

The baryton, an unusual bowed instrument with sympathetic strings, was championed as 'the king of instruments' during Haydn's time, but later slid into obscurity. Now, however, it is making a comeback, as **Gavin Dixon** discovers

# *Return of the* **KING**

Matthew Baker  
playing the baryton

ALEX BAKER

The early Baroque period was an experimental era for stringed instruments, and many elaborate designs – hybrids and radical restylings – briefly flourished. The baryton is one such instrument, incorporating elements of the *lyra viol* (a small *viola da gamba*) and the lute-like *bandora*. The result is an instrument with two sets of strings: the usual set at the front which are bowed or plucked (and are made of gut); and backstrings that run beneath the front set and behind the fingerboard, acting as sympathetic strings but with a window at the back of the neck allowing them also to be plucked, for example for *pizzicato* bass-lines (these are made of metal).

The baryton would likely have disappeared in the early 18th century were it not for one fanatical and highly influential advocate. Nikolaus I, Prince Esterházy (right), developed a passion for the baryton in the 1760s, pressing his young vice-Kapellmeister to write extensively for the instrument. That composer was Joseph Haydn (below right), who would go on to write around two hundred works for the instrument. In recent decades, the baryton has had a significant revival, allowing Haydn's works for it to be heard again. Two of today's leading players are Maddalena Del Gobbo, whose album on DG (released 2019) is titled *Maddalena and the Prince*, and Matthew Baker, who recorded a CD of Haydn baryton trios for Naxos in 2020 as part of his Valencia Baryton Project. I spoke with both about the instrument, and about Haydn.

The 'Prince' in Del Gobbo's title refers both to Esterházy himself and to the baryton's reputation as the 'king of instruments'. In keeping with its aristocratic status, the baryton has always been ornate and finely decorated, often featuring inlays and purfling of ivory or mother-of-pearl, and always topped with a finely carved head. Its sound is similarly opulent. The front strings usually have the same tuning as the *viola da gamba*, but, as Del Gobbo explains, there is much more to the baryton's sonic profile. 'Compared with the *viola da gamba*, the baryton has more and different sounds. In some ways there is less sound, in some ways more. The sound is very round, but it is wonderful at projecting. It is always "above" somehow. The baryton is like a kind of singing voice above the other voices, which is really beautiful and really sounds special.'

The baryton was invented in the early 17th century, possibly in England, but the Baroque baryton was a larger and more complex instrument than Haydn's. As Del Gobbo says, 'The Baroque baryton is a crazy instrument. It has the *viola da gamba* strings plus so many sympathetic strings. For Haydn I have nine sympathetic strings [Baker uses ten], but they had up to 28.' In fact, instruments with as many as 44 backstrings were reported in the Baroque era. She continues: 'These people would play a sonata with the whole *basso continuo* by themselves. Incredible!' By the Classical era,

baryton technique had become more streamlined. The player was no longer expected to accompany themselves on the backstrings. Often the backstrings were not plucked at all, simply providing added resonance, and when they were plucked, it was just isolated notes punctuating the melodic line.

Haydn himself knew little of this history when he first began writing for the instrument. Prince Esterházy bought his baryton in Innsbruck around 1765 (it is now on display at the Hungarian National Museum, Budapest) and immediately commanded his vice-Kapellmeister to begin writing works for him to play. We find letters from the prince to the composer containing complaints that he has not written enough baryton music. Haydn prided himself on getting to grips with instruments of every family. Later in life, he commented,

'I was not a magician on any instrument, but I knew the power and effect of all of them.' But the baryton was a particular challenge, and Haydn had to learn how to play it. He practised secretly at night, and rapidly mastered the instrument; early biographers reported an incident in 1769 when the prince admonished Haydn for surpassing his own skills.

Haydn wrote prodigiously for the baryton, composing solos, duos, quintets, octets and concertos as well as a cantata with baryton continuo. He also enlisted the help of other musicians at the Esterházy court, and Del Gobbo's album includes works written by Haydn's colleagues Franz Xaver Hammer, Luigi Tomasini and Andreas Lidl. Lidl was an acknowledged master and a touring virtuoso of the baryton who was briefly employed at the Esterházy palace. Later reports state that his instrument had 27 backstrings, on which he would accompany himself, following the earlier Baroque practice.

Many of Haydn's baryton works are now lost, including all of the concertos and sonatas. But the core of the surviving repertoire, and the form best suited to the instrument, is the baryton trio with *viola* (or occasionally *violin*) and *cello*. Haydn composed 126 such works. All of them survive, owing to the particular pride that the prince took in these works, having them bound together in four elegant volumes. The baryton proves the ideal solo instrument here, as the bright overtones from the sympathetic strings compensate for the lack of a treble voice.

It was a steep learning curve, both for the prince and for Haydn. Baker says, 'In the first of Haydn's trios, there is nothing written for the backstrings. >



A copy of Prince Esterházy's baryton, on display at Eisenstadt Palace



Matthew Baker's baryton, by the English maker Owen Morse-Brown. This example of a Classical baryton has six bowed strings and a fretted fingerboard, like a viola da gamba, but with a flatter bridge. The back view shows ten sympathetic strings.

He didn't know how to use them, and probably the prince didn't either. No.34 is the first trio that actually has music written for the backstrings, and by no.36 they are being used extensively. But then in those numbered in the 40s, you really start to come into his mode of using both manuals at the same time.'

Haydn himself played with the prince – baryton in the duos, viola in the trios. When playing these works today, the personalities of the two musicians soon become evident. 'In the duos, you'll notice the second part is often more difficult than the first,' points out Baker. 'That is because the prince was playing the first part. Anything really out there Haydn would usually put in the second part. But he never wanted to overshadow the prince. So the first gets the high, soaring melodies, and Haydn fills in the gaps. It seems that the prince was quite a jealous person.'

Sometimes in the trios, Haydn is braver, taking the melody for himself. 'There are many trios that have wonderful viola solos,' says Del Gobbo. 'In some trios, the viola has the melody and the baryton has the accompaniment in plucked strings.'

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These were formative years for Haydn, and through the course of the baryton trios we hear his mature voice taking shape. By the later trios, the prince had become more proficient, giving Haydn a freer hand. 'The later trios are the most beautiful,' says Del Gobbo. 'I am currently arranging a new programme, and I definitely want to include some of the later trios. Also, the requirements for the baryton player are just a little more challenging.' Playing the backstrings becomes a rarity again in these later works; a holdover from Baroque continuo, it is ill-suited to Haydn's smoother Classical sound.

Prince Esterházy's obsession with the baryton lasted a decade, ending as abruptly as it began. Around 1775, he started taking a greater interest in opera. The palace's opera theatre became the focus of musical activities, and Haydn suddenly found himself acting as company director and, of course, operatic composer. What did Haydn have to show for his baryton years? The huge catalogue of music would have seemed of little use, given the baryton's slide into obscurity. Nevertheless, the experience of writing these works would prove immensely valuable.

Baker says that the later trios are more reminiscent of the early string quartets, and several writers have pointed out that the fugal movements in the later trios look forward to the op.20 set. 'If you look at the range of the baryton, the bottom string is only a tone higher than that of the cello,' explains Baker. 'So the part-writing in the trios is always very close. The expertise Haydn gained in doing this would later be very important for his string writing generally, especially in the symphonies, where the strings are so close together, such tight writing... If it weren't for these trios, we wouldn't have the Haydn that we know. That is what is so special about the baryton. The instrument may be lost in time, but because of it we have his beautiful quartets, we have his symphonies.'

**J**ump forward to the 21st century, and we find a small but enthusiastic number of players returning to the baryton. The set-up of Prince Esterházy's instrument has been the model for revival instruments. Its bright, delicate tone initially proved a challenge for instrument makers, but more recent barytons have lighter construction and are well suited to the repertoire.

Del Gobbo mainly performs on the viola da gamba. The baryton is a side interest, sparked by her passion for Haydn's works. 'I adore this music,' she says, 'and my teacher, José Vázquez, who died in 2021, played it many times. I love this music so much, and I wanted to play it so badly. But I am the sort of person who doesn't do things by halves. If I play it >



An example of a baryton part, from Haydn's Baryton Trio in D major Hob.XI:34. Note the numbering which denotes which backstrings to play

I want to do it on the baryton – I also want to play the plucked strings and everything. It is a pity otherwise.'

Baker is a multi-instrumentalist. His day job is playing the double bass in the Orquestra de la Comunitat Valenciana at Valencia's opera house, the Palau de les Arts Reina Sofía. Looking for double bass repertoire led him to the baryton. 'There are transcriptions of the Haydn baryton duos, but for two cellos. Of course, being a double bassist I steal everything and I made it for cello and double bass. That was when I got the idea that I wanted to play this instrument. That was 2004 and

it took me until 2018 to find an instrument and somebody to show me how to play it.'

Naturally, then, both players bring playing techniques from other instruments to the baryton. 'It is basically a bass viol with a plus,' says Baker, 'and that is where it gets tricky. You soon realise all the things you think you know are wrong. All the things you want to do on a bass viol, you can't.'

**F**rom a player's perspective, the main difference compared with a viola da gamba is the shape of the bridge, which is wider and flatter, with the bass leg offset to accommodate the backstrings. Del Gobbo points out, 'Because it is a bit flatter, you don't have as much power on individual strings. You can't play the big chords that you would on a viola da gamba. Also, because the second leg of the bridge is not in its usual place, the bass sound does not go directly into the instrument.' As a result, the repertoire, and especially Haydn, focuses on the upper strings, and the lower strings are rarely played.

Bowing on the baryton is a curious combination of Baroque and Classical technique. 'Historically, it was underhand bowing,' says Baker. 'You can see that from the writing. The baryton is not asked to do spiccato so much.' Different bowing techniques, then, distinguish the baryton from its companions in the trios, a fact that Haydn exploits: 'The viola and cello have different articulations from the ones I have on the baryton.'

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It is a beautiful glimpse backwards in time, with these two articulations complementing each other.'

For Del Gobbo, the secret is to use a Baroque bow but aim for Classical articulation. 'I use a viola da gamba bow, but it is short. I have the feeling the music is more *en pointe*, it is more Classical.' Haydn's writing for the baryton often involves many notes in a single bow, and for Del Gobbo, that suggests a cello-like bowing technique. 'The baryton is a very similar instrument to the viola da gamba but I really need to adjust when I play, because the bow should make a more focused sound.'

The flatter bridge also requires a different fingering technique. For Baker, that's a welcome challenge. 'You'll be very frustrated if you try to play it like a viola da gamba. Viol studies, for example, don't always work on the baryton, because if you are trying to play up in the top positions, you will find yourself playing two notes at once. So everything is much more vertically thought. The open strings are your friends – the more open strings you play, the more the back resonates.'

That 'vertical' approach is valuable on other instruments too. 'Whether or not people keep playing the baryton, I think it highlights something. A lot of electric bass players, and guitarists too, play horizontally, they have their patterns. But sometimes this is at the expense of the sound and the articulation. When you start to focus on keeping on the same string, going up the string, you get a much more beautiful, open sound. So that is one of the challenges of playing the baryton, but it is also one of the benefits.'

The other great challenge is playing the backstrings, but that is a big part of the instrument's appeal. 'I met up with colleagues to play a few trios,' Baker recalls. 'We enjoyed doing it so much. And every time I had to play a backstring, I had this

ridiculous smile on my face. I was thinking, "Backstring! Backstring!" There is something so satisfying about playing them.' Haydn's notation system for the backstrings is succinct: 'Numbers underneath the music denote the strings I should be plucking. If there is no number underneath, the music is bowed.'

I meet up with Baker at the Royal College of Music in London, where the Valencia Baryton Project is giving a masterclass for students of historical performance. After running through several movements from Haydn trios, Baker asks if any of the students would like to have a try. Pablo Tejedor-Gutiérrez, a cellist and gambist, volunteers. His first challenge is where to place the left-hand thumb. 'So you have to have the thumb relaxed?' he asks. Baker explains: 'There are basically two positions, one of which is the I'm-not-playing-the-backstrings position, which is with the thumb a little bit off further to the side. If you put the thumb where it would be on a viola da gamba, you would be pressing on the backstrings.'

Tejedor-Gutiérrez plays through a movement from a Haydn trio. Afterwards he says, 'It is like a strange gamba.' Then he points to the backstrings, 'I don't dare to use these!' But Baker reassures him, and he becomes more confident: 'If you say it is easy, I'll try.'

They play again, this time with Tejedor-Gutiérrez cautiously but precisely picking out the plucked bass notes. Baker is impressed: 'The first time you were grasping for it, but the second time you were already getting it!' Here was another potential convert to today's small band of baryton players.

The instrument is an oddity but, thanks in large part to Haydn, it retains a distinctive presence in the world of chamber music. It defies expectations, a Baroque instrument playing Classical repertoire; but it is an audience favourite, both for its rich tone and for the eerie effect of the plucked strings. For Del Gobbo, that is the main motivation: 'The audience is always captivated. Many people come to concerts and have no idea what the baryton is. Then the music starts and they can't believe the beauty of the sounds – because it is not a violin, it is not a cello, it is not a viola, it is something completely different. It is such a joy for me, seeing how this unknown, strange instrument that was almost forgotten can still amaze people today.' ●



Maddalena Del Gobbo, who uses a Baroque viola da gamba bow