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Cornett

(Fr. *cornet-à-bouquin*; Ger. *Zink*; It. *cornetto*; Sp. *corneta*).

A wooden, lip-vibrated wind instrument with finger-holes and a cup-shaped mouthpiece. It was mainly used from the end of the 15th century to the end of the 17th, but continued in use, mostly by town musicians, until the late 18th century and occasionally even into the 19th. The late 20th century saw an extensive revival. The English spelling was usually 'cornet', but the common variant 'cornett' has been widely adopted, following the suggestion of F.W. Galpin, to prevent confusion in print with the modern valved cornet. The cornett is known in three main sizes – treble, small treble (cornettino) and tenor, of which the treble has by far the greatest importance.

See also [ORGAN STOP](#).

1. Construction and technique.

There are three types of treble cornett: curved, straight and 'mute'. The curved (Ger. *krummer Zink*, *schwarzer Zink*; It. *cornetto curvo*, *cornetto alto* (i.e. 'loud'), *cornetto nero*) is the most common type, with over 140 extant examples. It is about 60 cm long and made of a single block of wood (plum, pear, maple etc.) cut into a curved shape and split lengthwise. A conical bore is carved out of each half and the pieces are then glued back together, the exterior planed to an octagonal profile, and the longitudinal joints secured by a series of bindings and a covering of black leather or parchment. The socket for the mouthpiece, which is slightly tapered, was sometimes strengthened by an external brass ferrule, and both the upper and lower ends of the instrument were occasionally adorned with silver mounts. There are six finger-holes and a thumb-hole (nearest to the mouthpiece). The instrument is often curved to the right, and the player's right hand is placed lowermost, but many specimens are 'left-handed', curving the opposite way. Mouthpieces are made of ebony, ivory, or horn, but it is difficult to ascertain which extant examples are original; many are known to be replacements. One of the specimens generally accepted as original is that of the late 16th-century curved cornett from Ambras. It is turned from horn, 14 mm wide, and is similar to a small trumpet mouthpiece in the deep curvature of the cup, but the rim is very sharp, resembling an acorn cup. Many pictures of cornett players show just such a small mouthpiece, and these depictions, together with instructions in several treatises, suggest that the small cup mouthpiece was usually placed in the corner of the mouth, the centre position being occasionally employed as an alternative.

The straight treble cornett (Ger. *gerader Zink*; It. *cornetto diritto*) is made of wood – usually yellow boxwood – with a conical bore as in the curved cornett, but turned on the outside to a circular cross-section, usually without ornamentation. Finger-holes and mouthpiece are as in the curved cornett. This was evidently the least common type, and comparatively few (about 13) have survived, although it seems to have been widely used before 1550, especially in Germany.

The mute cornett (Ger. *stiller Zink*; It. *cornetto muto*) is made like the straight cornett, but its mouthpiece is not detachable, being turned in the wood at the top end of the instrument instead. The conical cup merges into the bore, usually without a sharp break, causing a softening and veiling of the tone quality. Many fine boxwood specimens are in the Brussels Conservatory museum; most of these are from late 16th-century Venice, where Vincenzo Galilei (*Dialogo*, 1581)

said that the best cornetts of his day were made.

The compass of the curved treble cornett was from *g* to *a*" until the 17th century, when parts were taken up to *d*" or even *toe*". But the lowest proper note is *a* (the thumb-hole and all six finger-holes covered), the *g* being obtained by slackening the lip. A few treble cornetts seem to have been pitched a whole tone lower, and there is evidence that mute cornetts were normally built so, at least around 1600 (see Weber). It has been widely speculated that such low treble cornetts may have been used as alto instruments. Although little direct confirmation of the theory exists, a Stuttgart inventory from 1589 mentions two cornetts pitched 'two tones lower than the treble cornett' (see Spielmann), and the civic ensemble of Bologna had positions for both *cornetto di soprano* and *cornetto di contralto* (see Gambassi).

Cornett fingering resembles that of other woodwind instruments of the period, although it becomes highly idiosyncratic in the upper octave. Only a few fingering charts survive, and most of them, such as that in Speer's *Grund-richtiger ... Unterricht der Musicalischen Kunst* (Ulm, 1687, enlarged 2/1697/R) are from the last century of the instrument's use. Dalla Casa (1584) states that the cornett, like the voice, can be played *piano* or *forte* and in every key (*tuono*). Similarly Mersenne (1636–7) wrote that it can be sounded as softly as a recorder and can play a scale beginning on any note as *ut*: the point of these observations was that most other woodwind instruments of the period (shawms, flutes etc.) were, in varying degrees, deficient in those respects. The most sympathetic scales on the cornett are G, C and F major, as they introduce the best cross-fingerings.

In its heyday (c1550–1650) the treble cornett was used more than other wind instruments for virtuoso display, resulting in spectacular divisions (or diminutions) as extravagant as those produced on the violin or bass viol, or by the voice. Mersenne went so far as to say that the cornett should almost always be played in diminution. Dalla Casa gave numerous examples; the extract in [ex.1](#) is from a diminution of the treble of Lassus's five-part *Susanne un jour* (from the second book of *Il vero modo di diminuir*; the original composition is printed in Lassus's *Sämtliche Werke*, xiv).



Ex.1

Similarly brilliant cornett passages occur in Giovanni Gabrieli's works, and sometimes in those of his followers (e.g. Praetorius's *Wachet auf!* in the *Polyhymnia*). For the execution of these divisions tonguing reached a high degree of complexity. Instructions were set down in a series of Italian tutors from Ganassi dal Fontego (1535) to Bismantova (1677). They embraced two considerations, force and speed, and with only minor differences, set forth a highly developed and remarkably consistent Italian 'school' of articulation. For the fastest divisions the liquid *lingua riversa*, usually expressed as *le-re-le-re, de-re-le-re, or-te-re-le-re*, was prescribed. Also recommended for moderately fast passages was the harsher dental *te-re-te-re*, which, it was said, is easier to hold back in semiquaver runs. *Te-che-te-che* (the ordinary modern 'double tonguing' on flutes and trumpets) was deemed 'crude and terrifying', in addition to being difficult to hold back. *Te-te-te-te* (ordinary single tonguing) was described as good up to quaver speed but too sluggish for anything faster. The model of articulation on the cornett was the human voice, especially the extravagant vocal ornaments known as *gorgia*, and thus the *lingua riversa* was sometimes known as the *lingua di gorgia*. Although the cornett can technically be played legato (i.e. without any lingual articulation), all notes were normally tongued, except in the execution of trills and some cadential ornaments (see [TONGUING](#)).

The cornett's tone quality was often described as being close to the human voice, particularly that of a boy soprano. Mersenne eloquently described it as 'like a ray of sunshine piercing the shadows, when heard with the choir voices in the cathedrals or chapels'. By modern standards

the instrument is not loud, its *forte* being less strong than a clarinet's. The mute cornett has a uniquely soft and velvety quality. Roger North (1695) said 'Nothing comes so near or rather imitates so much an excellent voice as a cornett pipe; but the labour of the lips is too great and it is seldom well sounded' (see Wilson, 1959). The difficulty of producing and controlling the sound of the cornett undoubtedly became more evident once the instrument began to be pushed aside (in the late 17th century) in favour of the more fashionable stringed instruments. As the number of players decreased, standards began to slip; that they did so precipitously is confirmed by a mid-18th century Bolognese source which complained that the instrument's daily appearances in the town square had become 'a public scandal' (see Gambassi).

The 16th-century cornettino (Ger. *kleiner Zink*, *Cornettin*) was a 5th higher than the treble cornett; during the 17th century it was a 4th higher (and known as a *Quartzink*). It was most commonly made to the curved design of the treble instrument, but straight and mute cornettinos were also constructed. The cornettino gained considerable favour throughout 17th-century Germany and Austria and was often required by Schütz, notably in no.3 of the third part of the *Symphoniae sacrae* (1650), in which, above the words 'Wo der Herr nicht die Stadt behütet, so wachet der Wächter umsonst', the cornettino pipes out plaintive, cockcrow rhythms on single notes to the composer's instruction 'ad imitationem Cornu Vigilis'. Walther's *Lexicon* (1732) gives its range as *d'* to *d'''* or even up to *a'''*.

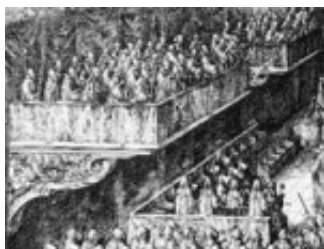
The tenor cornett (Fr. *taille des cornets*; Ger. *grosser Zink*; It. *corno torto*, *cornone*) was pitched a 5th lower than the treble cornett, and was usually provided with an additional finger-hole, covered by a key, for the little finger of the lower hand. Because of its length (75 to 105 cm) the instrument was generally made with a double curve, having the finger-holes on the inside facet of the lower bend; thus in playing position the bell points downwards to the front, not outwards to the side as in the treble. Its main period of use was, like the treble cornett, about 1550 to 1650, although it gained favour in England only after the beginning of the 17th century; in 1622 the celebrated Norwich Waits possessed at least two. Praetorius did not care for it, describing its sound as 'most unlovely and bullocky'. Nevertheless, it was widely used. Some 35 specimens survive in museum collections and many parts in alto and tenor clefs specifying 'cornetto' are only playable on the tenor-sized instrument. A tenor cornett in serpentine form is in the Paris Conservatoire collection. A straight tenor cornett, of ivory, ascribed to the late 17th century, is in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg. The bass cornett (Fr. *basse des cornets*; Ger. *Basszink*) pitched a 4th or 5th below the tenor, is described only by Mersenne, but it was also known in Germany, where it is listed in many inventories from the last decades of the 16th century.

See also [LYSARDEN](#).

2. History.

The word 'cornet', literally 'little horn', suggests an animal-horn ancestry for the instrument. Of the numerous cow-horn-shaped instruments in medieval pictures some are shown with finger-holes, resembling horns still used by Scandinavian herdsmen. In Sweden such instruments go back to at least the 10th century, according to the date determined for a 22 cm oxhorn with four holes, now in the Dalarnas Museum, Falun (no.7279). There are fairly clear 11th- and early 12th-century illustrations (mostly English) of such instruments (see Galpin); further examples were depicted in the next two centuries and contemporary French romances contain expressions such as 'cor à doigts', which presumably refer to them. The octagonal exterior form is seen in a carving from about 1260 in Lincoln Cathedral, showing an angel apparently playing two instruments at once (see Gardner). One of the Angers Tapestries (1373–82) shows a curved cornett with the lowest hole duplicated so that either hand could be placed uppermost (see Harrison and Rimmer). This feature, known on recorders from the earliest examples (although rare on subsequent cornetts), suggests that the cornett at that time was made by professional instrument makers. The classic curved model is seen from the mid-15th century, for instance in a Spanish breviary ([GB-Lbl Add.18851;fig.1](#) [not available online]), and by the end of that century references to cornett players are fairly numerous in most European countries. The Germans, however, seem at first to have preferred the straight cornett. In a letter of 1541 the Nuremberg maker Georg Stengel 'genannt Neuschel' referred to 'welsche krumme Zincken' (see Eitner, 1877), as if the curved form were

considered French or Italian in origin. Virdung's *Musica getutscht* (1511), the title-page of Arnold Schlick's *Spiegel der Orgelmacher und Organisten* (Speyer, 1511) and *Maximilian's Triumphal Procession* by Burgkmair and others (begun 1516) all show the straight form, in the latter two instances accompanying choristers. Earlier evidence of straight cornetts may exist in a number of 11th- to 13th-century pictures showing small straight instruments (with finger-holes) that terminate in the carved head of a dog or wolf. Most of the sources are German or Swiss; two less clear examples are French (see Hammerstein). Whether the medieval instruments in fact represent forms of cornett is impossible to prove, but a number of extant 16th-century Italian curved cornetts which end in a beast's head might be considered supporting evidence. Mute and tenor cornetts were both known by 1550 in Italy and Flanders, and no doubt also in other countries.



Cornetts with trombones, bass shawms and strings, accompanying choral music...

The cornett appeared along with trombones and organ as support for choral music throughout its main period of use (fig.2). In England cornetts and trombones doubled the voices of the choir in the Chapel Royal, in the cathedrals at such places as Canterbury, York and Durham, and in provincial and collegiate churches until at least the time of the Commonwealth. In Italy, Germany, France, Spain and Latin America the cornett was widely used to double voices in cathedrals until well into the 18th century. When the cornett did not double voices it either substituted for them or, especially after 1600, played instrumental lines, often together with or in place of the violin

or with an ensemble of trombones. Giovanni Gabrieli was a pioneer and master of elaborate obbligato writing for the cornett, but his example was followed more in Germany than in Italy, where obbligato use of the instrumental after 1650 is rare. The cornett was given leading parts in Schütz's early works, and continued to hold an important position in German and Austrian sacred music through the end of the 17th century. At the Imperial Court in Vienna cornetts and cornettini were given obbligato parts, of sometimes awe-inspiring difficulty in their exploitation of the high register, by such composers as Bertali, Biber, Georg Muffat and Schmelzer. Cornetts and trombones also formed an independent ensemble of five to eight parts for ceremonial music: in France they were used thus up to Mersenne's time; in England for such music as John Adson's *Courtly Masquing Ayres* (1621), and Matthew Locke's music for 'His Majesty's Sagbutts and Cornetts' (1661); in Germany for *Turmmusik* by J.C. Pezel (e.g. *Fünff-stimmigte blasende Music*, 1685) and by Gottfried Reiche; and in Italy in most important cities until the mid-18th century, including Bologna, where the Concerto Palatino was active until 1779 and Rome, where the Concerto Capitolino survived until 1789. In Germany the cornett-trombone ensemble continued to play *Turmmusik* into the 19th century; and it is in this ancient and humble duty that it is last heard of (see Kastner). Examples of cornetts (and trombones) used by the American Moravians are in the Moravian Museum, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

The decline of the cornett as an orchestral instrument can be followed in the published scores of the Leipzig Kantors from Schein to Bach. Although Bach wrote for the cornett he used it, except in the motet *O Jesu Christ, mein Lebens Licht*, BWV 118, merely to reinforce the trebles of the choir. Handel's cornett parts in *Tamerlano* (1724) and Gluck's in *Orfeo* (1762) had eventually to be performed on other instruments. In the 1880s V.-C. Mahillon made the first attempt to restore the cornett for use in such music. For a performance of *Orfeo* in Brussels he constructed a straight cornett on modern lines, with flute keywork (now in the Brussels Conservatory museum).

The pioneering work in reviving the cornett was done in the 1950s, in Britain by Christopher Monk and in Germany by Otto Steinkopf, one of the first to perform publicly on a reconstructed instrument.

3. Folk cornetts.

Various wooden instruments that are sounded like cornetts are found in the Baltic countries and parts of Russia. They are bound in birch bark, have four or more finger-holes, and may generally be seen as variants of the cow-horn with finger-holes (see §2 above). The *rozok* ('little horn') of the Vladimir and Tver (Kalinin) districts, however, may be a rural offshoot of the straight cornett; it has a separate mouthpiece (which some players place to the side of the lips) and is made in two

or more sizes for playing music in parts. This playing tradition may go back only two centuries, to judge by estimates of the age of Russian improvised part-singing in rural areas.

See also [RUSSIAN FEDERATION, §II, 4.](#)

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