

Instrumental insights

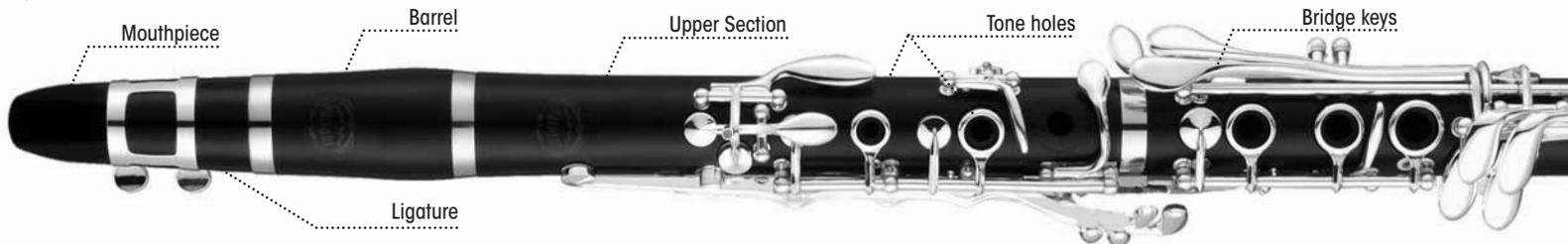
A brief history of the clarinet

by KRISTA MARTYNES



DID you KNOW?

The body of a clarinet can be made from various materials. Professional instruments are most often made from exotic hardwoods such as grenadilla, while plastic resin is a common, inexpensive student alternative. Historically, other woods have also been used, along with metal, hard rubber and ivory. Today, instrument-makers continue to explore the potential of other materials, such as carbon fibre and composites, working to continue the path towards design perfection.



EARLY HISTORY

Throughout a clarinetist's career, the musician can play up to seven different clarinets, transpose entire orchestral masterworks, develop more extended techniques than most instruments, as well as play major solos influenced by traditional folk music from various countries. This is all the result of the youthful history of the clarinet.

The clarinet originated from the German instrument-maker Johann Denner who expanded the range of the baroque 17th century chalumeau by adding keys and tone holes using a boxwood bore. The bore was also cylindrically altered to distinguish a sonorous contrast between the clarinet and other woodwind instruments.

Throughout the 18th century, many modifications were made to the tone holes and keys. Johann Stamitz wrote one of the earliest clarinet concertos, and his expansion of the orchestral score to include winds influenced Haydn to include clarinet in his own symphonic writing. The clarinets would often double the trumpet or horn which could elude to the sound quality of the boxwood bore. Mozart took the instrument to superstar status in the late 18th century by providing the famous clarinet concerto for a longer derivative basset horn in A (resembling the length of an English horn).

Beethoven helped put the clarinet on the map throughout his symphonic works. He began by writing for soprano clarinet in C, an instrument that resembled the modern Eb clarinet, with a bright sound. In his later compositions, he wrote for a less bright clarinet in Bb. Instrumentalists of the period became familiar with playing both Mozart's lower basset horn and Beethoven's brighter C clarinet. Consequently, modern day clarinetists carry the A and the Bb clarinet to their orchestral jobs every day, unlike most instrumentalists who have one primary instrument. Orchestral players often transpose Beethoven's symphonic works that are still written in C, and sometimes play auxiliary Eb or bass clarinets. »



A CHALUMEAU, the 17th century instrument on which the modern clarinet is based

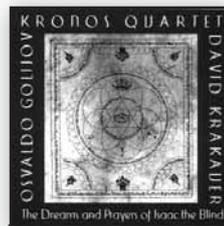
... romantic composers such as Weber, Spohr, Brahms, and Gershwin (wrote) elaborated concertos and solos bringing the young instrument to the fore.



Clarinet's Greatest Hits



Charles Neidich's Weber Concerto No. 2
Orpheus Chamber Orchestra
Deutsche Grammophon 435875, 1997.



David Krakauer's Golijov *The Dreams and Prayers of Isaac the Blind*
Kronos Quartet
Nonesuch 79444-2, 1997.



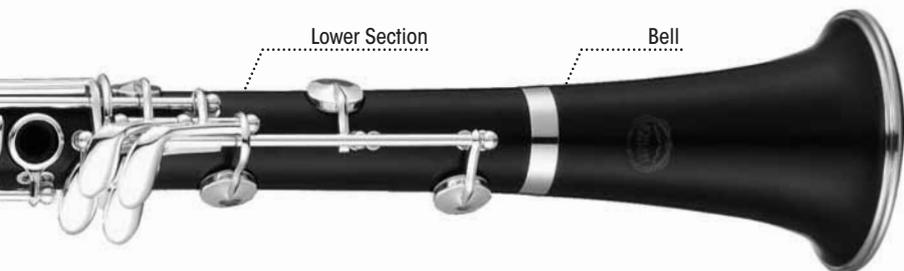
Sharon Kam in Mozart Gala from Prague: Clarinet Concerto
Czech Philharmonic Orchestra/Honeck
EuroArts DVD 2055158, 2006.

PHOTOS (L to R) Vincenzo D'Alto, Karl-Erik Bennion



Reeding up

If you think that a new reed is better than an older one, think again: new reeds need to be broken in gradually for maximum flexibility, control and comfort. While softer reeds are easier for a beginner, harder reeds produce better tone, but are more difficult to play due to the fact that more air is required to make the reed vibrate. Depending on the frequency of use, traditional bamboo reeds last from two weeks to one month. Plastic reeds are a recent alternative offering greater longevity.



The clarinet got its name from the Italian word *clarinetto* which means “little trumpet.”

» MODERN MASTERY

In the 19th century, **Hyacinthe Klosé** and Auguste Buffet modified the key system to the Boehm system (originating from the flute), creating two popular systems of clarinet that still presently exist: the French (Boehm system) clarinet and the German (Albert system) clarinet. The French instrument-makers started to use ebony and grenadilla wood which softened the sound. Each new system attempted to facilitate and improve technique. It's continual development influenced romantic composers such as Weber, Spohr, Brahms, and Gershwin to write elaborated concertos and solos bringing the young instrument to the fore.

The instrumental advancements influenced folk and tzigane clarinetists as they were provided with a full range instrument. Turkish, klezmer, oriental, and occidental folk musicians inspired famous compositions by 20th century and modern classical composers such as Bartok, Prokofieff, and Copland.

Deriving from the instrumentation of Schoenberg's *Kammersymphonie* op. 9, and the idea of each instrument being a soloist, a contemporary ensemble was developed in Europe in the 1970s-1980s. Contemporary ensem-



bles have since had a significant impact on musical society. Twentieth century and modern composers have grasped the clarinet's elaborate family and voluble extended techniques. Modern day instrumentalists that play professionally in contemporary ensembles can be expected to play on the A, Bb, Eb or bass clarinet within one concert or a single composition.

Instrument-makers continue to expand the clarinet family. There is a modern Italian clarinet that has extended the range a whole step lower than the French or German clarinet. Interpreting Italian composers, such as Salvatore Sciarrino or Luigi Nono, is difficult for clarinetists who play French and German instruments, as some notes don't exist on their instruments. As contemporary music is sliding from well-tempered to non-tempered to even equal-tempered writing, new instruments are being made such as the Bohlen-Pierce equal-tempered clarinet. Different parts of the clarinet have been modified to include contact microphones or pitch bending effects to facilitate playing with electronics. Modern instrument-makers are recreating the clarinet with different forms of wood, metals, reeds, and tuning holes, giving professional clarinetists, composers, and the instrument a bright and intriguing future.

LSM

CLARINET



PHOTOS (l to r) Shane Woodward, Karl-Erik Bennion

Krista Martynes' Pro Clarinet Tips

FOR THE BEGINNER

LSM What would you consider to be an important, yet often overlooked element of instrument care that a clarinetist should follow in order to maintain their instrument?

The inner bore of a wooden clarinet is constantly undergoing climate change as it is humid, then dry, much more than the outer parts of the clarinet. As a result the wood moves, changing the pitch, and the bore becomes dry and brittle. The bore needs to be oiled every six months by an instrument repairman.

FOR THE INTERMEDIATE

LSM What is an essential daily routine that an intermediate-level clarinetist should have in their arsenal to maintain and further develop their playing?

Playing long notes in all octaves of the clarinet helps the player maintain breath control which is the first essential obstacle for a wind instrumentalist to overcome. Playing scales rhythmically everyday (memorised) keeps the fingers moving and the technique sharp.

FOR THE ADVANCED

LSM What would you recommend as a potentially inexpensive way to upgrade a clarinet for someone who may not be able to afford a professional instrument?

The mouthpiece and barrel have a huge impact on the sound and facility of playing the instrument. If a player doesn't want to invest in a professional instrument, but feels limited, trying different mouthpieces with more open or closed faces/bore, or trying different barrels could be a positive change.

LSM If you could recommend one work and recording that would romance anyone into falling in love with the clarinet, what would it be and why?

If one attends an orchestral concert, the clarinet has a wealth of solos in most orchestral masterworks which are a treat to the ear, accompanied by a vast and glorious string section.

The Brahms Quintet is a masterwork for the clarinet and string quartet. Brahms' late-writing is glorious, with his marker rhapsody in the second movement. One of my favourite recordings is Swiss clarinetist (recently deceased) Thomas Freidli with the Sine Nomine Quartet recorded on Claves.

Krista Martynes has performed as a soloist, orchestral and chamber musician throughout Canada, the United States and Europe. Recently, she gave recitals in festivals including Musikprotokoll, Transart and Remusica. Intrigued by the process involved in the creation of new music, she frequently collaborates with composers, dancers, video and sound artists in Montreal and abroad. kristamartynes.com

