

**Interview with Swiss Recorder Maker, Andreas Kung
In Shanghai, China
Friday, October 20, 2006**

By Bill Blackford

For four days each year in mid-October, Shanghai is host to hundreds of Asian and Western music companies looking to sell their products at an annual international music exhibition simply named Music China. I had previously arranged to meet and speak with Mr. Kung there. He's a good-natured gentleman. We talked and I sampled models of his Superio and Marsyas recorders. He also showed me his copy of a Denner sopranino, and his Souffleur alteration to the block on a Superio alto.

Could you tell me more about Franz Kung? How did he get started in the recorder making business?

He was my father. He was trained as a piano maker and after he finished his studies in Germany and the Netherlands, he came back to Schaffhausen, Switzerland and bought a villa at Grabenstrasse. Then he started a music shop and made repairs of pianos, tuning of pianos, and he had a shop with radios, with brass, with all kinds of instruments. And he worked going on until 1938. Then he was asked to make a recorder because everybody had recorders out of Germany. At the start of the war it was not possible to get recorders out of Germany, so he started to make recorders and so he developed and after ten years, he stopped everything else at the music shop and made only recorders.

In the '50s he was so well-known that he exported a lot of instruments to the States, to America. And even in Switzerland and Germany the recorder was used to play in the schools. It was like obligatory, and that's why the firm was growing up quite fast. So he produced at these times about 60,000 instruments per year. Recorders only, with sopranino, soprano, altos, tenors, and we had basses. And at the end of the '50s he made a great bass, and so our great bass is over fifty years old.

And then in the '76 he produced a contra bass, so this is already 30 years old. But, it was too much work for him. He worked 12-16 hours a day to produce a lot of German fingering sopranos. And one day he decided to stop this, as this was more than half of the production. So as he had less to do, it meant that business went down, but we continued anyway, and from then on it was very successful.

My brother was a machine mechanic and then he went into the company. And myself, I studied recorder with Hans Martin Linde. I made a diploma in Early Music with a Major in recorder in Basel. So, after 1976 I finished my diploma and I taught in Basel at the Schola. I was working in the company 3 days a week, and 2 days teaching. And I made a lot of concerts. I offered workshops in the States. But, year by year I worked more and more in the company. In '83 my father died, and I began to work full-time in the company. So, less concerts and less teaching and now only company.

Since '83 my brother and I have been running the company. And since 1989 there is Geri Bollinger working with us. After some years of voicing all our recorders he got really into the job of a recorder maker and became a developer of the SUPERIO line, above all of the alto, bass, great bass, and now the contra bass. My brother Thomas

is responsible for the production, the mechanics, machines, and I contact the customers, make the advertisements some of the services and above all the commercial side of the business.

Was there another name for the Classica series?

Yes, we changed the name in 1983 when my father died. We changed a little bit our I.D. So, before they had numbers such as model 1A, 1B, 1C. That was in the very early days. For the recorders made out of palisander, or grenadill, or other expensive, exotic woods, these were called Meisterstück (or Meisterstueck). That was very well known. But after '83 we canceled that, and we changed a little bit the product. The Meisterstruck became the Classica.

Is there information available for people with older Kung models, for example about fingerings or when it was made?

Yes, it's not on the website, but we have a lot of emails asking about old Meisterstück models, and there is a code for the age on each of our recorders since 1948. Fingerings are the same, really.

Do you think a recorder older than 20 years is not worth fixing?

Sometimes. So generally spoken, these old models are not very, how do you say, not so actual with the sound response, and these things, so between some years before and now there's a big difference in the knowledge of producing and building recorders. So, we have slightly changed our bore and changed the production of the labium and wind tunnel. So if you take an old instrument, 30 years old, 40 years, the sound is very different from modern manufactured recorders. Therefore, we say it's not worth it to make repairs.

What was the idea behind making your Folklor Soprano in Bb?

This was because of the Swiss music, folk music. Swiss folk musicians play normally with harmonica (button accordion) tuned in Bb, and also they use the clarinet in Bb and somebody asked us to make a recorder in Bb so that it's easier to be played on recorders.

What about a recorder in D, which would allow more recorder players to play Irish and American fiddle tunes more easily?

Well we have made the whole scale for these historic recorders. We made sopranos in D and sopranos in C, both in 440, 415,, sopranos in Bb in 415, that would be the soprano in A, and then we have made an alto in G and altos in F, 440, 415 as well, and a voice flute in D 415. All after a Denner recorder. But all these kinds of recorders we took out of our program because there are a lot of makers that make historic instrument copies and customers like more to go to them than to a company. So in the mean time we haven't been asked for sopranos in D or a voice flute in D. Anyway if somebody wants to play the folk tunes and the Irish, they should play the tin whistle.

Are you going to discontinue your Classica series?

Yes, we have decided that we will take it out of the official program and we want to concentrate on the Studio and Superio models. And maybe we plan to make a new recorder quartet to play real ensemble music because we think that true baroque recorders are very concentrated in sound, very rich in overtones, and not very good to play in ensembles, big ensembles like recorder orchestras where the sound is not very good, or clear. So, it's better to produce a new recorder that is more open in tone like maybe a very good renaissance recorder. But therefore, we will move away from the Classica a little bit because this model is very old. We have some customers who like the sound very much, and we will continue to produce them on demand. So if somebody wants to have it, we'll make it.

You have this Souffleur with a hole drilled through the block. You said you have to get the size just right. If it's too small, the sound is distorted. If it's too big, it doesn't work. How did that idea come about?

Our inventor/developer of the Souffleur is Geri Bollinger. He made a tenor recorder for himself more or less, which can go away from the clear recorder sound into a sound like a shakuhachi or like a tin whistle. He took away $\frac{3}{4}$ of the mouth piece so that you would have a very short wind canal, very near to the window of the labium with your lips, and you can influence with your lips the sound. And when you then have a hole through the block you can blow even more air to the labium. The sound production there is disturbed by this more air. It's like to play outside when the wind blows.

There's a Canadian by the name of Craig Carmichael who makes the Supercorder. He came out with something similar to your Souffleur in early 2004. Did that influence your inventor in any way?

No, no. He didn't even know about this. But when we showed it at a fair in Frankfurt, somebody came and said, "Oh, I tried this also. I made a whole through the block some years ago." So it was thought of by another person, but this other person didn't come out with any information before, and so nobody knew. And even this is the first time I've heard of the Supercorder, I have to say.

Is this an invention that can be patented?

Well, as we thought it would be something very new we got a patent for this. But actually it's not very much worth it, because as you say now the Supercorder has this, and maybe it's nearly the same, so I have to see. So anybody can make a hole.

Might the hole affect the stability of the block? Is there any difference between drilling a hole in a new and old block?

No, it doesn't matter. It's the same.

Does it affect the voicing in any way?

No.

What about the effect of anti-condense on this kind of altered block?

I don't see any problems at all, unless you eat spaghetti and it gets into the block!
(Laughs)

(I tried one of Kung's Superio Altos with the Souffleur. It works quite well softening and quieting all the notes, so it offers the recorder player a wider dynamic range. However, one needs to really work at using it on the high F and G. As another use, I thought it could really help people who travel and need a very quiet recorder to practice in hotels, for example.)

You have a new sub-contrabass?

No, it's a contra-bass. Or sub bass, but we say the contra-bass in F. So, the sub-contrabass is even one octave lower. It's made by Paetzold. We make the contra-bass in F and a great bass in C.

What kind of people are buying such an instrument, or for that matter a garklein? Do people really play garkleins in a musical setting?

The garklein is maybe for more or less a joke, or a souvenir. But when it's played correctly, then it's very difficult. The Amsterdam Loeki Stardust Quartet played a Bach fugue with garklein on top, then sopranino, soprano, and the alto as the bass. So it's a high chorus, you know, but this is very, very difficult to be in tune.

But on the other hand, we have the basses, and now we see in Germany and in Switzerland and in England that a lot of people, older people, learn recorder and go to play together in an ensemble. Such an ensemble can be from 4 to 40 members or even more. So, we have in Germany especially a lot of recorder orchestras. And this is now becoming popular in Switzerland, also. And people buy a lot of basses and great basses and even these contra-basses. So, in Germany we have orchestras that play with 10 or 12 contra-basses, and then 10 great basses, and then I don't know 15 basses, and then some tenors and altos, so it's something very special.

So, there's a market there?

There *is* a market there. So you can see we are now producing the new contra bass and we can make only 10 in a series, but we have orders for over 30 pieces just now, but it's not on the market yet. We have a lot of back orders now and so we'll sell them next year in Spring, but there are back orders for over 30 pieces, so it's incredible, so I don't know. Because the great bass is very well known now, people trust that a contra bass will be as good as the great bass. And I think it's true.

Maybe there is a larger profit margin for you to make something like this as opposed to the historical models?

Yes.

What led to your business partnership with Heinz Amman and selling his Marsyas recorders?

The story is that Heinz Amman worked for Fehr. This has been a very famous company in Switzerland and he had been working there for 30 years, but because of some histories, business at Fehr was going down, and they just stopped the contract with all the employees and made new ones to lower conditions. Heinz Amman wasn't willing to continue working under those conditions, so he contacted us. He said that he had developed a new recorder based on the Fehr Model IV which was going a little

bit, or a step wider in the facility of the high notes and these things. So we met together and we started the company, the Marsyas GmbH. The Marsyas model was produced in the Kung factory, and he was making the voicings. Amman made the design and we made the production and he also did the voicing. Later, he left the company to make other things, and it is now Christoph Trescher, another recorder maker who does the voicing of the Marsyas recorders.

Was Amman's design based on any specific baroque recorder?

Not really. But as Heinz Amman is a very skilled man, he knows a lot, a lot, a lot of historical recorders, so he studied every ancient maker very well, and he studied the instruments very, very carefully and so the product of the Fehr Model IV, the Marsyas, is a combination of all this knowledge. So, it's not a historic model, but it's a model of recorder that you can really use.

What brings you to this expo in Shanghai? As we said before, the recorder is not so popular here in China. You seem to be, as far as I know, the only serious recorder maker here at this expo. I'm glad you're here, but why did you come?

It's only occasionally that I make a tour in Taiwan and in Korea to visit our customers there and to make workshops, and so I just decided to stop by here when I'm in the region anyway so that I can see what happens. But I know that Moeck and Mollenhauer, they came here the last two or three years. They were exhibiting here, but they stopped because they felt it's not worth it. But, okay that's true, it's not worth it for the moment, but we are getting in contact with people from Hong Kong and from Singapore here (in Shanghai) and I think that might be very interesting in the coming years. So, nothing at the moment, but maybe further on. There are some people playing recorder as well in China, but those are very, very cheap models.

So are you interested in production in this region or sales?

No production, just sales.

Do you think that the recorder might become popular here in China like it has in Taiwan, Korea, and Japan?

I don't think so. Not that much. But maybe there are some people like you in international schools of this kind who want to have some recorders, and we may have a distributor here in this country, it's maybe not bad.