

THE EARLIEST BASS CLARINET MUSIC (1794) AND
THE BASS CLARINETS BY HEINRICH AND AUGUST GRENSER

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For many years the bass clarinets by Heinrich Grenser and August Grenser made in 1793 and 1795 have been known. What has been overlooked is Patrik Vretblad's list of a concert including the bass clarinet performed in 1794 by the Swedish clarinetist Johann Ignaz Strenensky.¹ This is important news since it is the earliest documented bass clarinet music. All other textbooks and studies concerning the bass clarinet fail to mention this music played in Sweden. Although it is not definitely known what type of bass clarinet was played, evidence suggests that it was a bassoon-shaped bass clarinet by Heinrich Grenser. This article discusses the Stockholm court's early employment of full time clarinetists; its players and music, including the bass clarinet works; the bass clarinets by Heinrich and August Grenser; and conclusions.

Stockholm Court Orchestra

Stockholm's theater court orchestra employed seven clarinetists during the eighteenth century, including the famous composer and clarinetist Bernhard Henrik Crusell:

Christian Traugott Schlick	1779-1786
August Heinrich Davidssohn	1779-1799
Georg Christian Thielemann	1785-1812
Carl Sigimund Gelhaar	1785-1793
Johann Ignaz Stranensky	1789-1805 ²
Bernhard Henrik Crusell	1793-1834
Johan Christian Schatt	1798-1818 ³

In 1779, Schlick and Davidssohn appeared as extra players at the Stockholm theater in a concert of the music academy. In 1780 they both played with the court orchestra in a Symphony written by Johann Friedrich (Johan Frederik) Grenser⁴; cousin of the famous woodwind maker, Heinrich Grenser (1764-1813) of Dresden.⁵ Schlick and Davidssohn became regular members of Stockholm's court orchestra during the 1780-1781 season. The Stockholm orchestra is among the earliest theater orchestras to employ clarinetists on a full time basis along

¹ The author is grateful to Jörn Öierstedt for information about this music.

² These dates are given by Tobias Norlind and Emil Trobäck in *Kungl. Hovkapellet's Historia 1526-1926* (Stockholm: Wahlström & Widstrand, 1926), 283, and Fabian Dahlström, *Bernhard Henrik Crusell: Klarinettisten och hans större instrumentalverk* (Helsingfors: Svenska Litteratursällskapet i Finland, 1976), 90.

³ Dahlgren, F. A. Dahlgren, *Förteckning öfver Svenska Skådespel uppförda på Stockholms Theatrar 1737-1863 och Kongl. Theatrarne's personal 1773-1863 med flera anteckningar* (Stockholm: P.A. Norstedt & Söner, 1866), 548-549.

⁴ Patrik Vretblad, *Konsertlivet i Stockholm under 1700-Talet* (Stockholm: P.A. Norstedt & Söners, 1918), 207, no. 477; 208, no. 484.

⁵ J. F. Grenser emigrated to Stockholm in 1778 where he was active as first oboist in the court orchestra and in 1783 changed to first flutist. In later years he provided musical arrangements and original works for Carl Stenborg's theaters until his death in 1795. See, Bertil H. van Boer, "Grenser, Johann Friedrich," *Grove Music Online*; Dahlgren, *Förteckning*, 550; Dahlström, *Bernhard Henrik Crusell*, 90. See also, Pamela Weston, *More clarinet virtuosos of the past* (London: The Author, 1977), 75.

with the orchestras of the Teatro San Carlo in Naples (1779-1780), with clarinetists Wilhelm Hattenbauer and Leopold Vinitzki, and the Nationaltheater in Vienna (1781-1782), with clarinetists Anton and Johann Stadler.⁶

Players and music

For the next few years Schlick played a number of pieces: in 1780 a concerto; in 1781, two solos and a concerto; and in 1783, a concerto and a clarinet quartet, probably for clarinet and string trio.⁷ None of these works are identified by composer but it is likely that they were written by Schlick, which was a common practice at the time. In two concerts during 1783 the court chamber musician Gottlieb Rungstock played a quartet for bassoon solo, probably with string trio, and on 13 November 1785 he played a basset horn concerto.⁸ In September 1792, a Concerto for basset horn was played by a Mr. Hildebrandt who was not a member of Stockholm's theater orchestra and must have been a visiting virtuoso.⁹ Thielemann played a clarinet concerto by Grenser in December 1792,¹⁰ and Gelhaar played a clarinet concerto by Hoffmeister in 1793.¹¹

Johann Stranensky's first performance in Stockholm was in a Quintet for wind instruments in 1790; although the instruments are not specifically mentioned he played clarinet in the court orchestra.¹² Like many instrumentalists of the eighteenth century Stranensky played a number of instruments, making him a valuable member of the court orchestra. In 1792 and 1793, he played a [glass] Harmonica-solo with horn accompaniment, probably of his own composition.¹³

Stranensky introduced the "new" bass clarinet with three works on the program of 16 February 1794. The first is entitled "Romance with a Rondo à la Polonaise for Clarinette Fagotte"; the second, "Quintet with two flutes, two horns, and Clarinette-Fagotte"; and the third, "Terzette from Grétry's opera *Zemire et Azor* (1772) arranged for two horns and Clarinette Fagotte". These works have not been found, however, Fig. 1 includes no. 15, a Polonaise for clarinet written by Stranensky (Kungl. Biblioteket, Stockholm, FfB-R [National Library of Sweden]). It might have been the same work as played on the bass clarinet. Fig. 2 is the first clarinet part from Stranensky's Quintetto for two clarinets in B^b and two horns in E^b, and bassoon, (Kungl. Biblioteket, Stockholm, F.5/sv.-R) [National Library of Sweden, Stockholm]). This may have been a later adaption of the Quintet played

⁶ See Anthony R. DelDonna, "A documentary history of the clarinet in the Teatro San Carlo Opera Orchestra in the Late-18th Century," *Studi Musicali* XXXVII, no. 2 (2008), 410-414.

⁷ Vretblad, *Konsertlivet i Stockholm*, 209-210, no. 492; 214, no. 513, 215, nos. 520, 521; 215, no. 546; 221, no. 549. See also Dahlström, *Bernhard Henrik Crusell*, 89-90, who cited Vretblad.

⁸ Vreblad, 223, no. 557; 224, no. 560; "Solo-concert för Corno Bassetto (Hr Rungstock)", 226, no. 575, note 3. Rungstock played bassoon and basset horn from 1783 to 1785, see Dahlgren, *Förteckning*, 547.

⁹ "Solo-Concert för Basetthorn", Vretblad, 239, no. 640. Hildebrandt is not identified by Dahlgren, Vretblad, Norlind and Trobäck, or in Weston's books. Frederick Wilhlem Hildebrand (1785-1830), possibly a relative of this Hildebrandt, was a violinist, a student of Spohr, and played in the Court orchestra from 1816 to 1830, see Dahlgren, *Förteckning öfver Svenska Skådespel*, 537. The author thanks Jörn Öierstedt for information.

¹⁰ Vretblad, 241, no. 647. Grenser's concerto for Bb clarinet is discussed by Robert Titus in "The solo music for the clarinet in the eighteenth century (Ph.D. diss., State University of Iowa, 1962), 394-398.

¹¹ Vretblad, 241, no. 650. A concerto in Bb by Franz Anton Hoffmeister was originally published by Kühnel in Vienna; recorded by Dieter Klöcker in 1972 (BASF); and has been published in an arrangement for clarinet and piano edited by Alison A. Copland as *Concerto: in Bb, for clarinet and orchestra* (London: Schott, 1975). See Dahlström, *Bernhard Henrik Crusell*, 91.

¹² Vretblad, 237, no. 628; Dahlgren, *Förteckning*, 548. Dahlström reproduces the first ten measures of Stranensky's wind Quintet for clarinet in Bb, two horns in Eb, and one bassoon in *Bernhard Henrik Crusell*, 91. The parts in Stockholm are incomplete including only the first page for the bassoon.

¹³ Vretblad, 238, no. 635, 244, no. 644. The harmonica, in this case, was a glass harmonica of the type invented in 1761 by Benjamin Franklin. The harmonica consists of a chromatic set of thirty seven glass bowls with a compass of three octaves, mounted with rims closely overlapping on a horizontal square metal axle turned by a treadle with a heavy wooden or lead fly wheel. See, Anthony Baines, *The Oxford Companion to Musical Instruments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 130.

in 1794.¹⁴ The Stockholm newspaper, *Dagligt Allehanda* announced that the Clarinette-Fagott was sent from Dresden for Stranensky's use by Duke Carl of Östergötland.¹⁵ Vretblad stated that the Clarinette-Fagotte was a bass clarinet; indeed the name suggests a bassoon-shaped bass clarinet, and an early bass clarinet was made in Dresden the previous year.¹⁶ The clarinet parts of his Polonaise and Quintet show Stranensky's idiomatic and classical clarinet writing. He subsequently did not perform on the clarinette fagott at Stockholm and during 1800 conducted the Court musicians in a series of Vauxhall concerts featuring his own compositions and music for dancing. He left Sweden in November 1805.¹⁷

The bassoon shaped bass clarinets by the Grensers

What type of bass clarinet did Stranensky play in 1794? Extant bass clarinets include two anonymous, prototype, plank-shaped bass clarinets with three and six keys made during the mid- and late 18th century, and a curved shaped bass clarinet with seven keys by the Mayrhofers made about 1765. However, the announcement in the Swedish newspaper of 1794 makes it clear that Duke Carl purchased the Clarinette-Fagott from Dresden, and that instrument must be the bassoon-shaped eight keys bass clarinet by Heinrich Grenser of Dresden made in 1793. It is important to note that Heinrich Grenser's cousin, Johann Friedrich Grenser, was a member of the Stockholm orchestra from 1778 and he may have suggested the purchase of his cousin's instrument to Duke Carl. It should now be recognized that Heinrich Grenser's 1793 instrument was the earliest bass clarinet purchased for a court orchestra. During the early nineteenth century when bass clarinet parts in operas became more common, orchestras often purchased their own instruments for use by the principal clarinetists.¹⁸

The Grenser Bb bass clarinet dated 1793 was subsequently purchased by the Musikmuseet in Stockholm (no. M2653), and is the earliest dated bassoon-shaped bass clarinet. A photograph from the auction catalog of Christian Hammer's musical instrument collection sold in 1893 shows Grenser's bass clarinet and provides some insight into the instrument's present condition (fig. 3).¹⁹

A close-up of the Grenser bass clarinet (1490) next to an unstamped recorder (1460) shows some additional details (fig. 4).

Comparing this to a present-day color photo of the Grenser bass clarinet (fig. 5) shows the boxwood body; details of the block mounting and the key head for the open F/C key with its brass mount; the repair to the long shank for the F#/C# key played by the little finger of the left hand; the brass ferrules; curved crook with a register key; the maker's mark: "(crossed swords)/H. GRENSER/DRESDEN/1793"; and a dark wood mouthpiece with a large ivory socket. The 1893 catalog photo, however, shows that a mouthpiece was missing and it seems likely that the present mouthpiece on the instrument was made during the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries.

¹⁴ "Romance med en Rondo à la Polonaise för Clarinette Fagotte"; "Qvintette af 2 Fleuter, 2 Valthorn och Clarinette-Fagotte"; "Terzette ur op. 'Zemire och Azor' på 2 Valthorn och Clarinette Fagotte", Vretblad, 247, no. 684. The author thanks Jörn Öierstedt for providing copies of Stranensky's music.

¹⁵ *Dagligt Allehanda*, no. 34, 1794 and no. 50 (1 March 1794); see Vreblad, 97 who does not mention Duke Carl specifically. Carl or Charles III (1748-1818) later became the King of Sweden in 1809 and King of Norway in 1814.

¹⁶ Vretblad, 96-97. Norlind and Trobäck erroneously identified the "Klarinettfagott" played by Stranensky as a basset horn; see Kungl. Hovkapelletts Historia 1526- 1926, 107. On the history of bassoon-shaped bass clarinets and their widespread use and construction see, Albert R. Rice, *From the clarinet d'amour to the contra bass: a history of large size clarinets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 257-283.

¹⁷ Vretblad, 822-825, 827, 289-832, 835; Dahlgren, *Förteckning*, 548.

¹⁸ Examples include the Paris opera orchestra (ca. 1833) and Munich Court Orchestra (1838) purchasing bass clarinets from Louis-Auguste Buffet for performances of Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*, see Rice, *From the clarinet d'amour to the contra bass*, 347-350-51; Bettina Wackernagel, *Holzblasinstrumente, Bayerisches Nationalmuseum München*, 305-307.

¹⁹ *Katalog der reichhaltigen und ausgewählten Kunst-Sammlung des Museum Christian Hammer in Stockholm* (Köln: DuMont-Schauberg, 1893), 117-132. The author thanks Jörn Öierstedt for kindly informing him about his discovery of this catalog. According to Öierstedt's annotated copy of this catalog, the Grenser bass clarinet was sold to J.M. Heberle, the auctioneer who edited several volumes of personal property owned by Christian Hammer (1818-1905).

There is some evidence that one or more previous bass clarinets, probably made in bassoon form, were made just prior to Heinrich Grenser's 1793 instrument. For example, an anonymous German author was critical of the writer and historian, J.M. Forkel, for failing to mention the bass clarinet in his annual books entitled *Musikalischer Almanachen* of 1782, 1783, and 1784. The anonymous author wrote:

«The extended oboe lungo of the Italians or hautbois d'amour of the French has been quite unnecessary in our time because of the improved clarinet, and, in many cases, the so-called bass clarinets can be substituted for bassoons in orchestras with the best result.»²⁰

Thus, Heinrich Grenser's 1793 instrument may have been an improvement upon already existing instruments, possibly his own earlier efforts. Grenser served his apprenticeship with his uncle, the highly skilled maker, August Grenser (1720- 1807), in Dresden from 1779 to 1786. Within a few years, Heinrich became a prosperous maker with an active business employing several workers.²¹ On 19 December 1793 Grenser wrote a formal announcement of his bass clarinet invention in the *K.K. Prager Oberpostamtszeitung* (30 September 1794):

«I hereby notify all connoisseurs and lovers of music that I have invented an instrument to which I have given the name bass clarinet. This instrument has a beautiful and, at the same time, a strong tone; it goes down to the low B. Each octave can be produced four times, but the B and C five times. Anyone who plays the clarinet or basset horn can master this instrument immediately. The approval that it has met with has induced me to announce it and, by this means, to recommend it in the most dutiful manner to the musical public, and also to all who should desire to obtain an instrument of this or another kind, in order to assure the promptest and [most] particular service. I will endeavor, through each instrument that is desired of me, to make myself worthy of the praise that is granted to me, since I am not only a pupil of my present father-in-law, August Grenser, who is very well received by the respectable musical public, but also have been in business with him for a number of years.»

Dresden, 19 December 1793.

Heinrich Grenser, instrument maker.²²

²⁰ “Der weitgriffige Oboe lungo der Italiäner, oder Hautbois d'Amour der Franzosen, ist in unsern Tagen durch das vervollkommene Clarinette völlig entbehrlich geworden und die sogenannten Baßclarinetten kann man in vielen Fällen den Fagotten mit der besten Wirkung in Orchestern substituieren.” “Berichtigungen und Zusätze zum den Musikalischen Almanachen auf die Jahre 1782. 1783. 1784.” *Musikalische Korrespondenz der teutschen Filarmonischen Gesellschaft für Jahr 1791*, eds. H.P.C. Böbler and J.F. Christman, no. 6 (9 February 1791), 41. Cf. Ottmar Schreiber, *Orchester und Orchesterpraxis in Deutschland zwischen 1780 und 1850* (Berlin: Junker und Dünnhaupt, 1938), 173. The author thanks William Hettrick for help in translating.

²¹ In 1789 Grenser married August's daughter Henriette Regina Grenser. See, William Waterhouse, *The New Langwill Index: A Dictionary of Musical Wind- Instrument Makers and Inventors* (London: T. Bingham, 1993), 145.

²² “Allen Kennern und Liebhabern der Musik mache ich hiermit bekannt: daß ich ein Instrument erfunden, dem ich den Namen eines Clarinettenbasses beygelegt habe. Es hat dieses Instrument einen schönen und zugleich starken Ton, geht herunter bis ins tiefe H. Jede Oktave kann man 4mal, H und C aber 5mal angeben. Derjenige, der Clarinette oder Bassethorn spielet, kann dieses Instrument sogleich regieren. Der Beyfall, den es gefunden, hat mich bewogen, es anzukündigen, und mich einem musikalischen Publikum hiedurch gehorsamst zu empfehlen, zugleich auch allen, die ein dergleichen oder andere Instrumente erhalten wünschen sollten, die prompteste und genaue Bedienung zu versichern. Ich werde mich bemühen, durch jedes von mir verlangte Instrument des mir gegönnten Zuspruches mich würdig zu machen, da ich nicht nur ein Schüler des von einem verehrungswürdigen musikalischen Publikum sehr wohl aufgenommenen Instrumentenmachers, meines jetzigen Schwiegervaters, Herrn Augustin Grenser, bin, sondern auch seit verschiedenen Jahren schon mit ihm in Compagnie stehe. Dresden, am 19ten December 1793, Heinrich Grenser, Instrumentenmacher.” “Anzeige,” *K.K. Prager Oberpostamtszeitung* LXXVIII (30 September 1794), Beilage. Cited in *Musicalia v prazskem periodickem tisku 18. stolet / Musicalia in der Prager periodischen Presse des 18. Jahrhunderts*, ed. J. Berkovec (Praha: Sttn knihovna CSR nositelka du republiky, 1989), 178, no. 280. Cf., Günter Dullat, *Klarinetten: Grundzüge ihrer Entwicklung* (Frankfurt am Main: Bochinsky, 2001), 76. The author thanks William Hettrick for help in translating.

It is obvious from this announcement that Grenser wanted to be recognized as an established maker by his own accomplishments.

Grenser's instrument includes eight block mounted keys: register, A, Ab/Eb, F#/C#, F/C, E/B, D, and BB. The last three keys on the back side of the butt joint are positioned for the right thumb.²³ Its complete compass is from BB to c''', four and one-half octaves (the lowest octave is notated in the bass clef). Below the touches for closed E/B and open D (fig. 5) is a tone hole for the right thumb, above the tone hole is an open BB touch. Covering the right thumb hole alone produces Eb; covering the right thumb hole with the D key closed produces a C. There is a thumb hole for the left thumb and one speaker key on the back of the long joint. The A key head is octagonal on a brass tonehole seat, the Ab/Eb key head is round, and the F/C key has a single touch positioned like contemporary basset horns, with the Ab/Eb key to the right of the F/C key. The F#/C# key has a long touch for little finger of the left hand identical to contemporary clarinets. The register key located on the crook was not useable since a second register touch with a ring on the upper section was needed to be mounted onto the instrument to open it.²⁴

However, a second register key is found on August Grenser's very similar bassoon-shaped bass clarinet with the maker's mark: "(crossed swords)/A. GRENSER/DRESDEN/1795/1" (Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, Kg 67:133, fig. 6 front and back views). The number one in the maker's mark suggests that at least two bass clarinets were made by Grenser, so another instrument may be discovered in the future. The mouthpiece with a large socket, and the crook are both replacements. It has all the same keys as Heinrich Grenser's instrument with the addition of a second block-mounted register key with the end of the long touch placed below the first register key. The upper end of the second register key is connected to a half ring designed to open the key mounted on the crook. Kalina speculates that this key was meant to act as a second speaker for high notes in the clarion register: b'', c'', c#'', d'', and d#'' (written in treble clef).²⁵ An owner's stamp of Grand Duke Ludewig I of Hesse in Darmstadt, appears on the back of this bass clarinet as: "(crown)/L". The use of a second register key suggests August Grenser's attempt to improve the speaking qualities of the instrument's highest range or a later alteration.²⁶

Conclusions

The Stockholm Court orchestra and its members played an important role in the history of the clarinet. It was one of the earliest orchestras to employ two clarinetists full time beginning in 1780. In 1785, the bassoonist, Gottlieb Rungstock, played the earliest documented performance in Scandinavia on the basset horn.²⁷ We now can confidently state that the earliest bass clarinet soloist was Johann Stranensky using the 1793 Grenser bass clarinet, now in Stockholm's Musikmuseet, when he played the earliest bass clarinet music in Stockholm in 1794. Previously, the earliest known bass clarinetist was Ahl the younger, a member of Mannheim's orchestra who played his own compositions in 1809.²⁸

²³ See also the description in Rice, *From the clarinet d'amour to the contra bass*, 258-260.

²⁴ This bass clarinet is constructed so that the position of the bell is at the player's right; contemporary bassoons are placed on the left. Hoeprich notes that there is evidence of alternations in the tone holes and key positions and believes it to have been experimental. See Hoeprich's comments from a letter cited in Johann George Tromlitz, *The keyed flute*, ed. A. Power (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 201, note 48.

²⁵ David Kalina, "The structural development of the bass clarinet" (Ed.D. diss., Columbia University, 1972), 19.

²⁶ Rice, *From the clarinet d'amour to the contra bass*, 260-261.

²⁷ The earliest documented basset horn performances were played by the German Leopold Valentin in Lyon in 1769 and Paris in 1774. In German speaking areas basset horn concerts were likely heard since the 1760s. A 1771 inventory of the court orchestra in Schwedt includes three basset horns, one without a mouthpiece ("Drei Stück Basset-Hörner, eines davon ohne Mundstück"). In 1781, Anton Springer and Vincent Springer performed at the English House in Danzig (present day Gdansk) on clarinets and on "an unknown instrument called the Corno di Basseto, which has the tone of the clarinet." See Rice, *From the clarinet d'amour to the contra bass*, 104-5, 205, 239; Herbert Heyde, *Musikinstrumentenbau in Preußen* (Tutzing: H. Schneider, 1994), 41, 44.

²⁸ Rice, *From the clarinet d'amour to the contra bass*, 340.

The bass clarinets by Heinrich and August Grenser were both expertly constructed instruments by highly trained makers. They represent the first bass clarinets that could be played in tonalities limited to about three flats or sharps similar to the playing limitations of the classical five-key clarinet. It was only with the development of the straight-shaped bass clarinets by Louis-August Buffet from 1833 and Adolphe Sax from 1838, and the bassoon-shaped Glicibarifono by Catterino Catterini from 1834, that more difficult and demanding music could be successfully performed. As makers continued to modify their instruments responding to players demands and greater musical demands, the shape, fingering, and bore size of the modern bass clarinet appeared by the end of the nineteenth century.



Figure 1
No. 15, Polonaise for clarinet by Johann Ignaz Stranesky (Kungl. Biblioteket, Stockholm, FfB-R).



Figure 2
First clarinet part from the Quintetto for two Bb clarinets, two Eb horns, and bassoon by Stranesky (Kungl. Biblioteket, Stockholm, F.5/sv.-R).

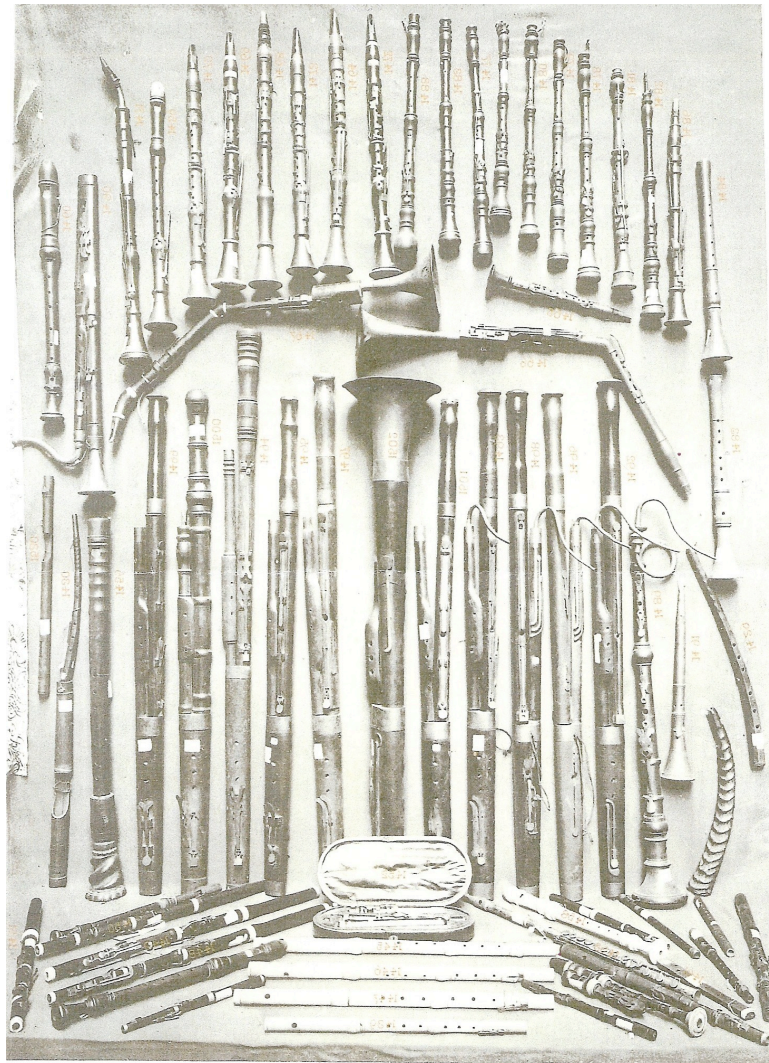


Figure 3
Woodwind instruments from Christian Hammer's collection, Stockholm in *Katalog der reichhaltigen und ausgewählten Kunst-Sammlung des Museum Christian Hammer in Stockholm* (Köln: DuMont-Schauberg, 1893).

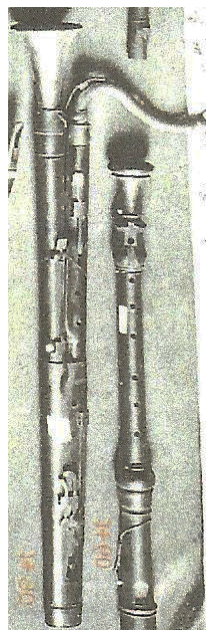


Figure 4
Close-up Heinrich Grenser, bassoon-shaped Bb bass clarinet next to an unstamped recorder.



Figure 5
Heinrich Grenser, 8-key Bb bass clarinet (Musikmuseet, Stockholm, M2653).



Figura 6
August Grenser, 9-key Bb bass clarinet (Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, Kg 67:133), front and back sides.