

WRITING FOR THE TRUMPET MARINE

As the name of the instrument suggests, the trumpet marine sounds like a trumpet, and it is this sound that most characterized the instrument in the 17th and 18th centuries. However, by extending the technique and exploring the sonic capabilities of the instrument a variety of other sounds and textures may be produced.

But first, the early trumpet marine and how it works:

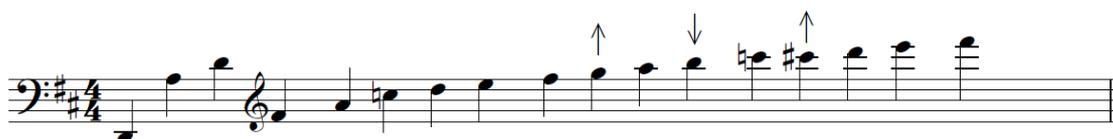
KEY FEATURES OF THE TRUMPET MARINE

BOWED MONOCHORD

The trumpet marine is a bowed monochord. It has one long playing string on which all the bowed notes are played. Our trumpet marines are tuned to D2 (see below) or D1 (an octave lower than the example below).

THE HARMONIC SERIES AND RANGE OF THE TRUMPET MARINE

Notes are produced by touching the harmonic nodes of the string with the side of the thumb. This produces an idiosyncratic major scale in the top eighth of the string. The string is bowed ABOVE the harmonic nodes. There is no fingerboard, so stopping the string is not possible. Playing on the harmonic nodes encourages the string to vibrate freely, which in turn produces the characteristic buzzing sound. The notes available using this technique (on the instruments tuned to D2) are shown below.



Notes that sound particularly 'out of tune' to a modern ear are indicated with arrows. The trumpet marine tuned to D2 shares the same range of notes as a clarino trumpet, but unlike a trumpet, it is not possible to tweak the tuning of the notes. They are what they are and there is a joy in embracing that – think exotic rather than out of tune.

Players slide the thumb between the harmonic nodes to produce melodies. Techniques such as trills, fast semi-quavers and scalic passage are all possible, but require skill and agility on the part of the performer. However, various 'smoke and mirrors' techniques might also be employed to give the impression of a melodic or ornamental gesture (see video).

BUZZING BRIDGE

The trumpet-like buzz is produced by the bridge, which is held in place by the playing string. The bridge has two 'feet'. The playing string runs over one of these, leaving the other foot free to vibrate against the table of the instrument when the string is bowed. The bridge is adjusted by the player to achieve the desired level of buzz.

Even in the 18th century, the trumpet marine was also set up to produce other timbres. The bridge can be adjusted to produce a soft flutey sound, and the bow can be used expressively as well as to mimic the more military aspects of a trumpet.

SYMPATHETIC STRINGS

Some trumpet marines were fitted with sympathetic strings. Sympathetic strings feature on two of our instruments. The sympathetic strings are also tuned to D, are made of brass and steel (according to pitch). They create a sonic halo around the core sound, making the instruments sound less shrill than those without sympathetic strings. They are accessed through a sliding door on the front of the instrument.

<https://youtu.be/xJQk51M9lQ> Trailer for the project and the sound of 4 trumpet marines playing an 18th century rondeau.

OUR INSTRUMENTS

The Society of Strange and Ancient Instruments own four trumpet marines. Three are copies of surviving instruments, and one is an experimental instrument designed to explore and extend the scope of a traditional trumpet marine.

TM1

This instrument is a copy of a mid-18th century instrument in the V&A musical instrument collection. It has room for 42 sympathetic strings which are tuned using a harpsichord tuning hammer. This is the easiest to play of the four instruments. At the moment it is tuned to D2 and will probably be used for the more elaborate solos in our programme.

TM2

This is an experimental instrument. When constructing this instrument we tried out new ideas and test various theories about the trumpet marine that might inform the making of the final two instruments. Key features of this instrument include:

- 2 bowed melody strings tuned to D1 and D2, allowing two full octave scales of buzzy notes.
- The possibility of using one of the strings as a drone string while simultaneously playing a melody on the other string;

- Eight sympathetic strings, tuned using banjo machine heads. Adjusting the pitch or tuning these strings is much easier than on TM1 and could feature within a new composition, though to adjust the pitch precisely needs time and silence;
- The possibility of changing the material underneath the bridges. On our other instruments the bridges stand on the table of the instruments, but on this instrument there is an ebony inlay underneath them. This could be changed for a metal or a different sort of wood.

TM3

This instrument is a copy of a 16th century trumpet marine which hails from a Swiss nunnery. It is a fine, delicate instrument. The string length is shorter than the other instruments which makes it more challenging to play. We are still working on the set-up and will probably change the D2 playing string to D1 soon.

TM4

TM4 is a copy of a 17th century trumpet marine made in 1674, the same year as the Fleece tavern performance. It has a thin rounded neck, making it easy to play more complicated music on. This will probably be our other 'solo' instrument even though it sounds very different to TM1.

EXPLORING AND EXTENDING THE SOUND AND TECHNIQUE OF THE TRUMPET MARINE

You don't need to be limited to technical and compositional styles associated with the 17th and 18th century trumpet marine when planning your composition. We welcome all ideas for expanding the sonic and technical palette of the trumpet marine and we would like 21st century composers to explore as many aspects of it as possible.

As this instrument is so unfamiliar, you might include a list of ways in which you would like to investigate the instrument if you are selected, or a list of questions about how it might be investigated.

We will not be using amplification or electronics. Please write for acoustic instruments.

Ways in which you might explore the sound of the trumpet marine are included in the 'information for composers' video.

Clare Salaman