

A journey of discovery with Mr Coromandel, an Alfred Verhoef flute.

by Dana Morgan

Many flute players seem to be on a quest to find a particular sound world or the perfect 'fit' with an instrument or a head joint.

I have been perfectly happy with my wonderful Jack Moore flute for many years. It was, and it still is, a tremendous flute and I will never part with it.

I have always been intrigued by the sounds of different flutes. Whilst still in my teens I started my 'collection' of flutes, pipes and whistles, including various sizes of bansuri, keyless folk flutes, quenás and panpipes, and my favourite Nepalese smoked wood flute, which originally smelt of kippers!

I was playing some Haydn with an orchestra one day and upon the request of the conductor I borrowed a wooden flute to use for the concert -a beautiful Rudall Carte- lent to me very kindly by Rachel Misson. After some initial adjusting to the resistance of the instrument, I quickly fell in love with the tone and feel of the flute and I was extremely loathe to give it back after the concert. I resolved at that point to save up for a wooden flute of my own.

When I went to the BFS convention in Warwick last year I was keen to research as many wooden flutes as possible, so as to build up a bigger picture of what was available. I also had thoughts of starting out with a wooden head joint until I could afford a full flute. However, using a wooden head on a metal flute (or vice versa), brings the qualities of wood to metal and it is always a compromise in-between the two different timbres. With this in mind, I wanted to try some full wooden concert flutes which led me to meet Dutch flute maker Alfred Verhoef.

As I am half Dutch myself, I am always really pleased to meet someone from the Netherlands, as it gives me the chance to practice my rather rusty language skills! I was fascinated by the sheer range of woods Mr Verhoef had on show and it was obvious that a lot of love and care had gone into each instrument; every flute had a beautiful sheen to its finish. As I had never heard of or seen these flutes before, I wanted to know more about their background and also about Alfred's life as a flute maker in Holland.

Alfred originally trained and then performed as a classical singer for many years, playing the flute as a release. Travel had always been important to him, and it was during one of these travel phases that he had a revelation. In the cockpit of his sailing boat, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, with no wind, he played some Bach on his metal flute. He was struck by what seemed to him to be an almost magical insight which he would remember for the rest of his life- that he strongly missed a certain warmth, colour and richness in the timbre; these elements, he found out later, were to be found in wood. And so he decided to make wooden flutes.

I found out that Alfred is unique in that he is the only flute maker in the world to build flutes in such a large range of different woods. These include African rosewood, Palisander, African blackwood, Coromandel, Cocus and Bahia rosewood. I spent a wonderful couple of hours trying out all the flutes on display and enjoying their differing responses and timbres.....and feeling very worried about my strength of will and my budget!

The convention being the convention, I moved on to look at other trade stands and to mix and catch up with friends and colleagues. As there was rather a large contingent of Dutch speakers, dinner was arranged and I managed to catch up with Alfred to find out a bit more about his philosophies on flute making.

As a classically trained singer, Alfred wanted to make flutes which sang, which had their own unique sound.

Alfred told me about how he lets the wood rest, or ripen for at least 10 years in his workshop before he starts the flute making process, always playing classical music in the workshop so that the wood learns to vibrate in the right way. I had heard about this method for guitars, but never for flutes! Each flute is one of a kind and is made from wood chosen according to weight, thickness, its series of overtones and the structure of the grain. Because the flutes are made of different woods and vary slightly in thickness for the sake of the sound quality, the keys are specially made to fit each instrument.

Alfred didn't try to push his flutes at me in any way, but let them speak for themselves. The day after next, I rather sheepishly left with an AV flute on approval. Strangely enough, it was the flute I had tried first and the one which Alfred had finished the most recently- a flute he nicknamed 'Mr Coromandel'. He explained how I could slacken or tighten the crown slightly to tweak the sound to my liking, and I also found out that he had researched and implemented his own version of the flute scale, which alarmed me slightly, especially after all the studies various well respected flute players and technicians have done recently!

While I had the flute on approval I wanted to ensure I wasn't plunging in heart over head, so I thought I should ask the opinion of a good friend of mine, Paul Windridge. Paul used to work at Rudall Carte for some years before setting up as an independent woodwind instrument maker and repairer and I really valued his knowledge and expertise. Paul was also intensely curious to see the flute so I didn't feel too guilty about leaving 'Mr Coromandel' with him for the day for an examination.

Paul thought that the keywork had been made with great care and that the wood turning was very fine and well thought out, resulting in the combined effect of the key work and the flute body working very well together, being aesthetically pleasing and making a top quality instrument.

So, what else could I find out about this flute? The type of wood itself intrigued me. Coromandel wood is native to India, Sri Lanka and South East Asia. It is of a hazel-brown colour with black stripes (or vice versa), very heavy and hard. The best comes from Sulawesi, Indonesia, and it is known as Macassar Ebony or variegated (striped) ebony. It is closely related to genuine ebony, but it is obtained from different species in the same genus.

I have to admit that I was still slightly concerned that the flute had a new scale, despite having checked it thoroughly with my tuner. I took it to some orchestral rehearsals and also introduced it to the other members of my wind trio, Cuillin Sound. I was pleasantly surprised to find that the intonation of Mr Coromandel actually worked better with the other woodwind instruments than my silver flute. I don't know whether that was because of the scale, or whether it was because the sound of the flute was more malleable and round, without that sense of 'brittleness' one sometimes finds in metal flutes.

Despite trying other wooden flutes during the approval period by various esteemed makers, Mr Coromandel is still with me. The flute seems to sing more every time I play and I love the naturalness of shaping the sound. It has power and projection too without losing the roundness in the tone and I have used it successfully with my trio and orchestrally. I was lucky enough have the opportunity to do a flute and piano concert tour around Australasia earlier this year, playing a mixture of classical and more contemporary music using both my AV and my Jack Moore flutes. Of course, the choice of a flute is unique to everyone. So who else plays on an AV flute?

Massimo Mercelli is an acclaimed and award winning Italian flute player with an enviable career and reputation. Having listened to his superb playing on the AV website, I was curious to find out what had drawn him to Alfred's flutes. Massimo plays on two different AV flutes; having initially bought one in coromandel, he also went on to book one from Alfred in cocus wood.

Massimo was kind enough to phone me (in the break of a Bach concert!) to tell me some of his thoughts about AV flutes.

Massimo tried different wooden flutes for about 20 years but found them to sound too much like metal flutes, which made him unhappy with the timbre. He wanted the wood to actually sound like wood. The first time he heard a wooden flute which sounded less like metal, was when he was in Lebanon working with the Beirut Symphony Orchestra and he met the Principal flutist there, who was playing on a flute which had been partly made by Alfred.

One month afterwards word came to him about 'flutes that sing' and he was desperate to 'try the singing flute'. As soon as he found out where to find these flutes, he immediately took the first flight to Amsterdam and from thereon to the workshop of Alfred Verhoef.

The first flute he tried was in coromandel and it spoke to him so much that he told Alfred that he would have to cut his hands off at the wrist, if he couldn't leave with the flute!

The AV flutes "really sound like a wood instrument".

I asked Massimo what it was about AV flutes that spoke to him so intensely.

"AV flutes have a sound close to the voice, with flexibility, with piano and forte, and a warm sound"

"This sound has been pursued by many composers, they love this kind of sound. They are very keen to write for this 'round sound'".

Since purchasing and performing worldwide on his AV flutes, composers have written and collaborated on many works for Massimo because 'they love the sound of the flute'. It is an impressive line up, including compositions specially written for him by Phillip Glass, Michael Nyman, Sofia Gubaidulina, Krzysztof Penderecki and Ennio Morricone.

To listen to Massimo performing there is a clip on the website for AV flutes of the opening performance at the Olympic Winter Games 2014 in Moscow. Details of more recordings can be found on Massimo's website www.massimomercelli.com

To find out more about Alfred and his flutes I will be travelling to Alkmaar to interview him for a future edition. Further information and links can be found at www.verhoef-flutes.com

Dana Morgan is a member of Cuillin Sound and she performs as a freelance flute player and recitalist. For more from Dana please see www.cuillinsoundmusic.co.uk or www.danamorgan.co.uk

The pictures for this article are kindly lent by photographer Joost Leijen from the Netherlands.