

## Recruiting, Repairing and Roguery: Eighteenth-Century America Bassoonists

By Georgia Peebles  
Akron, Ohio

**T**he *Performing Arts in Colonial American Newspapers, 1690-1783*, a database recently compiled by Mary Jane Correy, Kate Van Winkle Keller, and Robert M. Keller and issued by University Music Editions, provides a wealth of insights into the musical culture of the eighteenth-century America. Included within the many citations from newspapers are numerous references to performances, musical pedagogy, buying and selling instruments, recruiting musicians, and even tracking down escaped thieving musicians. Citations from the major colonial cities of New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Charleston predominate, giving a good sense of the growing urban musical and cultural scene.

Bassoonists were in demand during the late eighteenth-century, as recruitment notices, primarily from regimental bands, were published regularly in the newspapers. Inducements for these musicians varied, although none of the colonial offers could match that of an Irish recruiting parade, described in the *Georgia Gazette* in 1775:

“His method of enlisting was uncommon as it was pleasing to those who viewed the procession, which was as follows:

Major Roche, bearing a large purse of gold,  
Captain Cowley,  
A great number of likely recruits.

An elegant band of music, consisting of French horns, hautboys, clarionets and bassoons, playing “God save the king.”

A large brewer’s dray with five barrels of beer, the horse richly caparisoned and ornamented with ribbands.

Two draymen with cockades to serve the beer.”  
8 Nov. 1775: 11 (631) *Georgia Gazette*

Colonial recruiting efforts were less splendid and intoxicating. Bassoonist frequently were sought with offers of “good encouragement”:

“Any performers on the Hautboy, French Horn, Clarinet, or Bassoon, who are willing to engage themselves for five or six months; will meet with good encouragement by applying to the Commanding Officer of General Lascell’s Regiment at Amboy.”

23 Dec. 1758:42 (848)  
*New York Gazette & Weekly Post Boy*

“Musicians wanted for a regiment, Two good Horns, a Clarinet, a Bassoon, and a person capable of directing a band, to all of whom good encouragement will be given.”

18 Jul 1778: 31 (188) *Rivington’s New York Gazette*

There were occasional offers of financial rewards, however:

“Wanted, for the First Virginia Regiment, the following musicians. Two persons who understand the hautboy, two the clarionet, one ditto the bassoon, two ditto the French horn, and one drum-major; each one of these shall receive eighty dollars bounty, by applying to the above regiment, Edmund B. Dickinson, command, First Virginia Regiment.”

13 August 1777:43 (1802) *Pennsylvania Journal*

And, for those musicians with an entrepreneurial spirit, there was sometimes the chance to share in the spoils of war:

“Musical Performers.

Two French Horns,  
Two Clarinets,  
Two Hautboys,  
One Bassoon,

Wanted to complete the Band on board the General Pattison, Private Ship of War. Such as are deserving, besides the opportunity of making their fortunes, will meet with the best encouragement, by applying to Charles Patton Esq. on board the said vessel, or at the St. Andrew on Cruger’s wharf.”

14 Apr 1779:24 (265) *Rivington’s New York Gazette*

Bassoons and bassoon reeds were generally available through importation from England, and newspaper accounts detail the cargo of recently arrived ships carrying these musical supplies:

“Imported in the last fleet from London, and to be sold at 242 Queen Street, 5 doors from Wall-street, the following musical instrument, viz. Violins, violin bows, bridges & strings, screws, brass & ivory mutes, 12 string guitars, hautboy, basson & clarinet reeds, 2 trumpets, trumpet & French horn mouth pieces ...”

29 Oct 1781: 31 (1567) *New York Mercury*

“Just imported, and to be sold, by Josias Short Vavasor, at the Golden Hand, in Queen Street ... an excellent bassoon, with reed; filed ...”

10 Dec 1764:32 *New York Mercury*

Occasionally an individual would sell a bassoon:

“To Be Sold, A Bassoon of an excellent and well approved Tone, formerly the property of the famous Scammadine, who was acknowledged to be the First Performer in the Universe; the lowest Price is Fifteen Guineas. Enquire of the Printer.”

19 Aug 1778:43 (197) *Rivington's New York Gazette*

Those same musical instrument dealers and music instructors were frequently also skilled as repairmen, capable of “mending” almost any wind instrument:

“To all lovers of music, Jacob Hood and Philip Hartunoz beg leave to inform the public that they teach at home or abroad, all musical instruments of every denomination whatsoever, particularly the violin, violoncello, harpsichord, hautboy, bassoon, German and English flute, French horn, & etc. Any gentleman, a lover of music, may have his Negroes taught upon very reasonable terms by applying to them at the house of Mrs. Knox in Bedon's Alley. All musical instruments tones, repaired, and rectified.”

16-23 Mar 1772:32 (15/701)

*South Carolina and American General Gazette*

“Gottlieb Wolhaupter, living at the sign of the Musical Instrument-Maker, opposite Mr. Adam Vanderberg's has just imported from London, a choice parcel of the best English box-wood: Where he continues to make and mend, all sorts of musical instruments, such as German flutes, hautboys, clareonets, flageolets, bassoons, fifes; and also silver tea-pot handles.”

16 Nov 1761:12 (150) *New York Gazette*

Instruction upon the bassoon and other instruments was advertised by music masters eager to create a studio:

“John William Beck, musician, begs leave to acquaint the public that he teacheth to play on the following instruments, viz., clarinet, flauto transverso, flauto a bec, hautbois, or oboe de Simon, bassoon, violin, tenor violin, and bass violin as perfectly as any master in America. Any persons who apply may depend on his assiduity and punctual attendance on very reasonable terms, either at their own houses or at his house ...”

17-24 Dec 1773: 42 (16/796)

*South Carolina and American General Gazette*

“Joshua Collins, musical instrument-maker and turner from Manchester, begs leave to acquaint the publick, that he has commenced the said branches of business ... (and) has opened an evening school for musick, at Mr. John Hepburn's, where he teaches the most modern and approved methods of playing the German flute, hautboy, clarinet, bassoon, etc. Having been educated in that science, under the care of some of the greatest masters in England.”

25 Feb 1773:33 (1433) *Maryland Gazette-Annapolis*

Even as today, music teachers had to be zealous, and somewhat flexible, to patch together a living from their enterprise:

“Mr. Roth, Master of Music, in Sixth-Street, between Arch and Race Streets, near Cheery Alley. Acquaints his friends in particular and the public in general, that he has just returned from the southward, to teach the ladies the Harpsichord, Guitar, and gentlemen the Harp, Flute, Hautboy, Clarinet, French horn and Bassoon, etc., and to attend ladies at their own houses, or any place most convenient; can also furnish a whole band of music and the ways to play on all sorts of musical instruments that is mentioned before, in a minute's warning; and likewise to be sold, Violins and flutes with three middle pieces, and French horns and Bassoons.”

23 Sep/ 1783:32 (12/1097)

*Pennsylvania Packet-Philadelphia*

Unfortunately, even given this wide range of profitable music industries, some musicians still turned to unlawful means to support themselves. Notices of instrument theft and deserting musicians are not uncommon:

“Deserted. From His Majesty's 44th Regiment of Foot, and in Lieut. Colonel William Eyrs's Company, John Smith, private Soldier & Musicianer, aged 24 years, 5 feet 8 inches high, without shoes ... walks with a gentle air, plays extraordinarily well on the Bassoon, and likewise on the Violin.”

22 Jun 1764:41 (34) *Connecticut Gazette-New London*

“William Scot was taken up on suspicion of stealing a silver tankard and can from Mr. Henry Abbot, and on examination he confessed the same, and was committed to the goal in Concord. He appears to be a young pale faced man, of a good education ... he has been a clerk in the Exchequer & was brought up a Musicianer to play on the bassoon ...”

14 Aug 1772:32 (9/457)

*Connecticut Gazette-New London*

“Ran away from the subscriber, at Stratford, in Westmoreland County, on Sunday the 28th of August, Charles Love, a tall thin man, about sixty years of age; he professes music, dancing, fencing, and plays extremely well on the violin and all wind instruments; he stole when he went away a very good bassoon, made by Schuchart, which he carried with him, as also a Dutch or German fiddle, with an old hautboy and German flute, which are his own...”

29 Sep 1757:33 (647) *Maryland Gazette-Annapolis*

Perhaps the most intriguing bassoonist-thief, however, is Nathaniel Lock:

“Whereas Nathaniel Lock, musician in the 64th regiment has absconded from the regiment, and taken with him a hautboy, watch, and other articles which do not belong to him. This is to caution all people from concealing him, as they will be prosecuted for harboring a thief.

Any person who will bring said Lock to the regiment, now quartered in Boston, shall have five guineas reward. He is a middle sized person, about five feet seven inches high, swarthy complexion, dark hair, round shouldered, plays on the bassoon, hautboy and flute. He had better surrender himself. He has with him a woman low in stature, marked with the small-pox, and has the Irish brogue.”

6-9 Feb 1769: 483 (65) *Boston Chronicle*

Clearly, times were not so staid in the eighteenth-century colonies, and musicians had sometimes earned the dubious reputation they enjoyed. Bassoonists seem not to have been the rarified breed they are considered today, but a significant part of the military band and instrumental music culture. Instruction upon the instrument was widely available, albeit by generalists rather than bassoon “specialists,” and instruments and reeds were imported from abroad and sold in the larger cities. The level of performance may not have reached the heights expected today from professionals, but there was no lack of music, and bassoonists were an integral part of the process.

Those interested in this data base (*The Performing Arts in Colonial American Newspapers, 1690-1783*), as well as other publications about this era, may contact University Music Editions at (800) 448-2805, or P.O. Box 192, Fort George Station, New York, NY 10040. ❖