

# THE Musical Times ESTABLISHED IN 1844

---

The Authentic Clarinet: Tone and Tonality

Author(s): Colin Lawson

Source: *The Musical Times*, Vol. 124, No. 1684 (Jun., 1983), pp. 357-358

Published by: [Musical Times Publications Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/964062>

Accessed: 22/09/2013 17:56

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*Musical Times Publications Ltd.* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Musical Times*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

# The Authentic Clarinet: tone and tonality

Colin Lawson

R. M. Longyear's recent article on clarinet tone<sup>1</sup> raises important issues about the orchestral palette of the early 19th-century composer. While the exact role of each type of clarinet in this period may be difficult to ascertain, an overwhelming case can be made for identifying and following composers' preferences as a first step towards the re-creation of original sonorities. The difference in tone-quality among the instruments in A, B flat and C was perceived by virtually all 18th- and 19th-century writers on the subject; several, including Gottfried Weber, Berlioz and the players Berr and Baermann, emphasized that the choice should be the composer's responsibility rather than the player's.<sup>2</sup>

Mozart provides a comprehensive guide to late 18th-century practice. Like many of his contemporaries, he preferred to write clarinet parts that could be notated in F or C and advised his pupil Attwood to confine himself to these.<sup>3</sup> For example, the E major numbers (the chorus 'Placido è il mar' and the aria 'Zeffiretti lusinghieri') in *Idomeneo* were scored for clarinet in B,<sup>4</sup> with the parts in F; Mozart returned to this instrument for the E major numbers in *Così fan tutte* (the trio 'Soave sia il vento' and the rondò 'Per pietà'). The modern use of A clarinets here seems justified until one realizes that Mozart's perception of different keys in orchestral music took account of the shades of colour characteristic of each; the variation in clarinet timbre must be regarded in the same light as the effect of different horn crooks or open strings.

Thus, in assessing Mozart's choice of clarinet, it can be misleading to differentiate between his consideration for the players and his preference for a particular timbre.

F and C were not themselves keys with which Mozart usually associated the instrument. They occur in contexts where the presence of clarinets was not an overriding consideration, and may involve prominent writing for the C clarinet; examples include the arias 'Vedrai carino' (in C) and 'Non mi dir' (in F) in *Don Giovanni* and the duet 'Il core vi dono' (in F) in *Così fan tutte*. Outside opera, F and C occur principally to suit another instrument, as in the oboe concerto fragment in F  $\kappa 416f$  (with orchestral C clarinets) and the quintet fragment in F  $\kappa 580b$  for C clarinet, basset-horn and string trio. Only occasionally is Mozart's choice of clarinet not bound up with his tonality, as in the *Kyrie* in D minor  $\kappa 341/368a$  where A clarinets in four flats are used instead of C clarinets. Here colour is clearly the primary consideration, since clarinet parts in D minor are common in Mozart (e.g. in the *Serenade*  $\kappa 388$  and the *Piano Concerto*  $\kappa 491$ ). The *Kyrie* also illustrates the willingness of composers to write occasional clarinet parts in extreme flat keys, while avoiding the sharp keys of D and even G. On the five-keyed clarinet the intonation of  $f'$  sharp was variable, while  $f''$  sharp was rather a weak note (though the second subject of the Clarinet Concerto suggests that Stadler was able to overcome these difficulties).<sup>5</sup> In D an additional technical problem was the negotiation of the adjacent keys for  $b'$  and  $c''$  sharp. A rare use of B flat clarinets in C major occurs in the overture to *La clemenza di Tito*, where their parts are notated without key signature; C clarinets are used elsewhere in the opera.

★

The conventional view of the different clarinets in the early 19th century may be observed in the reaction of the Paris Con-

servatoire to Ivan Müller's submission of his newly-invented 13-keyed 'omnitonic' B flat clarinet in 1812. The continued use of the various sizes of clarinet was recommended, not on technical grounds (though Müller's clarinet could hardly claim to be genuinely omnitonic) but because the exclusive use of a single instrument would deprive composers of an important tonal resource.<sup>6</sup> In outlining the character of each size, the Conservatoire commission included a positive appreciation of the C clarinet ('le son brillant et vif'), as well as the A ('propre au genre pastoral') and B flat ('propre au genre pathétique et majestueux'). David Charlton has presented a detailed analysis of the French practice of publishing scores with clarinets notated in C even where instruments in A or B flat were to be used. This technique was observed by Saint-Saëns during the preparation of his edition of Gluck's *Orphée* and is summarized by Forsyth. Thus a knowledge of French performance conventions is necessary in order to comprehend the composer's appreciation of each size of clarinet, since the immediate impression left by surviving scores is that the transposition and choice of instrument were apparently left to the copyist or player. There is little evidence that this technique was applied in Germany and Austria.

Beethoven's clarinet notation often reflects the difficulties brought about by the increasingly wide tonal range of his music. Again, an authentic approach can scarcely expect to differentiate technical expediency from specific choice of colour. Professor Longyear seems to underestimate Beethoven's use of the C clarinet. A variety of motives seems to have prompted his choice of the instrument in orchestral music; the C minor solo in the *Agnus Dei* of the *Mass* in C occurs shortly before the modulation to the major, and the *Leonore* overtures nos. 2 and 3 present similar cases, with a C clarinet solo in A flat in the introduction to a principal *Allegro* in C. By contrast, the presence of C clarinets for the G

<sup>1</sup> April MT, p.224

<sup>2</sup> The minimal distinction between the tone-quality of A and B flat clarinets observed in Cecil Forsyth's *Orchestration* (London, 1914) was perhaps influenced by the over-simplification expressed by the celebrated English clarinetist Henry Lazarus in his tutor of 1881: 'those various pitched clarinets [A, B flat, C] are made so as to avoid writing music in keys which would render the fingering extremely difficult were there only one clarinet, and not for the change of timbre, as many think'.

<sup>3</sup> NMA X:30/1, *Attwood-Studien*, 156f

<sup>4</sup> The clarinet in B was made available by the insertion of an alternative middle joint (*corps de rechange*) into the C clarinet; a similar technique was commonly applied to the A and B flat instrument, with an inevitable detrimental effect on intonation.

<sup>5</sup> Clarinet parts within tonality of G are also rare; an exception is the *Notturmo Mi lagnerò tacendo* K437, which has A clarinets and the rare basset-horn in G.

<sup>6</sup> see David Charlton: *Orchestration and Orchestral Practice in Paris, 1789 to 1810* (diss., U. of Cambridge, 1973)

major slow movement of the Violin Concerto may be a matter of tone colour, since the A clarinets could readily have been retained from the outer movements. In the Ninth Symphony, Beethoven takes into account the inadvisability of quick changes of clarinet; the Alla Marcia of the finale, for example, retains B flat clarinets without key signature even when the notation elsewhere moves from two flats to two sharps. (A similar false key signature occurs in the clarinet parts of the overture *Leonore* no. 1.) The use of C clarinets in the Scherzo seems primarily a question of timbre. In terms of tonality, the main *raison d'être* of the C clarinet was by now its home key, F major having been assigned to B flat clarinets from the Sixth Symphony onwards. Composers remained reluctant to notate clarinet parts in D long after the key was first recommended in clarinet tutors.<sup>7</sup> The *locus classicus* here is the coda of Beethoven's C minor Piano Concerto, where the B flat clarinets incongruously fall silent after the modulation to the major.

In works by Beethoven's contemporaries, the C clarinet was sometimes selected where alternative solo parts were published simultaneously. A conspicuous example is the concerto by Pleyel; the florid obbligato in Schubert's offertorium *Totus in corde lanqueo* may be another. A rather different, more controversial context is the variation movement of Schubert's Octet, where the tonality of C is probably the principal reason for the appearance of the C clarinet, though the resulting change of timbre also needs to be accommodated in performance. In Spohr's Notturmo in C for wind band and Turkish instruments, the idiomatic C clarinet part in four of the six movements positively dictates the character of the music.

In a few contexts the choice of C clarinet can be ascribed wholly to technical considerations. A notable example is Mendelssohn's overture *The Fair Melusine* where, for a statement in G of the arpeggiated first subject, the first clarinet is asked to change briefly from B flat to C during the development. This is among the least persuasive contexts for authentic reconstruction, except on technical grounds. Despite his advocacy of the C clarinet, Mendelssohn's tendency in the symphonies to notate parts for A clarinet in three flats rather than

C clarinet in its natural key (a practice noted in *Grove 1*) heralds the withdrawal of the latter from the German tradition until its revival by Mahler and Strauss.<sup>8</sup>

In Italy and Eastern Europe the C clarinet retained an important role in the 19th century in both outdoor and domestic popular music. It is no coincidence that it was extensively used by Rossini, Verdi, Dvořák and Smetana. In Dvořák's Slavonic Dance op. 46 no. 1, for example, the instrument's sound and articulation are as much part of the conception as the contribution of the F trumpets and the carefully calculated percussion effects. The overture to *The Bartered Bride* is a further context in which C clarinets are indispensable and evidently specifically intended, since some of the later numbers in F are scored for B flat clarinet. The rustic introduction to Act 1 is also enhanced by adherence to Smetana's original scoring.

★

In tackling the complex problem of clarinet sonorities, I believe we should follow the composer's instructions as closely as possible, even where they appear conservative or eccentric; any attempt to interpret the motives for the choice of a particular clarinet must be undertaken with caution. A knowledge of subsequent developments in instrumental manufacture can pose a continuous threat to an authentic approach. Can we be certain that Mozart would have preferred our A clarinets in 'Soave sia il vento' or Schubert our B flat clarinets in the Great C major Symphony? The attitude to such problems adopted by players of any period should not be regarded as infallible, since adherence to the original text cannot be their immediate priority. An instructive example may be found in the music of Richard Strauss; his appreciation of different clarinet tone colours is widely acknowledged, yet in the cruelly demanding E major clarinet parts of the Oboe Concerto the temptation to exchange B flat for A clarinet and transpose is overwhelming. Even 20th-century works are not immune from the problems surrounding authentic performance!

<sup>8</sup> Alan Hacker has noted, however, that nos. 2 and 3 of Schumann's *Fantasiestücke* op. 73 appear to have been intended for C clarinet (see sleeve-note to L'Oiseau-Lyre DSLO 17).

<sup>7</sup> see M. F. Blasius: *Nouvelle méthode de clarinette* (Paris, 1802–3)

## Appointments, Awards

**Richard Lawrence** is appointed Arts Council music director in succession to Basil Deane.

**Ian Ritchie** is appointed artistic director of the City of London Festival.

**Giuseppe Sinopoli** has been appointed principal conductor of the Philharmonia Orchestra.

**Robert Bilson, Gregory Ellis, Richard Ireland** and **Peter Tanfield** (violinists), and **Alison Hagley, Mark Holland, Ian Platt** and **Lorna Windsor** (singers) have won Royal Society of Arts Music Scholarships for advanced study.

**Eva Doroszkowska** won the junior, **Sarah Briggs** the middle and **Nicholas Oliver** the senior section of the Surrey Young Pianist of the Year competition.

**Jeffrey Kahane** won the Arthur Rubinstein Competition, Tel-Aviv.

**Herbert von Karajan** is awarded the gold medal of the Royal Philharmonic Society.

**Steve Martland** has won the Karlheinz Stockhausen International Composition Competition for his piano piece *Kgakala*.

**Harry Mortimer** is awarded the first honorary graduate diploma in band musicianship by Salford College of Technology.

★

**Ian Parrott** retires this year from the Gregynog Chair of Music at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth; concerts were given in Aberystwyth on 16 and 18 May, including several of his works, among them two premières.

**A Birthday Album for Thomas Pitfield**, containing pieces for various combinations of piano, soprano, countertenor and recorder, has been published to celebrate the composer's 80th birthday; contributors include Alan Bush, William Alwyn, Anthony Gilbert, John McCabe, Gordon Crosse and Edward Cowie, and royalties from the sale of the volume (published by Forsyth at £5) will be given to charity.

**Sounds Natural** is the title of a songbook containing 19 songs for classroom use and illustrations and information on several species; the songs are the winning entries in a competition organized by the World Wildlife Fund, which has also issued an LP record featuring 12 songs, called 'Save the Animals' (profits from both will go towards the fund's international tropical rainforests campaign). The book is available (£4.95 plus £1 postage) from Boosey & Hawkes (Retail) Ltd, 295 Regent Street, London W1R 8JH, and the record or cassette (£4.95 plus 55p) from Wildlife Fund Mail Order, 3 Headingly Mount, Leeds LS6 3EL.

**What Price Music?** is the title of a 23-minute documentary film commissioned by the Performing Right Society to create greater public awareness of the value of music to the community, the importance of those who create and disseminate it, and the role of the PRS in the protection of their rights. Details from the PRS Publications and Information Department, 29/33 Berners Street, London W1P 4AA.

**Suppliers to Craftsmen Musical Instrument Makers**, compiled by Mark Norris, is published by the Scottish Development Agency in a new enlarged edition; it lists craftsmen and manufacturers from the UK and overseas arranged in categories of the materials they supply. It is available (price £1.50) from the Scottish Development Agency, 102 Telford Road, Edinburgh EH4 2NP.