

The Daily Telegraph

# ‘One man waited 18 years for a harpsichord’: inside the rarefied world of period instrument-making

You might think building a theorbo or a rebec is a dying art. Yet there is a demand for these weird and wonderful objects

By [Ivan Hewett](#)

21 November 2023 • 7:00am



*The London International Festival of Early Music: a member of staff demonstrates how to play the EMS Theorbo from the Lute section, worth £2,150 CREDIT: Belinda Jiao*

Step into the distant past of classical music, and you’ll encounter a strange menagerie of fantastical instruments. Sometimes you glimpse them in ‘normal’ music-making, for example when an opera house decides it’s time to revive a masterpiece by Monteverdi from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and lutes and harpsichords appear in the orchestra pit alongside familiar violins and oboes. But some are really rare beasts, known only to intrepid explorers in those far-off times. There’s the rebec, an ancestor of the violin, there’s the nakers, a pair of medieval drums, there’s the cornett, a curved wooden instrument played like a trumpet which gives a special soft glow to the splendours of 17<sup>th</sup>-century Venetian music. There’s the long-necked lute called the theorbo, the huge extravagantly curved serpent, and many others.

Leaving aside the mass-market for school recorders, which are factory-made, all these instruments are hand-made. Incredible though it may seem there are dozens, perhaps even a hundred craftsmen and women all round the world, who actually make a living from producing these exotic instruments. In the UK the marketplace where many of them bring their wares is the Early Music Shop, which has two walk-in stores, one at a UNESCO world-heritage site in Saltire in Yorkshire, the other at Snape Maltings. The proprietor at Snape, Chris Butler, has been in this unlikely business for half a century. “Setting up this business was really made possible by one man, David Munrow, who almost single-handedly created a passion for “early music” back in the 1970s,” says Butler.

“Munrow was this incredibly gifted musician who could actually play most of these instruments. This created a surge of interest, and lots of instrument makers started their careers as a result. So there’s a whole generation of makers coming to the end of their careers, but fortunately there are plenty of younger ones coming up.”

Butler describes his business as “niche” but some might find it incredible that it exists at all. The reason is that there is a real need for these instruments which the supply of genuinely old instruments can’t satisfy. The few surviving ancient harpsichords and lutes and crumhorns are locked up in museums and rarely come onto the market. When they do, they fetch astronomical prices – last year a 17<sup>th</sup>-century harpsichord by the great Dutch maker Ruckers was sold at auction in the UK for £180,000.



*Jeremy West with the great bass serpent, one of the instruments 'people love to see in the showroom'*

Another problem is that these old instruments need endless maintenance and are too fragile to be moved around.

In response, a world-wide niche craft industry has grown up. Butler buys from makers in every continent except Africa. He has a specialist supplier of bow resin in Australia, and a workshop making lutes in Pakistan. But the biggest concentration of makers is in Europe, and within that, there are regional biases. “Switzerland and Germany are strong on recorders, harpsichords we buy from Italy and the UK and America,” says Butler.

Butler admits his business trades on the alluring oddity of these instruments. “There are certain instruments people just love to see in the showroom, like the serpent and the hurdy-gurdy and the theorbo.” But are they actually affordable? “You can buy some instruments, such as an entry-level recorder or lute for several hundred, but with a richly decorated keyboard instrument with a complicated technology and rare woods you can pay many thousands. They sell either to professionals, or to people who just have a passion.



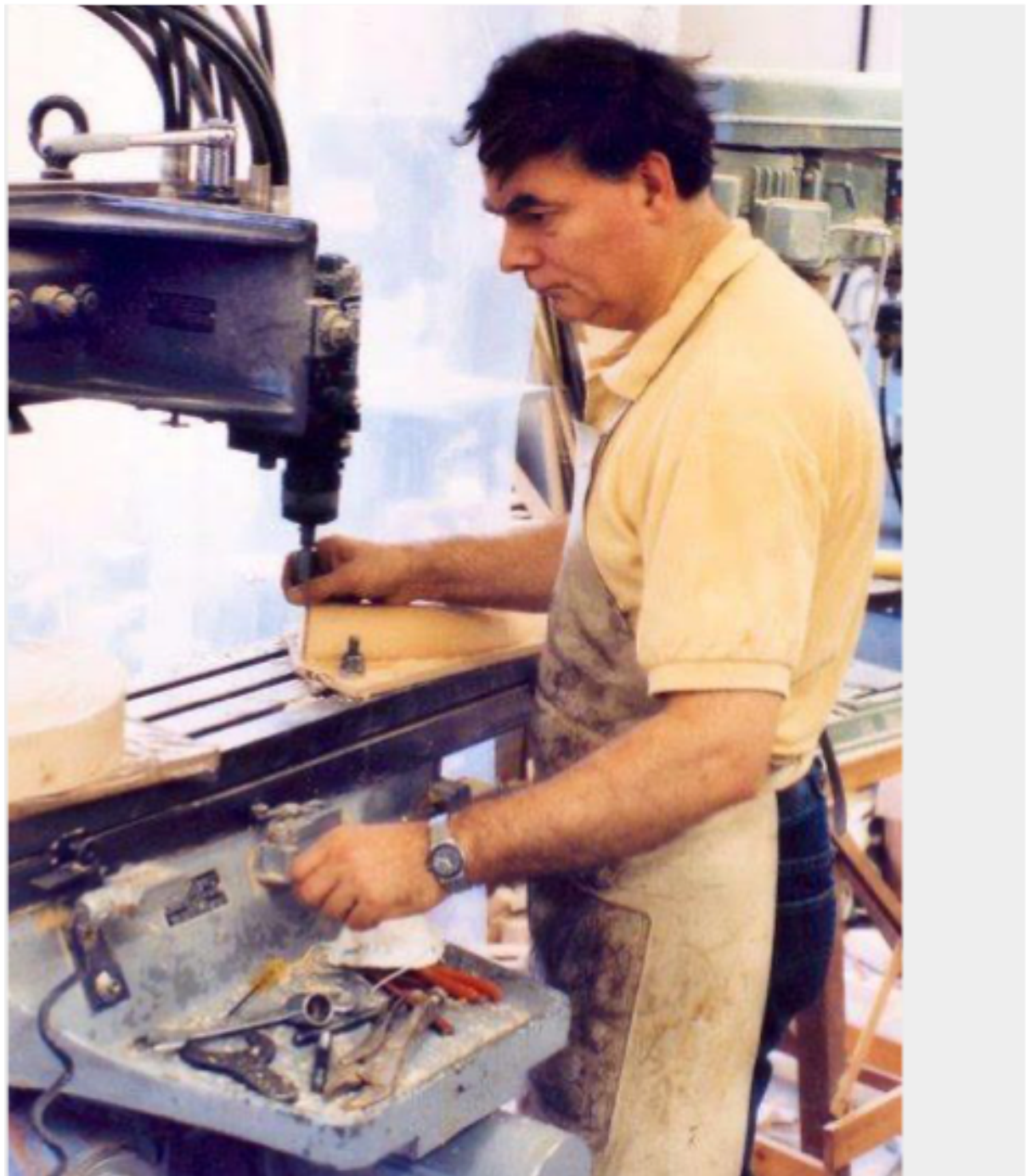
*The London International Festival of Early Music: a member of staff plays the Baroque style hurdy-gurdy, worth £1,275 CREDIT: Belinda Jiao*

“I had one customer who’d saved £10,000 and the choice was either a new bathroom or a serpent. His wife said, go on buy the serpent, so he did. But really this is not a business you can get rich in. We deal with a retired head of woodwork at a school who makes spinets, a keyboard instrument like a small harpsichord, and he can only make two a year. Really they should sell for 30 or 40 thousand, but [because of not much demand] he can’t sell them for more than 10 thousand.”

One of Butler’s loyal suppliers over the decades has been Jeremy West, who makes cornetts and serpents. Like many makers, he started out as a performer. He made a sideways move into instrument making when the well-known cornett maker Christopher Monk from whom he’d bought his own instrument became ill, and asked West to take over his workshop.

As with most ancient instruments, design blueprints of cornetts and serpents are hard to come by, so like most makers West has had to rely on examples of fine instruments in museums — though that method is becoming difficult. “In the old

days museum curators would let us examine and measure instruments, but these days they won't let us touch them," he says. His cornetts come in two types: a cheaper model made by pouring hot resin into a mould, which sells for around £300, and a more expensive one made with hardwood which cost around £1,000.



*The late Keith Rogers cuts the profile of the wooden cornett using the Bridgeport copying router*

“If you favour a bright sound for a cornett as I do you'll want a really hard wood, and I find English boxwood is absolutely the best. Tropical hardwoods are good but also are hard to find nowadays. For a softer sound you might use a fruitwood like plum.” Again the clientele is the small circle of professional players, and passionate

amateurs. “We’ve sold to 40 countries, and we’ve even sold a cornett to a Royal Navy sailor on a nuclear submarine,” says West.

Many makers operate as a one-man band or as a partnership, but the Italian harpsichord maker Guido Bizzi works on an altogether different scale. He began his career as an engineer working in the nuclear power industry but had always been a passionate amateur musician, and back in the late 1980s he became aware of a gap in the market for harpsichords. “You could buy very good instruments, but the cost was incredibly high, and the waiting time was absurd,” says Bizzi. “I know of one player who waited 18 years for the harpsichord he had ordered.”

Bizzi felt using his technical know-how he could create instruments at a fraction of the price. His Northern Italian workshop was also proximitous to wood carvers and painters from the furniture-making business in Milan. He “sub-contracts different parts of the instrument, such as the legs; we could make harpsichords of the same quality as French or American or British makers but at half the cost, around 17,000 Euros. Soon we were making 60 to 65 instruments per year. Altogether we have made 1000 instruments which we think is unique in the history of harpsichord making.”



*Lorenzo Bizzi, Guido Bizzi and Jane Chapman during her visit to the workshop in Villa Bossi*

At the end of all this labour comes the magic moment when a musician finally plays the new-old instrument. The harpsichordist Jane Chapman recently travelled to Bizzi’s workshop to choose a new harpsichord for a special gala concert at the recent London International Festival of Early Music. The one Chapman chose “feels good to play; it has a nice “touch” as we say. The great thing about these modern instruments is that they have the attractive features of an old instrument, but because they use modern materials, like plastic instead of quills, they are robust. You can put it in a

van and drive it to a concert without worrying. You can't do that with old instruments."

Chapman points to a feature of these new-old instruments we should treasure. Normally new technology drives out the old, but with these instruments new technology is the humble handmaid of the old. As well as being lovely to look at and to hear, they offer comforting evidence that not everything old has to be abandoned, in the remorseless pursuit of progress.

---

*For information on newly-made harpsichords, cornetts and other instruments, visit [earlymusicshop.com](http://earlymusicshop.com)*