An Interview with Greg Ingles of Dark Horse Consort

How do renaissance and baroque brass instruments differ from today's brass instruments? Early brass instruments are much lighter and smaller than modern brass instruments and accordingly, require a different performance approach. Since the voice was the pinnacle of musical sensibility, all wind instruments tried to emulate the voice in nuance and articulation. This can be a challenge at first for most modern brass players, but once its subtlety is learned, one can more easily blend with our vocal colleagues. [To listen click here]

How were brass instruments viewed during the renaissance and baroque periods? Each brass instrument had a particular function in the renaissance and baroque periods. The trumpet was an instrument of the court and many courts showed their wealth by purchasing multiple silver trumpets that would be displayed and played when foreign dignitaries visited. It was also a military instrument, with its fanfares calling out battle field directions. A certain fanfare could mean “left flank” while another could mean “fall back.” With this in mind, trumpet tutelage was a highly guarded secret only taught in guilds.

The cornetto was the equal to the violin during the renaissance and baroque periods, and was the highest member of the brass consort. Renaissance composer Girolamo calla Casa said, “Of all the wind instruments, the most excellent is the cornett for it imitates the human voice more than the others.”
The trombone was the utility instrument of the brass family, playing in both loud and soft settings. It often supported the alto, tenor and bass singers in church, but could also stand its own in the loud consort with shawms and dulcians.

**Who are some of the composers that made particular use of brass instruments?** Two composers who made frequent use of early brass are the Venetian composer Giovanni Gabrieli and his German pupil, Heinrich Schütz. Both composers had a distinct knack for writing for the brass consort with singers, in a way that supported the singers with a rich body of sound that never obliterated the subtleties of the voice.

**Are there any anecdotes that illustrate the importance of these instruments?** Marin Mersenne - the French music theorist - described the sound of the cornetto as being “like a ray of sunshine piercing the shadows, when heard with the choir voices in the cathedrals or chapels.”

**Is there anything in particular that audiences should listen for when you perform with The Rose Ensemble?** The audiences should 1) see how the different brass instruments (cornetto and sackbuts) play together as a cohesive consort and 2) see how close that consort comes to matching what the vocal consort is doing. If at times, with eyes closed the combined forces don’t sound like voices and instruments, but rather one large unified choir, then we have done our jobs well.