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COMMUNICATION

The following communication has been received from Robert Howe:

In his valuable article, "William Milhouse and the English Classical Oboe" (this JOURNAL 22 [1996]: 42–88), Cecil Adkins analyzes the oboe output of the Milhouse family. He concludes that straight-top oboes (Halfpenny type C) were used in churches outside of London to accompany congregational psalm-singing. He suggests (pp. 66 and 76) that these oboes were purchased by churches because of their purportedly lower cost, relative to the English "Classical" oboe (Halfpenny type D). This suggestion is based on the observation that prices paid for oboes by churches (1744–1811) ranged from 10 to 16 shillings. Unfortunately, only four such prices are known (p. 76), which does not constitute a meaningful sample.

Moreover, one may argue to the contrary. A straight-top oboe is not necessarily cheaper than a type D. Turning a straight-top oboe requires removing more wood from the unfinished instrument. This increases the work time and labor costs, and creates a greater likelihood of cracking during the turning process. Furthermore, the price differences that Dr. Adkins notes may be due to the cost of materials used rather than to the cost of turning. The use of silver keys instead of brass, or the placement of ivory mounts, would raise the cost of an oboe. Although those studied by Adkins all had keys of brass (p. 56), straight-top oboes with silver keys do exist. I have straight-top oboes by Milhouse and Cahusac with ivory mounts and silver keys; the keys on the Cahusac are hallmarked by John Hale. Adkins's fig. 3 shows two Milhouse straight-top oboes with a single ivory mount, and one with three.

It is unlikely that straight-top oboes were the work of apprentices or of less skilled workers, and thus cheaper (p. 75). The two oboes mentioned above are skillfully made and play wonderfully (both play best at $a' = 420$ Hz and are thus unsuitable for modern use). Two full-time performers of eighteenth-century oboes have played the Milhouse with me. Both found it to be one of the best voiced eighteenth-century instruments that they had encountered.

If we cannot justify assigning a lower cost to the straight-top oboe, why was this oboe relegated to use in country churches? Perhaps the reason is not financial, but instead aesthetic. The type D oboe is a very elegant, handsome instrument, with ostentatious turnings and a broad, onion-bulbed top, features which give it a sensuous, quasi-erotic appearance.

The straight-top oboe, by contrast, is visually plain and chaste. Indeed, Adkins "wonders if these 'ugly ducklings' would have pleased a sophisticated city musician" (p. 66). I propose that this very form and shape of the straight-top oboe favors its use in country churches. The straight-top oboe, simply put, looks much

more humble and pious than does the type D oboe. To this day, Protestant churches favor the use of simple decorative schemes.

This hypothesis is supported by the existence of a unique English form of tenor oboe, the *vox humana*. Pitched a fifth below the oboe, the *vox humana* was straight in form and devoid of decoration.¹ It contrasts to the very beautiful tenor oboes, *cors anglais*, and oboes da caccia produced on the Continent in the mid- to late eighteenth century.² Baines notes that the *vox humana*, like the straight-top oboe, was used extensively in English country churches.³

Dr. Adkins has shown that the straight-top oboe was probably used in country churches, while the type D oboe was used for art music. I theorize further that this segregation may have been due to the appearance of the straight-top oboe, rather than (or in addition to) any difference in price between the two types. Whether the straight-top oboe was adopted by country churches, or was developed specifically for their use, must remain speculative.

1. Arnold Myers, *Historical Musical Instruments in the Edinburgh University Collection*, vol. 1: *The Illustrations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Collection of Historic Musical Instruments, 1990), 81.

2. Gunther Joppig, *The Oboe and the Bassoon* (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1988), 103, and Philip Bate, "Oboe," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan, 1980), 13:473–74.

3. Anthony Baines, "Tenor oboe," *The Oxford Companion to Musical Instruments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 333.