

The Bass Clarinetist as Composer

AN INSTRUMENT WHOSE TIME HAS COME

The violin had its Paganini. The piano had its Liszt. Today, it's the bass clarinet's turn. Although there is no single towering figure like a Liszt or Paganini, there is an active, stylistically diverse, intensely creative community of bass clarinetist-composers working today to expand the capacities of the instrument. This article provides a brief lay of the land, introducing readers to a number of the people and trends that are shaping the future of bass clarinet technique and repertoire.

It's impossible to be completely comprehensive in an article of this length, so think of it more as a starting point for further exploration than as a final word. I communicated with many thoughtful and generous bass clarinetist-composers in researching this article, and their words will be interwoven throughout to give personal voice to the larger trends.

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

Many bass clarinetist-composers feel a very powerful bond with their instrument. "It was love at first sight," says Belgian **Stephan Vermeersch**. **Brad Baumgardner**, a founding member of Kansas City's experimental music group Digital Honkbox Revival, remembers first starting to play bass clarinet: "It was amazing. It was like I had been wearing clothes two sizes too small for my whole life and someone finally gave me a shirt that fit." **Daniel Dorff**, an in-demand composer and bass clarinetist based in Pennsylvania, explains, "I quickly fell in love with the physical sensation of the body resonance." **Cornelius Boots**, leader of the heavy metal-inspired San Francisco-based Edmund Welles bass clarinet quartet, and a Bb, flute, and sax player as well, recalls that, for him "...all roads converged at the bass clarinet: ultimately the ultimate of all the single-reeds..." This is a common theme amongst many bass clarinetist-composers: the feeling that finding the bass clarinet was fated to happen or was like finally coming home.

A RANGE OF BACKGROUNDS AND INFLUENCES

The range of backgrounds of today's bass clarinetist-composers is striking. Some come from primarily classical Bb clarinet backgrounds, while others come from the jazz world, often by way of the saxophone. They draw on a wide range of influences in their work. Two frequently cited influences, from very different ends of the musical spectrum, are the Dutch bass clarinet virtuoso and commissioner of countless new works, **Harry Sparnaay**; and the French jazz saxophonist and bass clarinetist **Louis Sclavis**.

Other jazz-influenced bass clarinetist-composers include **Henri Bok**, Professor of Bass Clarinet at Rotterdam Conservatory, Amsterdam-based **Tobias Klein**, the German **Steffan Schorn**, the Swiss **Claudio Puntin**, and the aforementioned **Brad Baumgardner**, among many others. Improvisation is a central component of composition for many bass clarinetist-composers. Although also influenced by a range of contemporary classical music, “I would have to say that my primary influence on what I put down on paper is from improvisation,” says Montreal-based **Lori Freedman**. For **Jeff Reilly**, a Canadian who conducts and produces radio shows in addition to his extensive bass clarinet and composition work, the “focus is to integrate improvisation with formal composition, or in other words to find the balance between the control of formal composition and the freedom of improvisation.”

Other bass clarinetist-composers draw on quite personal and idiosyncratic combinations of influences. **Aaron Novik**, based in San Francisco, says of his influences, “these days it's definitely Brazilian music, choro and the metal band meshuggah that are perhaps my biggest influences...” **Beth Custer**, also from the Bay Area and the leader of the clarinet ensemble, *Clarinet Thing*, cites blues, jazz, and rock as important influences. For American **Michael Miller**, “Death metal always crops up in any piece I am writing, sometimes subtly and sometimes blatantly, usually the latter.” For **Michael Lowenstern**, who specializes in solo compositions with electronic looping and layering, “Electronica and Funk are my two biggest influences....Groove is incredibly important to me – more than form, more than harmony, more than timbre or sound.” **Oğuz Büyükberber**, born in Turkey and based in Amsterdam, notes that, “Jazz, Turkish Folk and Court Music and Contemporary Music are the main ingredients of my language both as a composer and an improviser.” **Cornelius Boots** most audibly draws on heavy metal and hard rock in his compositions, but also cites influences ranging from classical clarinet repertoire to early blues and gospel to “pop, funk, disco and R&B from the 70’s and 80’s,” to bands such as Tool, Melt-Banana and Fishbone.

Despite this wide range of interests, one particular influence was mentioned by almost everyone: **Eric Dolphy**. Dolphy, as any bass clarinet aficionado knows, was a brilliant 1960s jazz musician with a distinctive voice on flute and alto saxophone, but most remarkably on the bass clarinet. Approaching it from a jazz improvisation background, and drawing on the timbre of both the Bb clarinet and the saxophone family, Dolphy found a universe of sounds in the instrument that no one approaching it from the classical direction had yet uncovered – rhapsodic lyricism, searing wails, and animal-like squawks and grunts across an enormous registral span. Although he never achieved the fame of colleagues like Charles Mingus, Miles Davis, or John Coltrane, he was one of the great jazz innovators of his time, and it is difficult to overstate his importance to bass clarinetist-composers today. Even those with no background in jazz are influenced and inspired by him. It is indeed telling that the first virtuoso of the bass clarinet was not the product of a classical conservatory education, but an experimental jazz musician who essentially invented

his own technique. Many of today's bass clarinetist-composers are similarly seeking their own path and forging their own technique, inspired by Dolphy's example.

PERFORMING COMPOSER OR COMPOSING PERFORMER?

Bass clarinetist-composers exhibit a range of relationships between performance and composition. A few see themselves as composers first, and performers secondarily. Many, on the other hand, began primarily as performers and discovered composition only later, sometimes out of practical or even metaphysical necessity.

Michael Lowenstern fell into composing after realizing how hard (and expensive!) it would be to try to commission others to do it. After hearing from modernist composer Charles Wuorinen how much he would charge for a solo piece, "...I decided that if I was going to get pieces written for the Bass Clarinet, I probably should just do it myself. And there it began." **Henri Bok**, also had a very practical reason to start composing bass clarinet music: "I started composing, because I needed an encore for two solo recitals and had forgotten to bring anything...in my hotel room I got an idea and started writing my opus one: 'Vinho do Porto Brasileiro'. When the audiences were raving about this piece I saw that as a great encouragement to write more and now I spend a lot of time composing..."

Oğuz Büyükberber explains a different type of necessity that led him to write his own music: "I have very low vision and to be able to play with other people, I had a few options: playing "tunes" everyone knows which I can learn by ear,...someone spending time to teach me his or her music by ear, improvising freely, or me composing my own music." For **Laura Carmichael**, an American long based in Amsterdam, composing for bass clarinet grew naturally out of her own musical explorations: "If you are busy with music, and curious, I think it's quite natural for sounds and ideas to creep into your imagination."

For others, including myself, there was another very practical reason to compose for bass clarinet: as a young composer, if I wanted my music to be played, my best shot was to play it myself, rather than hoping for someone more famous to take it up. For **Cornelius Boots**, it was simply an imperative to start writing for bass clarinet: "The bass clarinet absolutely demanded that I spend a considerable amount of energy and focus creating new contexts, new conceptions and new compositions for it. This is not metaphor or hyperbole; it is a simple statement of exactly what happened."

Many bass clarinetist-composers see composing and performing as vitally linked and are reluctant to assign either one priority. "I consider myself a musician. I do several things, primarily I make music," says **Lori Freedman**. Former Bang on a Can All-Stars clarinetist and bass clarinetist **Evan Ziporyn** says "It's something I think about a lot but never answer...it's all music-making in the end." And **Brad Baumgardner** notes a strong historical precedent for integrating performance and composition: "I try not to draw a distinction between the two. Up until the 20th

century, almost all composers were strong players. We seem to have drifted away from that a little bit, which tends to make people identify as one or the other. I try not to do that. I mostly just call myself a musician.” Indeed, this does seem to be part of a larger trend within contemporary composition. The return of composer-performers – long the norm, but rare in the increasingly specialized 20th century – is one of the most salient and welcome trends in composition today.

COMPOSING FOR WHOM?

Most bass clarinetist-composers write with themselves in mind as performers. They draw on their own strengths and idiosyncrasies or use composing as a way to push their technique further. **Michael Miller** says “I very much use composition as a means of creating challenges for myself. I am always trying to get better as a player, so I am constantly writing pieces that are at the very edge of my technical facility. At the same time, I would be stupid to not include things I do well in all of these pieces.” **Jeff Reilly** says, “Composition is a wonderful way to extend, explore, challenge and focus one’s technical and expressive capacity – you can use it to extend and push your technical abilities, but more interestingly – you can also use it to explore and focus your musical language.” **Ken Thomson**, the current clarinetist in the Bang on a Can All-stars adds, “Often the music I write requires some serious technique. Not extended techniques, but a lot of finger work. It's actually the way I get better at many of my instruments that I play – by writing something without considering the fingerings, intervals, etc., and working it out after it's too late to change it!”

There is often little expectation that others will later play their music, and it can generate certain challenges when they do. As **Evan Ziporyn** describes it “...I never expect anyone else to want to play my music for bass clarinet – so in each case it’s a bit of a surprise and a struggle when that happens – I have to find a way to notate a lot of things that I didn’t bother writing down – or to omit them and find a way to make the piece still function.” However, it can also be exciting and gratifying when others take an interest in music not originally intended for other performers. **Michael Lowenstern** explains, “I don’t worry much about other bass clarinetists playing my music when I’m writing, but I’m enormously flattered and honored that so many do.” This of course is quite similar to how things have worked with past virtuoso-composers on other instruments. When Paganini and Liszt were around, they were often the only ones with the technical skills to perform their own compositions. Now, talented high school students can play them. The same will likely be true of the most idiosyncratic, technically demanding works of today’s virtuoso bass clarinetist-composers.

On the other hand, there are some bass clarinetist-composers who are thinking of other players more from the beginning. **Daniel Dorff** has always considered himself a composer first, and so his works are often written with other players in mind. And **Eric Mandat** has really pushed the envelope in terms of extended techniques in his

compositions, but also has developed ways to notate them clearly and meticulously so that others can easily interpret what he comes up with.

BEYOND THE CONCERT HALL

This brief exploration of bass clarinetist-composers makes it clear that each individual is unique, with their own personal history, their own mixture of influences, and their own goals as instrumentalists and composers. The range of backgrounds and influences is quite broad, making it difficult to generalize about the bass clarinetist-composer as a species. If there is a common element, though, it is the persistent influence of music from outside of contemporary classical music. Whether it takes the form of heavy metal, electronica, jazz, free improvisation, blues, or non-Western musical traditions, bass clarinetist-composers seem to have a natural inclination to draw on worlds of music from beyond the Western concert hall.

There is something about this instrument that seems to attract people with particularly creative, often unconventional impulses. It may be the lure of an instrument without the baggage of an extensive history. Whereas the Bb Clarinet has centuries of pedagogy and repertoire, on bass you can invent your own approach suited to your own personality and interests. It also may simply be that the bass clarinet is an inherently rich instrument, ripe for exploitation by people who know, hands-on, how it works. With a four-and-half-octave range, a huge variety of timbres, great flexibility and fluidity, and an extremely rich spectrum of overtones, it's an instrument that has a deeply distinctive personality, yet is at the same time extraordinarily versatile. It's no wonder that creative, inventive people would be so drawn to it.

A PERSONAL NOTE

As a bass clarinetist-composer myself, I feel deep gratitude to those who have taken the instrument this far, and am eager to see what the next generation does with it. My own story begins where it does for many others: with **Eric Dolphy**, who I heard for the first time in 1999, during my junior year in college. His playing inspired me to begin exploring the bass clarinet as a vehicle of personal musical expression.

Since then I have been fortunate to encounter or work with a number of the people discussed above. **Michael Lowenstern's** recordings and a live performance at ClarinetFest opened up the full range of rhythmic and lyrical expressivity of the instrument. My attempts to play **Evan Ziporyn's** compositions *Tsmindao Ghmerto* and *Partial Truths* were instructive early lessons in extended techniques and creative composition for bass clarinet. A workshop by **Laura Carmichael** when I was doing a masters program at San Francisco Conservatory opened my ears to a new universe of extended techniques and electronics. My many years of playing in Edmund Welles with **Cornelius Boots** opened a whole new world of sound,

resonance, and power, unlike anything I had known was possible, an experience that deeply influences my work to this day.

For my bass clarinet duo Sqwonk, with **Jeff Anderle**, I transcribed works by **Steffen Schorn** and **Claudio Puntin**, and commissioned new works from **Cornelius Boots**, **Aaron Novik**, and **Ken Thomson**, which all stretched and challenged both my instrumental technique and musical imagination in new ways. I have learned immensely from all of these inspiring musicians, and I would like to think that my own bass clarinet compositions are building on their achievements, refracting them through my own musical personality. It is deeply rewarding now to see younger players starting to play and respond to my music, building on what I have done and taking it in new directions.

LOOKING AHEAD

The bass clarinet has come a long, long way in a relatively short time period, thanks in no small part to the creative efforts of all the bass clarinet-composers out there. It will be exciting to see what happens next. A final anecdote from **Michael Lowenstern** sums up the journey thus far: “In 1994 I got a letter from Concert Artists’ Guild telling me (after I applied to their competition) that Bass Clarinet repertoire wouldn’t sustain an audience. Their suggestion was that I play Bassoon transcriptions or the Stravinsky Three Pieces on bass clarinet. A lot has changed in 20 years; indeed a lot has changed since 1955 when Josef Horak played the first bass clarinet solo recital, since Dolphy brought it to the Jazz fore in the 1960s, and since Harry Sparnaay won Gaudeamus on it in 1972. This is an instrument still in a rapid evolution. I’m just glad to have been a part of it.”

- Jonathan Russell

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