



1 André Bouys (1656–1740), *La Barre and other musicians*, oil on canvas (after restoration), 160x127 cm
(London, National Gallery)

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The hole truth and nothing but the truth: the resolution of a problem in flute iconography

THE portrait of a group of French musicians shown in illus 1 has been the subject of debate on many fronts since 1907, when it was purchased by the National Gallery from the Comtesse de Coullanges. Since the 1950s it has been attributed to the French painter Robert Tournières. Before that it was ascribed first to Hyacinthe Rigaud, then to François de Troy.¹ A black and white photograph of this painting taken in the early 1940s has circulated widely in recent decades. In North America an identical colour photo has for years served as a large promotional poster for a well-known summer early music academy, the Baroque Performance Institute at Oberlin College. It also appears in numerous textbooks and histories of music, as well as in books on musical instruments. A recent cleaning and restoration of the original portrait has uncovered a signature, revealing the true author of the portrait to be André Bouys (1656–1740), a student of de Troy, who is known for a portrait of the French viola da gamba player Marin Marais.² In addition, the painting also has until now presented an organological mystery with regard to the construction of the ivory flute in the painting's foreground; it is now possible to set aside at least some of the speculation concerning these aspects of the painting.

All the musical instruments are painted with great care and accuracy. The man on the left holds a seven-string viola da gamba. Three of the others are holding flutes whose style is typical of French instruments of the early 18th century. The flutes have long, ornate caps and turnings, and bear no visible

maker's mark. The seated man in the front must be very wealthy, as is evident from his richer dress and the fact that his flute, unlike the others, is made of ivory. Moreover, he turns out toward the viewer somewhat more than the others, as if he is sitting for the portrait.

Despite numerous attempts, the identification of the figures remains inconclusive. The musician standing—once thought to be Louis XIV, Hotteterre or even Lully, surrounded by professional musicians of the French court—is now generally regarded as Michel de La Barre (1675–1743), flautist-composer to the French king. La Barre's *Sonates en trio pour la flûte traversière*, published by Ballard in 1707, lies open on the table to the 'Première Sonate', as if the composer is presenting his latest works to the players. The music is still unbound, another clue suggesting that it is newly published. The prominent and well-dressed gentleman to the right may be Monsieur Landais, the amateur to whom the trios are dedicated.

Perhaps more puzzling than the identity of the figures were, until recently, the number and configuration of the tone holes of the ivory flute held by this gentleman. The two wooden flutes depicted are very similar to one another. Probably made of boxwood, each is in three pieces and features a mouth hole, and (presumably) six finger holes and a single key. The flute of ivory is of similar construction. But in addition to the mouth hole at the top, and the six usual finger holes, there appeared to be two extra holes of irregular shape on the ivory flute—one under the

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2 The ivory flute from illus.1: (a) before restoration; (b) after restoration

second hole, the other below and to the right of the fifth hole (illus.2a). These two holes were cause for considerable debate, and over the years I have been asked repeatedly why I think they are there. My reply has always been that they must be fake. I have been questioned about it so often that I began to joke that a mischievous museum patron must have burned them into the canvas with the end of a cigarette.

Very few three-piece conical flutes like these survive from the 18th century. By about 1722 they were being made in four pieces. But if we look to surviving three-piece flutes, other pictures, or treatises from the period, we find no evidence at all for more than six finger holes. Still, some have ardently wished that these holes might be real, and have proposed elaborate theories to explain them. Christopher Addington supposed that they were later additions and that two of the original holes were sealed with wax, in order to make it easier for the player to reach two holes that otherwise would have required an uncomfortable stretch of the fingers.⁴ He imagined that this became necessary because of what he regarded as the unusual length of the flute shown in the painting, and claimed to have successfully drilled extra holes like these into his own flute.

Previously, in 1969, Philip Bate had also pondered the extra holes, supposing that the one near the A hole could render a usable G² if it were small enough and sufficiently undercut, and that the other, located near the underside of the flute

between the E and F² holes, could potentially be stopped by the thumb as a B² or C hole.⁴

Shortly before viewing the painting in person in July 1999, I wrote ahead to the National Gallery and learned that the work was undergoing restoration. I took the opportunity to ask whether the conservator might check the extra holes, to determine whether they were original parts of the painting. Upon closer inspection, he discovered the holes to be products of damage that had occurred some time before the gallery had acquired it.⁵ He did not hesitate to paint over them, and the museum has now produced a new photograph of the completely restored painting, erasing all but the memory of those mysterious 'holes' (illus.2b).

Interestingly, another copy of this painting, contemporary with it or possibly dating from the early 19th century, has been held by the Musée de Dijon since it was acquired in 1842. Evidently without investigating it further, Martin Davies mentioned its existence in 1956 and, although it has appeared in illustrated exhibition catalogues and books since at least 1965,⁶ the Dijon portrait has been completely overlooked by all who have puzzled over the construction of the anomalous ivory flute.⁷ Needless to say, the corresponding instrument in the Dijon portrait exhibits no unusual tone holes. In short, these holes that never were provide an object lesson against basing elaborate speculation on a suspect iconographic detail.⁷

1 Discussions of attribution and of identities of the figures represented are found in J. Cailleux, 'L'art du dix-huitième siècle', advertisement supplement to *Burlington magazine*, xxvi (1971), pp.x-xi; M. Davies, *National Gallery catalogues: French School* (London, 2/1957), pp.213; L. Fleury, 'The flute and flutists in the French art of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries', *Musical quarterly*, ix (1923), pp.514-37, esp. p.547; J. E. Matthew, 'A pictorial puzzle', *Musical times*, xlviii (1907), pp.301-3; and J. Tiersot, 'Une visite au British Museum et un tableau de la National Gallery', *Revue de musicologie*, vii (1923), pp.73-9.

2 The signature 'A. Beuys' appears in the lower left corner.

3 C. Addington, 'In search of the Baroque flute', *Early music*, xii (1984), p.39. An excerpt of the portrait on p.38 depicts the ivory flute.

4 P. Bate, *The flute: a study of its history, development and construction* (New York, 1969), pp.95-6. Bate reports having viewed the painting in person and being assured by (unnamed) experts at the Gallery that these holes were part of the original painting.

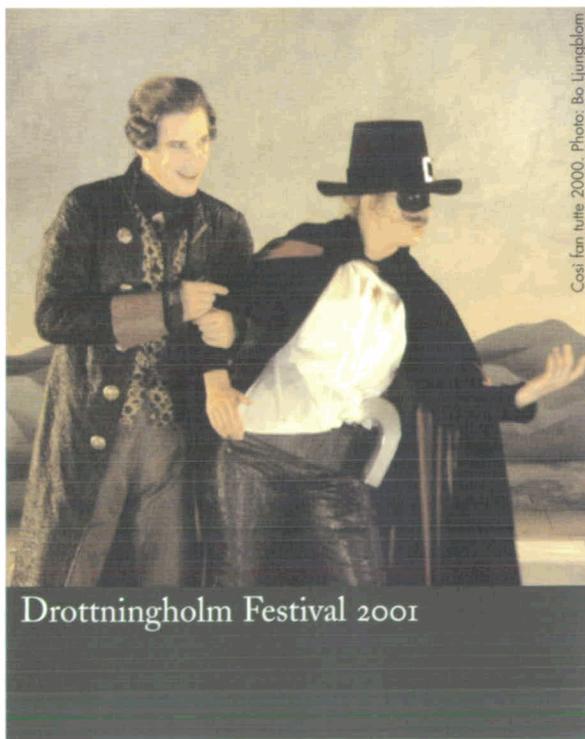
5 The damage is already shown in the illustration in Fleury, 'The flute and flutists'.

6 *La musique dans l'art ancien au Musée des Beaux-Arts de Dijon* (Dijon, 1965), pl.x; *Orphée en Auvergne: Rameau organiste* (Clermont-Ferrand, 1983). More recently the Dijon portrait has appeared in *La musique & la peinture, 1600-1900: trois siècles d'iconographie musicale* (Nice, 1991), pp.122-3. This version of the portrait was attributed to Pierre-Charles Trémollières (1703-39) when it was

purchased from Don de M. Bertholomey in 1842; see J. Magnin, *La peinture au Musée de Dijon* (Dijon, 1914), p.187.

7 Davies could not have consulted the Dijon painting, for in *French School*, p.213, he writes: 'The man on the right who may have ordered the picture is holding a flute with two more holes than usual; these have been deliberately put in by the painter, but it seems that they can have had no purpose whatever for the playing of the instrument.'

8 At the time of my visit Humphrey Wine, curator of French painting at the National Gallery, was preparing a detailed study of figures in the portrait. I am grateful to him for permission to examine the painting while it was removed from public view, and to him and conservator Anthony Reeve for information concerning the painting's conservation and attribution.



Così fan tutte 2000. Photo: Bo Ljungblom

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