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Clarinet Sonorities in Early Romantic Music

R. M. Longyear

Though much attention has been given to recapturing the original sounds of the Baroque and even Classical orchestras, we are only beginning to re-create the sonorities of the orchestra of the early Romantic period, around 1795 to 1830. When it comes to the sound of the orchestras that played music by Beethoven, Weber, Rossini and Schubert, Raymond Meylan has raised two questions concerning the sound of the clarinet in the early Romantic orchestra: to what extent were the differences among the clarinets in A, B flat, and especially C, recognized by composers and writers on music? and did the position of the reed on the mouthpiece affect the sound of the clarinet, especially in solo passages?¹

At the opening of the 19th century three clarinets, pitched in A, B flat and C, were in general use in orchestral music. Though nearly all writers on music perceived the difference in sound among the three clarinets, they were almost united in disparaging the sound of the clarinet in C: its tone was *derbe* (powerful but rough), and it was more limited in tone than the clarinet in B flat, to cite two adverse criticisms.² The only favourable comments come from Arnold Sundelin, himself a clarinetist, who considered the clarinet in C preferable for outdoor music because of its bright sound, and Michaelis, who stated that this clarinet was the easiest and most secure in the high registers.³

In examining the choice of clarinets by composers of the early 19th century, one notices that the solo literature is overwhelmingly for the B flat instrument, whether for concertos, sonatas, chamber music or obbligatos in operatic and oratorio arias; the clarinet in A was a rather distant second, and the clarinet in C last. Beethoven's chamber works for clarinet are all for the B flat instrument, as are all Weber's solo and chamber works and virtually all Spohr's. Mozart's preference for the clarinet in A was followed only, it seems, by J.G.H. Backofen, Spohr in his E minor concerto (written in 1828, but not published until 1884), and the Archduke Rudolph; the bulk of sonatas for the clarinet in A were written after the mid-century improvements to the instrument. When clarinets in C can be definitely identified (and some composers were wont to write, or even publish, their scores showing

clarinets in C but with the parts for the B flat instrument), there is a tendency to treat it as a strictly ripieno instrument, with its solo excursions limited to doubling another instrument at the octave or sparingly participating in dialogue passages. This is true not only of Beethoven but also of Schubert, Rossini and a host of lesser composers.

On the evidence of his orchestral writing, Beethoven seems to have had little trust in the clarinet in C except for military music. He frequently kept it in its throat register where its sound was weakest and its intonation least good, and most diatonic tones had to be adjusted by lip pressure; wrote high notes for it less often than for the other clarinets; treated it chiefly as an accompanying instrument; and showed little confidence in its ability to cope with parts with any technical complexity. The one important solo Beethoven wrote for the instrument is in the *Agnus Dei* of the *Mass in C* op.86.

Subsequent composers showed, for the most part, an equal lack of confidence in the clarinet in C. The significant exception was Berlioz, who made the greatest technical demands of any composer, wrote for it in as many as four flats (*Les francs juges*), and used it from its chalumeau (*Waverley* overture) to lower altissimo registers, taking advantage of its powerful but rough sound in the 'Tuba mirum' of the *Requiem*; the last time he specified it, however, was in 1846 (*La damnation de Faust*). Glinka did not write at all for the clarinet in C; Schumann specified the B flat instrument for his orchestral works in C, F and G major; Mendelssohn used the instrument sparingly; and Wagner stopped writing for it after *Der fliegende Holländer*. The last major composers to write for the clarinet in C were Liszt (*Les préludes*, *Faust Symphony*, *Coronation Mass*), Smetana (*Vltava*, *Sárka*) and Verdi, and one may doubt whether their music was in fact played on that instrument for by 1850 the 13-keyed clarinet was in general use and every professional clarinetist could easily transpose parts written in C to the B flat instrument. In this century, some players and writers have even contended that it is not necessary to preserve the distinction between the sonorities of the B flat and A clarinets. A widely-quoted orchestration treatise claims that the difference is less than that 'between a Brescian and a Cremonese violin',⁴ and it has been proposed that the choice be not the composer's specification, but ease of fingering and avoidance of harsh notes.⁵

¹ Raymond Meylan: 'A propos du développement de l'instrumentation au début du XIXe siècle', *Acta musicologica*, xlii (1970), 71-2

² Gottfried Weber: 'Einiges über Clarinet und Bassethorn', *Cäcilia*, xi (1829), 48; unsigned review of Wilms's *Sinfonia concertante* op.35, *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, xvii (1815), col.98

³ Arnold Sundelin: *Die Instrumentation für sämtliche Militär-Musik-Chöre* (Berlin, 1828), 7; C.F. Michaelis: 'Über die Klarinette', *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, viii (1806), col.387. Note that Beethoven specified clarinets in C and F for his military marches.

⁴ Cecil Forsyth: *Orchestration* (London, 1914), 255

⁵ Rosario Mazzeo: 'The Congenial Clarinet Family', *Selmer Bandwagon*, xc (1979), 29 (in recommending the B flat rather than the A clarinet for the solo in the third movement of Brahms's First Symphony; he advocates reviving the clarinet in C, but with reservations, and chiefly for clarinet choirs).

Is there, then, a case for the revival of the clarinet in C? Is it worth the finger adjustments on the part of the player (the holes are closer together than on the B flat) and the necessity for a separate reed and mouthpiece? One may point to a few places where the composer may have envisaged a weak clarinet tone, as in the reprise of the scherzo in the finale of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony or the statement of the second theme in the first movement of Schubert's Ninth; but on the other hand there is the evidence that most composers abandoned the clarinet in C when the 13-keyed instrument came into use and clarinetists could transpose parts in C to the B flat instrument – those who kept writing for the clarinet in C probably did so from force of habit. We should surely be given the opportunity to hear the clarinet in C for ourselves, where it is specified in order to determine whether it is worth reviving as an ingredient of the colour of the early Romantic orchestra.

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The position of the reed on the mouthpiece of the clarinet is another important matter for consideration. In contrast with present-day usage, where the reed is below the mouthpiece and is activated by the pressure of the lower lip, many written sources and surviving mouthpieces from the late 18th and early 19th centuries indicate that the common practice, outside Germany and Austria, was for the clarinet to be played with the reed above the mouthpiece and activated by the upper lip and even the teeth.

Just when the first enterprising clarinetist placed the reed below the mouthpiece (thereby changing his tone) cannot be determined, but as early as 1806 the position of the reed below distinguished the German school of clarinet playing from others.⁶ The great Austro-German clarinetists of the early 19th century for whom Beethoven, Spohr and Weber wrote – Bähr, Bärmann, Beer, Iwan Müller and at times Fröhlich – continued, rather than began, this tradition. The reed-above method was favoured in France until 1831, when the German system was introduced into the Paris Conservatoire. It persisted longest in Italy: as late as 1883 Ferdinando Busoni (a clarinetist and father of the composer) still advocated this usage, which older Italian musicians today refer to as 'la scuola napoletana'.

The reed-above method was criticized as a 'système vicieux', for the performer could not play softly and *couacs* (squawks) were likely.⁸ But it had its defenders: one could change registers with greater facility, and in the higher registers one could obtain a shriller and more penetrating tone, especially in outdoor music. There may have also been greater facility in rapid articulation, especially after the breath staccato (the syllable 'ha') gave way to the

⁶ Michaelis, col.385

⁷ Ferdinando Busoni: *Scuola di perfezionamento* (1883)

⁸ F.J. Fétis: 'De l'exécution musicale', *La revue musicale*, iii (1829), 226

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tongue staccato ('ta' or 'ti') early in the 19th century.⁹

We are still at the mercy of the limited information available in determining whether a given work for (or including) clarinets should be performed with the reed above or reed below. One may presume that Mozart's mature clarinet works were performed with the reed below the mouthpiece, whereas the reed-above system prevailed in London at the time of Haydn's last 12 symphonies. The great Austro-German symphonic, chamber and solo works of the 19th century were written for the reed-below clarinet.

Some doubt exists, however, over the Italian and French repertoires. We may be certain that Rossini's and Donizetti's works were written for the reed-above instrument, which would produce a brilliant effect in such clarinet solos as that in Rossini's *Semiramide* overture. The reed-above system would be also appropriate for the Italian display pieces and for the stage bands in 19th-century opera. There must be less certainty, however, when it comes to Verdi's operas. His clarinet solos often use the chalumeau register where the reed-above system was at a disadvantage. Milan, the city most important in Verdi's early career, was ruled by Austria until 1859 and was heavily influenced by Austrian musicians. So it is possible that Verdi wrote for the reed-below instrument.

⁹ see Heinz Becker: 'Zur Geschichte der Klarinette im 18. Jahrhunderts', *Die Musikforschung*, viii (1955), 284-6

In the French repertory, Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* is the pivotal work between the reed-below and reed-above schools. On the basis of its nuances, including a *pppp* echo, the clarinet solo in the third movement would seem to have been intended for the reed-below clarinet. But the reed-above technique would be appropriate in the finale for the E flat clarinet, which was mostly an outdoor instrument - its part lies almost exclusively in the clarion and altissimo registers, and the solo would be even more penetrating, diabolical and shrill on an instrument with the reed above the mouthpiece. (It should be noted that the performer cannot simply turn his ordinary mouthpiece upside down, for special mouthpieces and reeds are needed for the reed-above system; there may still be old-school instrument makers and clarinetists in Naples who could provide them.)

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In the present climate of authentic revival, the opportunity would be welcome to hear and to judge for ourselves what these sonorities are like. We need to be able to hear the clarinet in C and the clarinet with the reed above the mouthpiece, just as we need to hear the ophicleide, the cimbasso, the trumpet in F, the Viennese *Pumphorn* and other instruments of the 19th century that have been displaced by technological innovations, or which have been 'improved', mechanized, or plasticized to the point where composers of their time would have difficulty in recognizing them.

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