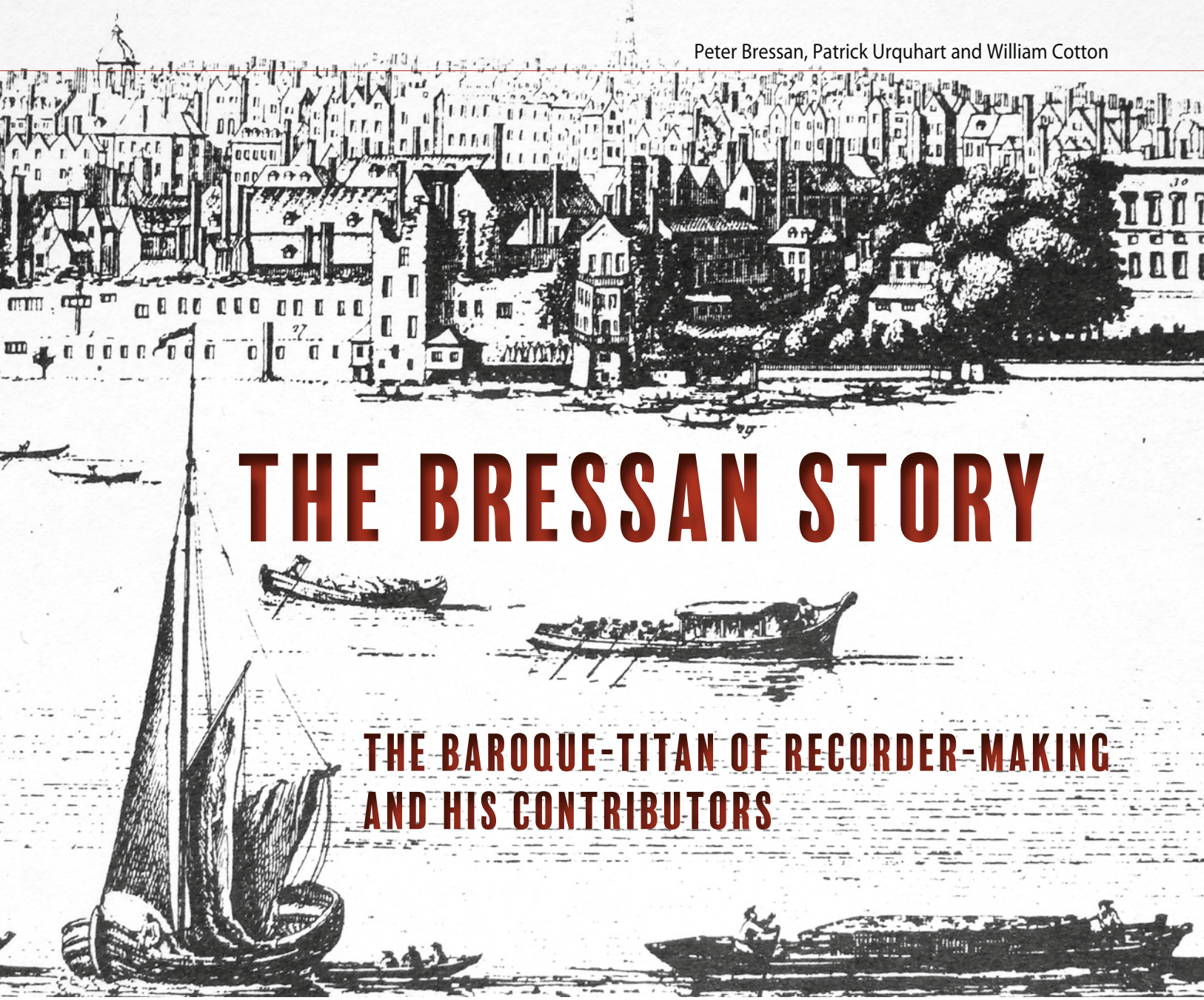

THE BRESSAN STORY

THE BAROQUE-TITAN OF RECORDER-MAKING AND HIS CONTRIBUTORS

Detailed view from Samuel & Nathaniel Buck's »Panorama of the River Thames from Westminster Bridge to London Bridge« showing Bressan's house. (Total size of the huge engraving: 30×404 cm, publishes in September 1749, but based on older illustrations of the site.)

In a London pub towards the end of the 1720s, we are encountering the young apprentice William Cotton. A few beers made him chatty: Standing at the crossroads of his life by a stroke of fate, he tells us everything that worries and touches him. And we gladly listen to him, as he knows of circumstances, only few people may know even three centuries later.

An article by ***Nik Tarasov,*** *essentially based on older research by Maurice Byrne and new findings by Simon Waters.*

Please forgive me, may I introduce myself? My name is William Cotten, but just call me Bill. I have no idea how to continue. Listen to me and believe me; I simply have to tell someone what's weighing on me. I'm an apprentice here in London with Master Patrick Urquhart, in my final year of training. We make first-class woodwind instruments here. But now, good heavens, my master is dead, called from this world in his 66th year. He was a widower, with no children. And I, his protégé, haven't even finished my apprenticeship! Will the venerable guild, the high gentlemen of the Merchant Taylors Company, let me enter the profession without a proper vocational qualification? When Master Urquhart saw his end approaching and had his will drawn up in 1726, I was one of the two witnesses. I'm not his only apprentice. There's also young Will [William Abbott].He's even worse off ▶

because he's only been with us for five years and is far from finished learning. My boss thought very highly of me. "Flutalo Bill," he teased me with a wink. Secretly, I called him "Master Urqui," but he didn't know that. "You'll be something special someday," he'd sometimes grumble. Meanwhile, I was always so insecure, doubted myself a lot, and still do today.

But I could already hope to one day take over his workshop. Especially because of the many tools, the materials, and the sheer number of prefabricated instruments. After his death at the end of February 1729, the instruments still in preparation (as will be recorded in the notarized inventory) included 686 larger and 89 smaller recorders, 56 transverse flutes, and 10 oboes, to name just a few. Yes, I know, we should have focused more on the increasingly fashionable transverse flutes. But when you have such a brilliant concept for recorders, you don't just discard it.

What to do with the instruments now? What will become of them? How to sell well over 700 recorders? I had such a wonderful vision: at the beginning of November 1729, I would have finished my training and, at 21 years old, finally come of age. In just eight months, it would have happened that way!

Then I would have been allowed to sell instruments bearing my own master craftsman's mark – with the blessing of my master and the Chamber of Crafts. I had even secretly designed my own trade card for this purpose. Although I've learned to build all the major woodwind instruments, I want to showcase my workshop under the name "Hautboy & Two Flutes" (in a beautifully drawn emblem: a proud oboe, a trendy four-piece transverse flute, and the beloved recorder depicted side by side). I already have a nice, affordable workshop in mind at Bride Lane Court, near Fleet Street. (And – true to the street name – a strapping bride is already waiting in the wings... Now that my professional future is uncertain, can we actually get married?) Well, it's certainly out of the question for me to stay in my master's large workshop on the magnificent Great Russell Street. Only celebrities live and work in that posh area. Just think of the family of the famous astronomer and star architect Sir Christopher Wren, who built his own ostentatious villa there. He was a professor in London and Oxford and a founding member of the illustrious Royal Society, where he also served as president. As Royal Architect-General of England, he designed grand palaces and, less than 20 years ago, completed the gigantic St. Paul's Cathedral. I don't belong in this area; I need to start by frying some smaller fish and chips. But at least my future workshop, near Fleet Street, leads directly onto the main road, The Strand, right by the waterfront – precisely where Grandmaster Bressan lives on one of the side streets called Duchy Lane! I wonder what he'll be doing now? It's going to be anything but easy for him either...

Since 1722, I had been with Master Urquhart for my seven-year apprenticeship. At first, it involved running errands, observing, sweeping the workshop, hauling and sawing wood, and lighting the stove in winter. I had to prove myself "worthy." Then, little by little, I was allowed to do something real. Of course, I started with a lot of preparatory work: drilling holes in the center of the timber so they could be clamped in the lathe. Then the blanks were turned into round pieces. Next came the turning: the rough outer shape, followed by the delicate ring decorations. Cuffs and rings were made of ivory and fitted to precise dimensions. Then came sanding and polishing. Not forgetting the precise clearing of the inner bore

Detail from a trade card of woodwind instrument maker William Cotton. London, 1730s or 1740s. (British Museum, Heal Collection, Heal 88.18)

and then the placement of the finger holes, in the exact size and at the correct angle. I've done it hundreds of times. I feel confident in all of it. Finally, I was initiated into carving – the ultimate challenge. At first, you feel like a sleepy, staggering woodworm, completely overshadowed by Urquhart, who was a true master at it and, with sleepwalker-like certainty, placed and carved the flute window freehand. It was truly awe-inspiring! How often my hands were clammy with sweat as I painstakingly scraped out the intricate lower lip of a recorder in dim light. The slightest mistake—and it was all ruined. Cutting the window, shaping the windway and the block, their finest chamfers (called "chamfers" in our dialect). The perfect fitting of the parts. How I admired Urquhart's artistry! Everything always had to be perfect, always, without exception, without the slightest flaw. I still cry today when I think about how, on his deathbed, he pressed his sacred carving knife into my hand, blessed me, and said, "That's it, now it's your turn"...

Why was he so good at it? It was in his blood: his father wasn't a weaver by trade, like mine. He was a renowned violin maker with close ties to the London court. He inherited his father's endless patience, perseverance, and steady, golden hands for every detail. And he watched his father repair the royal instruments, including all sorts of flutes. So the son's path seemed predetermined: to become a violin maker himself. Yet, he became an apprentice (and only at the age of 18!) in the workshop of the late John Woolstonecraft, a woodwind instrument maker. And after seven years of training, contrary to all his father's hopes, he was one himself. What finally prompted him to take a different path? I'll tell you: He, the gifted one, encountered the work of a truly gifted man at just the right time. In fact, what am I saying, the most gifted of all! Shortly after Urquhart had completed his own apprenticeship, set out to establish his own workshop, work independently, and marry—that was in 1689—a number of Frenchmen arrived in London again in 1691.Well, young French musicians playing this new, sensational instrument called the "hautbois." Between you and me: How stupid do you have to be to give a trendy instrument such a name that's unpronounceable for us English? Let's just call the thing an "oboe" for the sake of simplicity. Anyway, the fifth of these oboists, fittingly for the language problem, was named the even more unpronounceable "Pierre Jaillard." After several humorous attempts to pronounce his name, it was suggested that he be named after his place of origin, which he gave as Bourg-en-Bresse. Kindly, this also didn't initially meet with much success. Because it became, quite impossibly awkward, almost sounding Chinese, "Brazong" or "Brezong," after which they finally settled on "Bressan." And so, Pierre Jaillard was given a distinctive stage name.

But he hadn't primarily attracted attention in the metropolis through his playing. What he had brought with him—and on which he himself played so captivatingly—that was what made him stand out! James Talbot's records from 1692–1695 indicate that the thirty-year-old Mr. Bressan was a skilled maker of the new, fashionable woodwind instruments of French design.

London at the turn of the century

It was a particularly good time for musical instruments back then. London was home to wealthy people who were willing to spend a lot of money on their passions, if only to show off and outdo each other. But understandably, that wasn't really possible with the original woodwind instruments. They looked as unspectacularly plain and boring as a stilt. New fashion needed things that made an impression. Something beautiful, artfully designed. Exactly what the new things from France were all about: perfumed clothes, dreamy accessories, chic gemstones. People were especially eager for these modern, precious recorders, crafted from exquisite exotic woods and ivory in ornate, luxurious designs, sometimes even encased in magnificent tortoiseshell. And of course, Mr. Bressan knew how to build them to the highest standard. He hadn't come to work as a musician. His mission was to sell expensive instruments to gentlemen!

Before he even started looking for a workshop that could put his grand plans into action, he was first occupied with something else entirely: finding a place to live. As a foreigner with a halting accent and a person of a different faith, he appropriately chose the area around Somerset House, the Catholic-French center of London. His tenancy—you can probably tell I'm clearing my throat—soon transformed into a completely different kind of "relationship." For when one of the local homeowners died in 1713, his daughter Margaret and "son-in-law Mr. Brissan" were mentioned (in connection with the inheritance of goods, movable property, and household items). Brissan had married the homeowner's handsome daughter, Mary Margaret Mignon, a decade earlier, in 1703—when he was already a proud 40 years old. She was quite a catch, and moreover, naturally endowed with certain stately advantages, if you understand what I mean. I tell you, she was quite a dominant person, indeed. And she always aspired to be something better. That must have impressed him. She would manage everything well and independently, allowing him to focus on his art. A dream combination. The two promptly had a number of children – ten in total, of whom four survived.

Initially, everything went quite well. His business model with the instruments flourished. He had prudently insured his hard-earned wealth with the Sun Fire Insurance Company in 1711 – you never know. He was so good-natured, mediating, and friendly, and universally popular. In 1716, he even became the chief magistrate of his parish, St. Mary le Strand. He became known to an even wider public as "Peter Brasan, flute maker and music seller in Somerset House Yard in the Strand," as the press announced him as editor of Pietro Castrucci's "Twelve Sonatas for Violin" in 1717. In 1724, he had sonatas for recorder or violin and bass printed, composed by Francesco Barsanti. Clearly, this helped generate even more buzz among the many music lovers...

Since Mr. and Mrs. Bressan's residence is located in London's West End, directly on the Thames, the metropolis's main artery, its location makes it a bustling place: viewed from one of the many boats or ships on the river, the crumbling old Savoy Palace is to the left (recently a hospital for war veterans, still owned and administered by the Duke of Lancaster, like almost everything in the area). Incidentally, the Lancaster coat of arms also played a significant role for Bressan: He chose the Rose of Lancaster as the royal symbol for the stamp of his inst- ▶

ruments. He saw it right next door on the ducal grounds, where this stylized English national flower adorns the cast-iron railing. It looks truly elegant and welcoming. It should be something like the fleur-de-lis; the French often have this heraldic lily on their instruments. Master Urquhart, when he occasionally stamped his instruments himself (we mostly worked on commission), used the Scottish thistle as his heraldic flower (because of his ancestors there). On the other hand, I've heard of a workshop in Nuremberg—over on the Continent—run by a certain Jacob Tanner, Tenner, or perhaps Denner, whose coat of arms features a plain, prickly fir tree. Well, who can make sense of the Germans? "O Tannenbaum," as they sing—there's even a famous song about the fir tree, if you can believe it...

Pierre Jaillard Bressan's stamp with the Rose of Lancaster on the foot joint of one of his original alto recorders (private collection).

But back to the location of the Bressan estate: to the left, the Savoy Palace; to the right, the beautiful public parkland of Somerset Gardens. It's a lovely place to stroll, if you ignore the many boat landings and the noisy ferrymen. And precisely between the palace and the park, by the water, between the steps of Somerset Water Gate and the grand riverside promenade, The Strand, is Duchy House. This is the Bressan family's tree-lined residence. I shudder to think what such a large property will be worth in a few hundred years! Right in the heart of London, where the Thames bends towards Westminster. I recently heard that the taxable value of the house is 60 pounds per year, which suggests a considerable estate compared to that of Bressan's contemporary and professional colleague, Thomas Stanesby Senior, on Stonecutter Street, for which a mere 9 pounds per year is due.

Bressan's house has three completely different floors: at the very top, the family's private rooms with a balcony overlooking the river; below that, the large reception room with its Thames-facing bay window and pretty leaded windows; and on the ground floor, the master's workshop, with a bright window providing ample light. When he himself didn't have time to work, apparently John Just Schuchart would occasionally lend a hand there—at least, that's what I heard people say. I was never down there, in the inner sanctum, as one might say from a flute maker's perspective. But I was jealous of this Schuchart, whose real name was Johann and who had a terrible German accent. I met him once and asked him point-blank what the secret of Master Bressan's workshop down there was. He looked me up and down disdainfully replied, curtly and haughtily, that there wasn't one. There were only "draawrs vull of toolls" – that's "eenoff for foicing, for zee fainaal daaches on zee instruments". Ugh, I wished he got lost on the moon, that conceited snob with his crooked mouth...

I, on the other hand, visited Bressan's magnificent first floor several times to deliver flutes, as Master Bressan used to receive his guests and clients there. A meeting place and showroom in one, it was furnished to impress high society: antique wood panelling, artwork everywhere – paintings in magnificent gold frames, sculptures, busts, carpets, porcelain, and silver. There were also musical instruments, enough to equip a small orchestra: a harpsichord, a guitar, bass violins, violins, bassoons, flutes, and oboes. I often saw guests there, coming from all over to play music and try out the flutes they had ordered. Everyone enjoyed coming, especially since plenty of wine was always served on these occasions. Madam Bressan had become a great wine lover and even tried to trade the fine vintages on her own account. Due to her constant alcohol consumption, much to her husband's dismay, she developed an extremely fiery temper. They often clashed. He was gentle, honest, hardworking, quiet, and modest, with a deep appreciation for the finer things in life; she, however, was boastful and quarrelsome in her violent outbursts of anger, buying one chic gown after another and leading an expensive public life. Which of the two did his friend, the recorder player James Paisible, side with? He also had a wild flame for a wife, who was also Charles II's mistress! I swear, that's what people say! But no one can put up with that for long! Bressan soon had to take care of Paisible's will, all the debts, and then fell behind on the expenses for his funeral.

Bressan's hot-blooded friend Francesco Barsanti fared somewhat better: he had snagged 'Jean'. Together they moved to Edinburgh. Not that there should be any misunderstanding: Jean had long, fiery red hair and probably as much Tellicherry pepper in her rear end as Joan of Arc, the Maid of Orléans. What a combination, those two! I hope it works out...

Musical celebrities

Our London attracts important musicians; new ones arrive regularly from abroad. They and their students need to be supplied with instruments. Bressan knew them all from his active days as an oboist and was also friends with them, including his well-known companions François Le Riche and Peter La Tour. A group of eight hautbois was employed at court, composed mainly of Frenchmen. La Tour and John Loeillet were hautbois players at the London Opera. Loeillet was succeeded by the German Johann Ernst Galliard; the second hautboist at that time was the Dutchman Jean Christian Kytch. Not to forget Gottfried Finger (here called Godfrey) and all the 'Johns', including John Banister (II), John Baptist Grano and John Baston. They all also played the recorder or composed for the instrument. Now rumours are circulating that another 'John' is coming from Milan, a certain Giuseppe Sammartini, who with his southern verve on the oboe would eclipse everything known. He also composes continuously for the recorder, they say.

For the Bressans, such company was just the tip of a sugar-sweet iceberg. Attracted or repelled by all the hustle and bustle, it wasn't just music masters who came and went at Duchy House. Gentlemen and wealthy amateurs from high society came in droves to buy Bressan's instruments. This made him quite wealthy, but his extravagant wife even more exuberant.

Samuel Scott (1701/1702–1772):
Thames Side Buildings. Detail from an undated and partially coloured drawing featuring Bressan's house.
(Yale Centre for British Art)

One scandal follows another

Encouraged by her, Bressan invested the money in the South Sea Company. As a seller of luxury recorders, he did not suspect anything untoward about this then-flourishing stock exchange, because it promised investors high profits from trading in exotic products from the South Seas. The company then expanded its business model to include the purchase of Bank of England government debt for speculation. The shares did indeed rise from £170 to £870 over a period of three months, only to plummet mercilessly from 1 March to 2 June 1720. The Bressans found themselves in debt, which drove another wedge between them. They were by no means the only victims of the South Sea Bubble. Even a clever guy like physicist Isaac Newton lost £20,000 in this stock market crash! His self-critical comment is now proverbial: 'I can measure the motion of a body, but not human stupidity.' Recessions make people nervous and unpredictable. So it's hardly surprising to learn that Mary Margaret Bressan had also put money aside for herself and borrowed money in her husband's name. It was no wonder that all the debts eventually led to a rift between the two. I saw this quarrelsome fury throwing drinking vessels at him in her rage. A former lodger in their house reported witnessing a domestic dispute in which she, in a fit of rage, threw the empty safe out of a first-floor window. Poor Bressan, who was repeatedly confronted with arrests and often had to post bail due to his debt burden, had no choice but to finally explain himself in a years-long court case. I once observed a hearing there. In a highly emotional manner, his wife attempted to morally defame him as well. She stated the following: "My husband is a French Papist and I am an English Protestant and have four children by him the eldest whereof he has educated in France in the Romish Religion and the three youngest I have educated in the Prostestant Religion and I have been informed and believe that my husband designs with his eldest son to leave me and my three youngest children and retire into France having for that purpose remitted there several sums of money. Since the pronouncing of the decree in this case he hath used me very barbarously in so much that I hath been forced to sweare the peace against him. He absolutely refuses to maintain me and my three children or to suffer me to endeavour by my own care and industry to get a livelihood, which I could and am willing to do if he would live peaceably with me and let me endeavour the same, by which usage I and my three children are in danger of perishing."

Amidst the confused squabbling over who was responsible for the debts, witness statements convinced the court of Bressan's impeccable character. Contrary to her accusations, he had never been heard to say a harsh word, except to persuade her to curb her moody outbursts and calm her temper. In contrast, she had been heard several times threatening Bressan with death and claiming that she would either force him to leave England or die in prison, and she constantly ran up debts without his knowledge. She taught her children to tell stories invented abroad about how their father beat their mother and other notoriously false things.

Following an affidavit by Bressan, various court orders were issued. The agreement provided for the shares to be sold and the proceeds plus dividends to be held in trust and invested. Mary Margaret's debts amounted to £749 and consisted mainly of £150 in rent arrears for the house in which she lived and £400 in mortgage payments on the same property. Now put two and two together: this shows that the estranged ▶

couple had long since been living secretly in separate households. Bressan was left with a debt burden of £419. But that was not the end of it. Further debts were subsequently accumulated. The couple remained officially married but lived separate lives.

Anatomical Bodies

Despite the scandal: 'The show must go on,' as they say, and now more than ever. Don't lose your good reputation, so organise something social and spectacular to distract people!

See for yourself: the following advertisement appeared in the Daily Courant on 18 January 1724. Here, watch this, I have it in my pocket, folded up, and I'll read it to you: "To the Curious. Whereas the Artificial Bodies of the Human Anatomy, done at Paris from the life in coloured Wax were the space of four years out of this Kingdom, this is to give notice that they are demonstrated and exposed again to the sight of the Curious of both Sexes. A new figure ofNatural Bigness has been added to the former, with several parts asunder, and other Rarities. The general approbation this singular work has had of the most learned, who wonder every Day more and more at the Exactment give hopes of a successful Encouragement.

The limited Bounds of an Advertisement hinder any further Relation of the Particulars; besides, the full View, and the explanation of all the Parts made Intelligible to everyone, Satisfy incomparibly beyond all the Expressions that could be used. Daily Attendance is given from Ten a-clock in the morning till seven in the Evening."

What was now on display at the Bressans' was the first stop on a travelling exhibition of anatomical replicas. This gruesome ghost train of body worlds with a scientific veneer was a sensation and brought money back into the empty coffers. For the first time, middle-class London was able to marvel at what the Sicilian cleric Gaetano Guilio Zumbo had developed far away: the technique for producing coloured wax models. He collaborated with the French surgeon Guillaume Desnoues to produce anatomical models for teaching purposes, which were preferable to the use of corpses in the days before the discovery of effective preservatives. However, a dispute arose between the two, and Desnoues subsequently collaborated with François de la Croix, an ivory carver, and they exhibited the wax models in front of the Académie des Sciences in Paris in 1711. When the Parisians eventually began to find the exhibition boring, the entire collection was sent to London in the 1720s. It was the event of the season at the Bressan residence.

Mechanical Clock

Spurred on by this success, the Bressans presented another eye-catcher a few years later. On 19 October 1728, the following advertisement appeared in three London newspapers. Look, I saved that one too: "In Mrs Bressan's large room near the landing place in Somerset Yard on The Strand, where the anatomical waxworks used to be displayed, there is a curious machine called "The Theatre of the Muses". It resembles a temple decorated with statues and paintings depicting, among other things, the triumph of Neptune, the birth of Venus, the rural music of Apollo, Pan and Mercury, and Bacchanals, etc. The front of this machine, which surprises with its variety of moving figures, depicts a landscape with a view of the sea, which ends imperceptibly in the distance: there, the bustle and pleasures of country life are described, swans in a river fishing and adorning themselves with feathers; duck hunting in perfection; ships sailing against the wind, rounding capes and finally receding until they appear at a great distance. Above this is another beautiful moving picture showing Orpheus in a forest playing among the animals. Here you can see the trees and animals moving as if animated and driven by his music. It plays a large selection of the most outstanding pieces of music, composed by Mr Handel, Corelli and other famous masters [including music by Albinoni, Bononcini, Hyam, Bonporti and Torelli], on several instruments with such marvellous accuracy that hardly any hand can achieve it. It also imitates the sweet harmony of a bird aviary with such marvellous perfection that it cannot be distinguished from nature itself. With several other magnificent performances too lengthy to mention, all performed entirely by the music box. The prices are 5s [5 shillings], 2s, 6d [6 pence] and 1s is the lowest. Admission is from 10 o'clock in the morning until 10 o'clock in the evening."

As expected, the impact was huge. Other newspapers, even the London Evening Post, reported on it. What fascinated Bressan about Christopher Pinchbeck's machine, however, was not so much the visual spectacle of the moving figures as the fact that this mechanical device was actually capable of preserving music! For the present and for posterity! Good heavens, how incredible! And it seems that there are more and more such trends nowadays anyway. What if even recorder pieces, such as the great Handel's beautiful recorder sonata in F major (one of Bressan's favourite pieces), were precisely recorded and preserved for eternity? Possibly even with all the embellishments that are never written down on paper. You could sense that this was suddenly in the air, that there was much more to come.

But Mistress Mary Margaret was not interested in that, but only in the outward appearance of the apparatus and in all the crazy fuss that the spectacle caused in her favour. The public's reaction seemed to prove her right. Master Bressan had to watch bitterly as the dull-witted crowd, regardless of the machine's musical potential, preferred to gawk at its visual effects. Certainly, it brought in good money. But this incessant, primitive noise, from early morning until late at night, echoed mercilessly through his four walls and wore on his nerves! Had the famous musical instrument manufacturer Bressan now become a showman catering to the public's thirst for sensation?

Indeed, how could he find a quiet moment to take care of instruments? Especially since, in the midst of all this drama, it was becoming increasingly clear that Master Urquhart's last hour was approaching and that the source of ready-made instruments would soon dry up – believe it or not.

And now, as I sit here drinking... Oh, the jug is al–al–already empty again! Bring me another beer, for goodness' sake! Well, I tell you, just a few months later, look, everything has actually turned out that way: Boom, the great Bressan has thrown the machine out the door, along with the crowd and his quarrelsome, fluttering wife, and is sitting helplessly in his house. And I, little Cotton, am standing in front of my late master's officially sealed workshop and, having barely completed my apprenticeship, can no longer enter. Just like that! Unbelievable!

Good heavens, w–w–what have w–we both done to deserve this? Forgive me, I'm already slurring my words, the beer is making my tongue heavy. Heeeey, iiiiinnkeeper, pour me another one! Another ale! Oh, tell me, how can we go on without Patrick Urquhart? Almighty, truly, neither of us knows...

Two years later

Oh, there you are again! Gosh, you want to know how the story continues, how we've been doing in the meantime? No, I can't accompany you to the pub right now. But it'll be enough for a chat out here over a quick smoke. Well, you see, I'm in a bit of a hurry – my sweetheart is calling me for lunch. She doesn't like it when I go out for a drink, especially because of the children...

Yes, I am now married. Because I was appointed master craftsman by the guild. I build beautiful instruments, including recorders; modelled on Master Bressan's designs, of course, what else. And I can actually draw on some recorders that were formerly made for him in the workshop of the late Master Urquhart. I was only able to take over part of his estate. As you know, Urquhart was wealthy – half of his estate consisted of unfinished instruments. It would have been utopian to buy them as a young professional. But Richard Bagnall, his estate administrator, was gracious. Special items such as unfinished recorders are difficult to sell. Schuchart and Stanesby and a few others probably bought some of it, but I, as Urquhart's closest confidant on the subject, was given quite a bit. Oh well, who knows, maybe future generations will wonder why all our recorders are so similar. But then again, you stick with a concept that is almost perfect. Almost perfect, I would say. Because I am in the process of improving the high register a little, making it cleaner and more appealing, as standards have changed somewhat in recent years: some rather ambitious recorder editions of original violin sonatas by Pietro Castrucci and Francesco Geminiani have been published, and these require new instruments that perform better in the upper register.

Back to the Roots

Master Bressan no longer builds instruments. After nearly four decades in our royalty, and God knows how long tormented by his marital ghost (from whom he had tried to live apart for almost ten years), it had all finally become too much for him. He just wanted to get away, to finally breathe some freedom again, to return to where he once came from. It was a kind of escape: with few possessions, he crossed the Channel and travelled first to Flanders. He stopped off at the home of his old friend François Le Riche, his oboe colleague from the early days. Le Riche had done the right thing and, after a successful career in London, had retired to his home country. The two old men reminisced. They wanted to play together again and go on tour (at over sixty years of age)! A revival tour! It was to end in Bourg-en-Bresse. This is where the instrument maker we know as Peter Bressan was born at one o'clock in the morning on 27 May 1663 and baptised on the same day in the parish church of Notre Dame with the name Pierre Jaillard.

Thoughts of his old home had hardly ever left him anyway. As Master Bressan told me years ago, he once had a terrible nightmare: he saw his home church devastated, the bell tower destroyed, his baptismal font dragged out by angry vandals, the furnishings demolished and everything sacred desecrated. Outrageous cries of "Vive la révolution! Mort aux prêtres! Mort au roi!" [Long live the revolution! Death to the priests! Death to the king!] shouted the angry mob, throwing stones at the old stained-glass windows with their scenes of saints until they were shattered. But the stones did not reach all the way up to the high choir of the chapel, which is dedicated to Saint Cecilia (the patron saint of music). It seemed as if the martyr herself was protecting the angels playing music depicted there.

How often had little Pierre sat in the pew with his beloved grandmother in that place of his childhood days and looked up at the scenes depicted in the old stained-glass windows. He could not take his eyes off them, hearing the music of the angels in perfect harmony in his inner ear. He talked about it again and again, but no one understood him.

Only his grandmother, and she sent him on 13 May 1678, when Pierre was almost fifteen, to Jean Boissier, the master turner from Bourg, for two years and also paid for his apprenticeship. Pierre was delighted. There was much to practise, much to prepare for. He wanted to build wooden instruments with a heavenly sound. Shortly before the end of his apprenticeship, his grandmother died. He accompanied her coffin in great sorrow.

Master Bressan never told me where he had learned to play music so well and achieved perfection in instrument making. ‘Perhaps in Paris, with the royal Hotteterres?’ I asked him. But he just smiled quietly and mischievously and shrouded himself in silence. It took more than a decade of hard work before he was finally confident enough to set off for London with other musicians to seek his fortune in the early 1690s.

I remember how he once spoke of a fateful coincidence when I asked him about the meaning of his master's mark. ‘Sainte-Cécile, elle m'a crée une impression de déjà-vu!’ he murmured. When I looked at him questioningly (I don't speak French), he told me in his charming, somewhat stilted English about the place where he had settled in London and which was to become his new home for decades. Standing next door, on the banks of the Savoy Palace, his hands involuntarily touched the iron railing and felt the rose of Lancaster engraved into it. Suddenly, images from his childhood came to mind: the many Gothic stone rosettes, the stone buds and blossoms on the Renaissance façade of the main portal and the column capitals of the Church of Notre-Dame in Bourg – his town, which was part of the Duchy of Savoy. He smiled contentedly, filled with gratitude.

As you know, old people tend to feel a certain nostalgia and romanticise their homeland. It had always remained with him in his mind. But he would never see it again.

Here, read for yourselves what I carry with me in my pocket on newspaper. There, a news item in the Daily Journal from 5 May 1731. It is under the headline ‘A letter from France’ and is dated ‘Tournay, 20 April N.S.’. Do you see how my hands are beginning to tremble? It is a deeply sad message. Good heavens, listen to what it says: "On the 12th of this month, the renowned flute maker Mr. Bressan passed away here, and his body was laid to rest on the 16th. He undertook a tour of the Austrian Netherlands, and his loss is deeply mourned by ▶

all music lovers, as well as by his inconsolable widow and three children (one son and two daughters), who live at Somerset House in London. He died a Catholic, leaving 5,000 Livres to a lawyer from Tournay and arranging for a mass (for his soul) to be said for the Virgin Mary and all the saints."
Oh, those wretched newspaper hacks! He actually died on 21 April 1731, as correctly recorded in the register of the parish of St. Jacques in Tournai.
He had fallen ill, and on 28 March made his will before. Apart from bequests to his solicitors, he made his three children equal universal heirs. Of particular interest were the shares representing holdings in the Compagnie des Indes, the French East India Company. Active interest on the shares consisted of a fixed rate of 7½%, based exclusively on profits from the state monopoly on tobacco sales. By Jove, I might be smoking some of that stuff right now!
At least they would be paid off by 1739 – so the history books would note. Even the "deeply grieving" Mrs Mary Margaret Bressan would be busy until her death in 1738, chasing after all the money and at the same time shaking off her creditors.
Since Bressan's estate was located in England, an inventory of his legacy was necessary in order to issue a certificate of inheritance. His inventory from 1731 bears witness to a wealthy household with only minor indications of instrument making. There is no mention of a larger workshop in which even more than just the many elaborately designed recorders were made, just as there is no mention of some kind of workshop in his father-in-law's inventory from 1713, which also describes the entire Bressan household – at a time when the master was at the height of his fame.
As I said, that's no surprise. We worked hard at Urquhart and generated excellent sales. However, very little of that was under our own name or brand. We mainly worked on commission – a common practice that is sure to continue for a long time to come.
Right, folks, that's it for now, I really have to go. My wife is calling me to dinner and she doesn't like to wait. And afterwards, I'll go straight back to my workshop to continue working on my recorders. So that my instruments won't be forgotten in the future either. I think I've now told you everything that was once important, and I've told you about all the ups and downs that went with it.
Why so down?! 'Say love, wee!' – harsh, but true. (Well, I still can't speak French ...) Life goes on. I'll leave you with a motto from my two mentors, Master Urquhart and Master Bressan (who, incidentally, were the same age): 'See, music is fleeting, to be sure. But nothing, no sound, is lost. Music moves into the aeons and spheres that spread their cloak over the fleeting din of all time.'

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Photos: Heinz Ammann

Original 16th-century stained-glass painting in the high choir of the Chapelle Sainte-Cécile, in the parish church of Notre Dame in Bourg. Only the upper section of the window survived the demolition of the church during the French Revolution.