glue but some of it leaked into the interior bore and dried there. I noticed that some of the octaves were out of tune and when I took out the glue they were again in tune. This astonishing revelation, the fact that this slight change in the interior bore effected the tuning, urged me to continue experimenting on other aspects of the instrument which concluded in me becoming a recorder maker. So I more or less became addicted and couldn't stop.

P.R. – Why did you begin making copies of original instruments?

A.L. – I really liked the sound of these fantastic instruments. Being able to play them was for me a very extraordinary

and satisfactory experience. This influenced me a lot because up until then I had only played modern instruments.

P.R. – You played many original instruments? Does it affect a recorder maker having been in contact with these original recorders?

A.L. - A lot. But one mustn't believe that all of the original instruments that have been able to survive are great to play.

They just are not, however they could have been great when they were made. Although, being able to play a good original is very intimidating and a bit scary. It establishes a certain level of craftsmanship that is hard to even reach much less surpass, and no modern instruments that I have seen have been able to capture the essence of these good surviving original recorders. But even though, makers hopefully will never stop their quest in order to obtain this essence.

P.R. – Do these old recorders need to be played differently from the modern ones?

A.L. - Yes definitely. The fingerings are different and the tuning is also different and therefore this demands a different way of playing the instrument altogether along with the way in which you produce the sound. Recorder players need to understand and use these important factors which I just mentioned. It's a pity that nowadays there are such strict rules implemented in the museums and also we will have a new generation of recorder makers that will never have touched an original.

P.R. – It seems that a recorder player or maker who has had some sort of contact with original instruments will have in many cases his point of view changed?

A.L. - That's correct, it's as if one has seen maybe Venice or the Amazon jungle and due to the experience he has had his point of view change forever and he is not the exact same person.

P.R. - Do the types of wood really influence the sound of an instrument?

A.L. - Some scientist say no and some say yes. But the majority of the players and makers say yes however some say no. As far as I am concerned the type of wood does influence the sound.

.P.R.. - What are your favorite woods?

A.L. - The answer is simple. I prefer for medieval instruments European plum, for renaissance instruments European maple and for baroque instruments European box wood and for instruments that will be playing music of this century, granadillo o palosanto.

P.R. - The method of drying wood has changed from time to time.

Is there any common method that most makers use nowadays?

A.L. - Yes. We all like our wood dry, clean and without any imperfections and with an interesting grain pattern and all of this at a good price. The changes in drying have been rather dramatic. Few, if almost no makers would leave his wood in a stream for years, bury it in horse manure or suspended in air. All of these were authentic techniques used once upon a time. Nowadays it's normal to dry it with air, steam or microwave and of course the softer woods are impregnated with some type of wax or paraffin by the factory makers.

P.R. - What do you think about the use of ivory?

A.L. - I have never used it and I never will. I like my recorders made of wood and I like happy elephants.

P.R. - Can you compare the differences in sound and performance of the instruments of Bressan, Denner and Stanesby?

A.L. - In many aspects they are similar. They are very pleasing to the eye, they fit in your hands nicely and they are also nice to play. They are not loud but have a rich beautiful sound. The instruments of the two English makers usually have a lighter more opaque sound and have a stronger richer lower register. The Denner recorders have a more brilliant sound, combined with a light faster articulation in the upper register.

P.R. What advice could you offer to recorder students?

A.L. They have to realize that it is an instrument in miniature and they must learn to utilize its limited resources to the maximum. It must be used with all of it possibilities to transmit the message and of course this is valid for any period. One must speak through the instrument in a musically interesting way even though there may be a mistake.

P.R. - What's the difference between an excellent recorder player and a normal one?

A.L. - The excellent recorder players are simply boring and I classify them as also normal. The excellent player that is musical, makes music and that is what the listener wants to hear, music. Some years ago there were quite a few of these musical players but nowadays there are very few. While the technical level has gone up enormously the artistic level has gone down. Nowadays such difficult works are played in public that not in the very recent past were they even attempted. Here is an example of technical virtuosity of the first order but very little art and very

little musicality. These last two qualities are exactly the attributes the recorder player with his miniature instrument must cultivate.

I am sure that if the majority of the players we are talking about that record and give concerts were persuaded to sing in a chorus a couple of years under the direction of a good director, that their musicality and artistic talent would surely be noticed when they played afterwards. They would still have their technique but they would begin to look at music from a different and more interesting point of view. They would be speaking through the instrument. It would be a musical message via the player using his recorder and this is applicable to the recorder music from which ever period it may be in.

P.R. - You were talking about CDs. What do you think about the current musical industry?

A.L. - The control that the recording engineers has over the final outcome is amazing. The finished product, often is the result of combining short pieces of many recordings. The individual notes can be inserted, amplified, reverberated, etc. Also large parts can be treated, taken out or even super-imposed not to mention improved. In the final product there is an absence of technical flaws or mistakes thanks to the modern technology in the recording studio. The effect of this is that it makes live performances a very demanding enterprise because the musician can't make even the smallest error without being compared to the recording. Therefore this changes the emphasis in preparation to the technical aspect. So the outcome of CDs seems to have created this message, "in musical performances you can not make

mistakes", which elevates the technical aspect to such a level that other things are left behind. Recorder players with this technical phobia should read what the critics wrote about some of the concerts that Rubinstein gave. According to Rubinstein, throughout his career there were enough mistakes to write a small symphony, the way in which he played was classified as just after that of Liszt.

P.R. - You made some instruments for Bruggen. Which ones?

A.L. - Small ones: I think he liked my sopranos, sixth-flutes and the sopranos.

P.R. - Was he a difficult client?

A.L. - It gave me a bit of a scare a first when he first started trying my instruments. However, later it became a pleasure to hear him dig deep inside and bring out ever thing that the recorder had to offer and then some. He really knows about recorder and all their possibilities.

P.R. - How were his concerts?

A.L. - It's a pity that many modern players haven't had the chance to listen to Bruggen play in a direct concert. I was lucky to be in the right place at the right time, in small churches, concert halls and such. I heard him make mistakes that would not be acceptable nowadays by the technical experts, but it was a delight to hear such beautiful sounds as well as music and he had the ability to surprise the listeners musically. That's it, musicality was at the top of the list.

P.R. - I understand that you were on a jury not long ago with Tom Prescott and Bob Marvin at a symposium.

A.L. - Yes, in this symposium you are talking about, Bob spoke about where the recorder came from, and Tom spoke about where it is today and I spoke about where it is going.

P.R. And where exactly is it going?

A.L. - Presently the recorder is suffering from enormous changes, there are models that now exist that offer more than three octaves. It will all end up, I think, with a broader and a stronger more uniform sound and with possibly more holes. And that means that there will most likely have to be keys, using the Boehm system of fingering in order to get three and a half octaves. And that will I feel give a push to the contemporary composer to write music for the recorder.

P.R. - Do you think that these changes will happen to all of the different sizes?

A.L. - Oh no! Only to the altos and tenors and maybe the basses too. Each one could be extended a bit lower by say a half note or even a whole note. This extension could add more room in order to add more finger holes.

P.R. - Are you making any of these new models?

A.L. - Good heavens no. This must be the work for the new pioneers.

P.R. - If you are not one of these new pioneers, how would you describe yourself?

A.L. I wouldn't describe myself in any way, I would prefer that others do that, but I heard someone the other day at a gathering amongst makers and players say that von Huene and I are more or less old statistics in the world of recorders but it was said in such a caring way that it, in a way, moved me.

P.R. And the future?

A.L. - Who knows? And since I haven't finished my work completely. But I am getting close to the final phase and I am travelling a lot. It's true that I am making less recorders than in years past and being much more selective in the orders I am taking.

Also, I am making a lot less specialized tools and machinery for recorder makers. I am writing a lot more material about recorders and I hope to get that published in the future.

P.R. - Do you think you will be remembered in recorder history?

A.L. Who knows, it's possible.

P.R. - How do you think you could be remembered?

A.L. I would prefer the question to how would you like to be remembered?

P.R. O.K. How?

A.L.- All makers are remembered by their instruments but I hope to be remembered for other reasons such as: for feeling the necessity to help eliminate the ignorance that surrounds recorders. Afterwards teaching music but before putting on my hat as a big time recorder maker I think it would be logical to mention first of all the conferences and the courses on wood wind instrument making. I like to think that many people and makers have been able to take advantage of my teachings and that knowledge of the instrument is much more complete. Many players and makers have learned in my courses how to tune, adjust and take care of their instruments. At the same time there are dozens of successful makers who are currently working that got their start working as my students. And no less important is the fact that I have made specialized tools for these makers. There are hundreds and hundreds of recorders around the world that were made using these tools that were made in my workshop.

P.R. - Such as?

A.L. - Cutting blades for the labium, machines to make blocks, windway cutters and chaflan cutters just to name a few.

P.R. – And they were all designed by you?

A.L. – Most of them but not all. With the *windway-cutter* I had a lot of help from Paul Whinray who is another maker from New Zealand and also Dave Whitehead, an engineer. I have made quite a few and they are used throughout the world. The design was not patented and others like Roessler have made their own, although they did not need my help.

P.R. – With your *windway-cutter* one can control the canals to the extent that they all come out the same, however, when a maker makes a series of the same instruments, one of them very often comes out much better. Why?

A.L. – This is simple. Maker don't know for sure why. The production is the same and there is no visible difference, however, one in the series stands out as superior. We just don't know and of course if we knew the all important mix of factors needed to produce the superior instrument we would always repeat it.

P.R. If you had the chance to repeat your life as a recorder maker, what sort of changes would maker, if any.

A.L. – I am fairly sure that I would repeat my work because I really do enjoy it. As far as the mechanics of production are concerned I would make sure that the machines did most of the repetitive work

Which would leave more time for me as a maker to concentrate on the tuning and voicing which are factors that are necessary in order to get the best sound from each instrument.

P.R. It seems that you are almost the only maker that seems inclined to share your knowledge with others.

A.L. That is not strictly true. In these last few years some of the others have

begun to share ideas. Others don't want to because this business is very competitive and they are not interested in helping the competition. Yes if you are involved in teaching you have to answer many questions and there are many. Now you can explain how to make a recorder with all the details, as well as how to make wine and how to drive a race car, but this don't not mean that those who are listening can or will be able to repeat the process.

P.R. – Amen. Quite a few makers that I know work alone and seem to have very little contact with other people. Is the life of a instrument maker a bit monastic?

A.L. – Certainly one can be in the workshop for long periods of time, working with wood and not with people. And yes it can be difficult. I am sure that this explains why so many makers, having more than enough work, attend exhibitions. It's a way to meet new people. To find the right equilibrium in life is a difficult and very worthy goal.

P.R. – Some makers are selective when they accept new clients.

A.L. – Some that have only a few orders are content with those that they have but one with many orders and not enough time can be more selective.

They can ask for details concerning one's musical life

And if they are teachers or if they play concerts or if they have made

recordings. Those that have none of these qualifications may find themselves on a long waiting list. This way the maker is sure that his limited numbers of instruments are going to the right people.

P.R. – How many instruments can be made in a year?

A.L. - As many as possible but normally they can make around 50 or 60.

P.R. I don't think there are any surviving baroque recorders that were tuned together as far as consorts are concerned, were there?

A.L. - Baroque recorder were not made in consorts so the tuning and the voicing as to being in a group were not considered to be that all important. The recorder consort was, of course, the period just a bit earlier in the renaissance. The use of baroque recorders being played in consort is a modern practice of the 20th century.

P.R. - How did this begin?

A.L. - Arnold Dolmetsch made the first modern baroque recorders and he used them in the first festival that began in Haslemere England. The idea for these recorders took hold and without knowing it he made the standard recorder of the 20th century. So other recorders are often classified as specialized instruments

(Van Eyck, Ganassi, medieval, renaissance). It was just by chance that these baroque instruments were made in various sizes and played together in consort. I have often said that the recorder world would have a better place if Carl Dolmetsch had lost a renaissance recorder instead of the his father's baroque alto. Arnold Dolmetsch would have made the replacement of a renaissance recorder and this one would have become the standard instrument. The baroque recorder would be on the list of specialized instruments. Alas, history can not be undone. Arnold Dolmetsch made baroque recorders and this marked the direction of our instrument. The king of recorders is, the *modern baroques*.

But long live the other specialized types!

P.R. - Is the recorder world controversial?

A.L. - In many ways yes but I see this as a healthy sign. When players, maker, sellers, composers and editors don't sell eye to eye

And do not agree, this can bring about good things. Often new ideas appear and in some cases historical details are filtered in and things become clear.

P.R. - You have been in the eye of the hurricane at times, haven't you?

A.L. - Only twice. Some articles in the first volume of Early Music caused some controversy and also the Ganassi affair in the American Recorder that lasted for way too long. However, in the end both cases the outcome was that I was right.

P.R. But you through more wood on the fire?

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A.L. - Not at all and for me it was exhausting. The Ganassi affair caused me a lot of anguish and I almost abandoned the world of recorders.

P.R. - Will the recorder ever be considered a serious instrument?

A.L. - You mean to be considered on the same level as the piano, violin or organ, for example?

P.R. - Yes.

A.L. For many recorder players yes but for others that play "serious" instruments, I have my doubts. Many of these people are amazed when they hear a recorder played musically but that's all that happens, they are amazed but they don't change their way of thinking. I feel that for most people it will always be considered a school instrument. Clowns that ride one wheel bikes have the same problem. People are amazed but nobody takes the one

wheel bike seriously. I have been told "important", that is the question. For me that this does make the clowns a bit sad the satisfaction from hearing the recorder well played and well listened to, is more important than the question, Recorder players could learn somethingis it an important instrument. Just like from them without buying a one wheel the clowns, the recorder players have to bike. establish the correct order of their

P.R. - But is the instrument musically priorities.
important? Interview, Paul Richardson, Oxford,

A.L. - Much more today that ever in it'sEngland, March 1996

history as well as being much more abundant. Never in it's history was it an important instrument. But it is important if we consider that many people owe their work to the recorder: composers, editors, writers , professionals and sellers and a long etc. Does this really make it "musically