

Robert Bigio: *Rudall, Rose & Carte: The Art of the Flute in Britain*.

Rudall, Rose & Carte, later Rudall Carte, was one of the world's great flutemaking companies. Founded in London in 1822, it established its reputation with a series of new designs at a time when the modern flute had yet to be devised. By the 1880s, its instruments had become the natural choice for serious flutists in Great Britain and were popular throughout Europe and the English-speaking world. Many were imported into the U.S until the introduction of "swingeing" import taxes in the Fordney-McCumber Tarriff Act of 1922. In Great Britain, Rudall Carte flutes, made in cocuswood or silver, sometimes ebonite or gold, continued to be played at the highest level until the Second World War, after which fashions began to change. British players gradually abandoned their Rudall Cartes until finally these once-premium flutes fell so far from favor that insurers would no longer include them in new policies. A general view took hold that they were outmoded and stuffy. Yet some diehards held on to them—and why not, since by then they were next to worthless? A few even had the temerity to play them in public.

For most flutists the sheer variety of Rudall Cartes, with different keys and playing at various pitches, was a foreign country whose language they didn't understand and couldn't see the point of learning. But recently—partly because an interest in authenticity has argued against the automatic discounting of old instruments, and perhaps also because the growth of traditional music has brought a fresh demand for simple and Böhm-system wood flutes—musicians have begun to appreciate Rudall Cartes anew for their qualities. Flutists in important orchestras such as the BBC Symphony and Zurich Opera regularly take up Rudall Cartes for certain composers, and the last couple of years have seen many more retrieved from cupboards in every part of the world where they were once so popular.

The author of *Rudall, Rose & Carte: The Art of the Flute in Britain* was instrumental in this reversal of fortune. When the reputation of Rudall Carte flutes was at its nadir, Robert Bigio made a point of advocating their merits. He began an extensive research into the history of the company and its products. This publication is therefore the result of more than two decades' devotion.

The first impression is that this is a book worthy of its subject. And from the hundreds of superb photographs, it is clear that Rudall, Rose & Carte—after Rose's death, simply Rudall Carte—was the Rolls-Royce of flutemakers.

The book falls naturally into halves, the first giving biographies of the firm's directors, the second dealing with the designs and playing characteristics of its flutes. We follow George Rudall and John Mitchell Rose, later joined by Richard Carte, as they come together from different backgrounds to produce flutes of the highest quality and exploit a craze that can hardly be imagined today. In 1829 it was reckoned in London that one man in 10 played the flute. Touring superstar flutists performed to packed houses. "The vast market for flutes is demonstrated," Bigio writes, "by the proliferation of flute designs in the two decades before the middle of the 19th century, and the number of new designs demonstrates that inventors realized that this vast market was calling for an improved instrument."

Rudall, Rose & Carte's great coup, having recognized the importance of Theobald Böhm's innovations, came in persuading him to trust them with his designs. Yet even while manufacturing the latest key systems, they were canny enough to continue producing those simple-system flutes that Böhm's developments were meant to supersede.

Bigio sets the company's success in the context of a concise and definitive history of the development of the flute. He has toured museums and private collections to inspect important instruments by all the major manufacturers at first hand, and much of the research reaches back to primary sources. Flutes that proved popular are described alongside those with different systems that failed. Bigio stresses the extent to which economics ruled in that near-perfect market. "Flutes are objects of manufacture, not objects of art," he insists, and argues that players were responsible for establishing with their purchases the nature of today's Böhm system.

By the 1890s, Rudall Carte had perfected its models. For the next 60 years it hardly altered them. Neither did it adapt its workshop practices. Unlike other flute companies that operated a division of labor, each Rudall Carte was made almost entirely by one man. Bigio points out the inefficiency of having craftsmen manufacture even the most rudimentary of components, and argues that such a system inevitably led to an unevenness across the firm's output, with flutes by some makers, while still very good, inferior to others. The irony in this is that today, the fact that no two of their flutes is the same has become part of the allure. The best Rudall Cartes, made in their entirety by one or other of the best makers, remain peerless.

But while its output continued unchanged—indeed Montague George, who'd bought the company from Richard Carte's son Henry in 1895, told the famous American collector Dayton C. Miller that he wouldn't, "for the sake of wider sales, make cheaper flutes and sacrifice the reputation of Rudall Carte & Co"—demand began to shrink. The company lost its lucrative American market, and in the 1920s and 1930s had to compete against second-hand Rudall Cartes that, because of the excellence of their manufacture, were still playing as well as ever. Attempts at introducing new products, such as flutes made from a nickel alloy called Monel that resisted tarnishing, brought only temporary financial relief. And if true innovation was lacking, so was investment. Photographs of the workshop show flutemakers—among them some of the greatest who have ever lived—struggling into the 1950s with hand tools and gas burners.

By then the company had been bought by Boosey & Hawkes, who at the end of that decade closed the workshop that had been home to Rudall Carte since 1873. Its craftsmen dispersed, some to form Flutemakers Guild, others such as Albert Cooper to set up on their own. The prestigious name of Rudall Carte & Co came to be stamped on cheap imports from Eastern Europe or the Far East.

There probably is no writer better qualified than Robert Bigio to give us this history. He brings to bear an unrivalled knowledge of the subject together with the insights of a flutemaker and the experience of a professional player and teacher. His approach is scholarly without being academic, his style articulate and fluent. He allows himself flights of rhetoric and balances these with careful descriptions of keyword or manufacturing process. Devotees of Rudall, Rose & Carte will want a copy for their shelves.

But the author's broader purpose in giving a general history of the flute's development makes this essential reading for anyone curious to know how the flute they play has come to exist in its current form.

Arthur Haswell

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