

"The Clarinet" by Eric Hoeprich

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Book Review: Hoeprich, Eric. *Clarinet*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. ISBN 978-0-300-10282-6.

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For over a generation Eric Hoeprich has been acknowledged as one of the world's most accomplished period clarinetists. He has developed a major profile as a soloist, chamber musician and orchestral player. While others have been content to embrace practical expediency at the expense of historical accuracy, Hoeprich's career has been marked by an integrity that has become increasingly rare within the field of "early music." He is a much sought-after teacher and is on the faculties of the Royal Conservatory of Music in the Hague, the Paris Conservatoire National Supérieur de Musique and Indiana University, Bloomington. Over a number of years he has published scholarly articles in academic journals such as *Early Music* and the *Galpin Society Journal*. He is also a highly respected maker, an aspect of his work that brings particular insights into the clarinet's history. He is therefore very well qualified to undertake the substantial task of authoring the Clarinet volume in the ongoing and highly successful Yale Musical Instrument Series. The book is beautifully produced and lavishly illustrated. Just a few misspelt names, such as Birtwistle, Phillip Rehfeldt and Neal Zaslaw, testify to a slightly disappointing level of proofreading.

It is scarcely a criticism of such an important volume that its perspective directly reflects the author's own interests and tastes. It would be unusual to find a single writer to cover such a wide range of subject matter with equal authority. No clarinetist will want to be without this book, not least for the lists of instrument makers and instruction materials in the appendices, together with the select bibliography. Hoeprich begins with a brief literature survey that rightly draws attention to the post-war corpus of research that has addressed aspects of the clarinet's history, repertoire, players and construction. He then quite reasonably asserts that the time is now ripe for a comprehensive volume on the clarinet. Hoeprich states his objective as "to touch on most of the important aspects of the clarinet from the past to the present, giving an overview of its physical development, of approaches to playing the instrument, and of its music... To study the clarinet is also to study the inventiveness, imagination and the industry of the people involved in playing, making and composing for it. It provides an impressive testimony to what has been accomplished by a great many people over a long period of time" (xix-xx). Unlike one or two other authors in the Yale Series, Hoeprich does not offer a more detailed rationale for the book's structure and content, nor clues as to his intended readership, although he does suggest that learning from history can help with the myriad decisions with which players are confronted (1). But musicians and listeners other than clarinetists will certainly find something in these pages to interest them, since the text relates to phases in the history of music told from the perspective of one instrument and its players.

Despite its unpromising title, the opening chapter “The basic clarinet” benefits greatly from the author’s experience as a player. He follows eighteenth-century advice in observing that “the goal of playing any musical instrument is to communicate with and move the listener” (10). He also delivers an evocative account of the physical sensation of playing the clarinet, which he describes as “...extremely pleasing—the air flows into the mouthpiece, the reed buzzes against the lips and the body of the clarinet vibrates in the hands” (7). There are some useful remarks on intonation, which (together with sound and attack) is identified as an area for continuous development by the player. But whilst noting that the clarinet should have a lovely sound, capable of great expression, Hoeplich shows some reluctance to characterize in words the clarinet’s tone quality and response. Indeed, he prefers to rely in this regard to other writers such as Richard Strauss and Jack Brymer.

In addressing the earliest clarinets, Hoeplich regards most repertoires for two- and three-key clarinets as “not technically challenging,” (41) while conceding the difficulties of the necessary cross-fingerings. Clarinetists who have attempted the concertos with clarinets by Vivaldi, with their figurations across both main registers, will probably feel more cautious. He proposes a three-keyed instrument for the Handel Overture HWV424 for two clarinets and horn, in view of the technical difficulties posed by the piece. This seems a little surprising in the light of his purist approach later in the book to the five-keyed clarinet in classical repertoire. Many players today have more than a passing interest in the way the earliest clarinets were played. The earliest clarinets were played with the reed placed against the top lip, a technique abandoned at the Paris Conservatoire only in 1831. Hoeplich might well have chosen to probe the subject in more depth, even though he does return to it in his chapter on the classical instrument. In particular, he takes no account of a major recent 382-page study by Ingrid Pearson.¹ But in this chapter and the succeeding one devoted to the chalumeau, Hoeplich is generally highly effective in summarizing and developing the work of clarinet scholars such as Albert Rice. He might usefully have referred in more detail to recently published biographies of relevant baroque composers, by Janice Stockigt and others.

Hoeplich’s account of the classical clarinet and of Mozart and the clarinet offer many valuable insights into instruments, repertoire and performance practice. Players of both modern and period instruments will find a great deal here to inspire and educate, especially his espousal of a rigorous historical position. He observes that “...all of the available information points clearly toward the use of five-key clarinets for the Mozart repertoire. The intricate and difficult cross-fingerings on these clarinets was [*sic*] an integral part of the performance. Natural horns and trumpets had to deal with similar problems, as did the other woodwinds” (122). Hoeplich has himself been closely associated with many of the research areas he touches upon, including the discovery in Slovakia of a trio of basset horns by Lotz and recreation of Stadler’s basset clarinet design that is illustrated in a 1794 program from Riga. Overall, the history of the instrument and its players is more impressively treated than the music itself. Hoeplich offers little indication of what constitutes truly idiomatic classical clarinet writing, and is rather too content to resort to such descriptors as “ravishing,” “rewarding,” “superb” or “effective.” In particular, there is little attempt to investigate the

¹ Ingrid Pearson, “Clarinet Embouchure in Theory and Practice: the Forgotten Art of Reed Above” (Ph.D. diss., University of Sheffield, 2001).

dramatic contexts for prominent clarinets within Mozart's operas, beyond an obvious linkage with aspects of love in *Figaro* and *Così fan tutte*. For example, the author might well have taken account of Jean Jeltsch's recent observation that at the end of the eighteenth century the relatively new clarinet came to symbolize progress and new ideals, whereas the oboe retained an association with the aristocracy and the monarchy. Hoeprich tends to a literal view of primary sources. Against the addition of embellishments in the repeated sections of the Minuet and Trios in Mozart's Clarinet Quintet, he cites Türk's *Klavierschule* of 1789, which defines the minuet as "a well-known dance of noble and charming character in 3/4 time..., played moderately fast and agreeably, but executed without ornaments" (120). Yet Mozart's stylized Minuet in K581 is some way removed from his ballroom dances. Robert Levin and others have recently asserted that Stadler and colleagues would have elaborated even Mozart's orchestral wind solos. If that really was the case in the 1780s, it seems unlikely that Stadler would suddenly have ceased ornamentation on reaching the third movement of the Quintet. The issue is at any rate more ambiguous than Hoeprich implies, as illustrated by Levin's recording of Mozart's E-flat Piano Concerto K482, where solo ornamentation continues into the Minuet that occurs during the finale.

The opening years of the nineteenth century are well characterized, not least in the chapter title "1800 to 1843: Astounding innovation and breath-taking virtuosity." Hoeprich gives an excellent account of the scope and pace of organological developments, revisiting primary sources to great effect. For example, Simiot in 1808 directly anticipates Berlioz in observing: "The range, the variety and the quality of sound of the clarinet distinguish it from all the other winds; it has all the characteristics which composers desire, and can play equally well the hymn of the warrior or the song of the shepherd" (cited in Hoeprich, 123). The English clarinettist Thomas Willman further stated in 1826 that Lefèvre's 1802 Tutor for the Paris Conservatoire "...will throw but feeble light on numerous more *recent* difficulties; and indeed, in many instances, it leaves the Learner to grope his way by the erring guidance of conjecture" (123). Hoeprich's comprehensive survey of makers is richly illustrated and expertly done, incorporating some little-known primary material. An example is Glinka's comparison of Müller's harsh tone with the screech of a goose and his dismissal of the notion of a *clarinette omnitonique*. Observations on repertoire (including orchestral contexts) and performance practice are laced with an effective use of primary evidence, such as Weber's remarks relating to tempo flexibility. The first edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London, 1879-1889) is an important source.² The physician W.H. Stone's article "clarinet" appears in the first of the four volumes and therefore dates from before 1879. Hoeprich has the date variously as 1899 (156) and 1904 (bibliography).

"1844-1900: The clarinet joins the establishment" completes the nineteenth-century picture. Buffet's radical redesign (the so-called Boehm system) in the 1840s was directed towards an absolute evenness of scale, perfect intonation, and a lack of technical difficulties. Among a plethora of inventions, the "Baermann" and "Albert" (or "simple-") systems were developed and continued to find favor. Hoeprich gives a very good idea of the sheer variety of clarinet making and of the "general reluctance to try something new" that impeded

² Sir George Grove, *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London: Macmillan, 1879-89).

developments. He cites the 1904 edition of Stone's 1879 *Grove* article, which leaves unaltered an assertion that the Boehm system "certainly removes some difficulties, but at the expense of greatly increased complication of mechanism and liability to get out of order" (204). He might have added that the simple system was the model illustrated in Forsyth's *Orchestration* (1914) and in *The Oxford Companion to Music* (1938, tenth edition 1970).³ Even in 1957 Anthony Baines noted that it was still played by many. But any clarinettist will find an enlivened context for the performance of Romantic repertory from Hoeprich's subtle blend of generality and detail. For example, it is interesting to discover from Brahms's autographs of Op. 120 that "the clarinet part for the F minor sonata shows little sign of use, whereas the part for the second sonata was clearly used many times" (366, n74).

Even with a separate chapter for folk music and jazz, it remains questionable whether the "twentieth century and beyond" can really be accommodated within a mere thirty pages, especially since the book as a whole runs to almost 400. Having devoted a third of the chapter to organological developments, Hoeprich gives a lightning tour of repertory by genre. It seems odd that the medium of clarinet and piano is allocated little more than a page, with large swathes of repertory (especially over the past 40 years) reduced to mere listings. This is a serious matter for mainstream performers (and examination candidates) expecting to find a context for such staple duo fare as those by Messager, Finzi or Howells. There are other significant omissions, such as Peter Maxwell Davies's influential *Hymnos*. Contemporary techniques might have been probed further, for which Roger Heaton's chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to the Clarinet*⁴ could have served as a useful model. In fact the strongest parts of the chapter relate to aspects of performance and national playing styles, together with the author's prognosis for the future and call to arms: "Details that matter so much to artists start to seem irrelevant and even ludicrous in the eyes of the general public, who are by and large increasingly undereducated in the arts. For clarinettists there is little to do other than maintain the greatest possible devotion to their art. As a civilization we are more than just producers and consumers of goods; without the arts we are very little indeed. 'Life is short, art is long; long live music in all its diversity and magic'" (235)! This is a sentence that surely belongs at the end of the book.

The concluding chapters address the basset horn, bass clarinet, "The odd clarinets" and "Bands, folk music and all that jazz." Of these, the first two are especially successful, offering comprehensive surveys of instrument design, repertory and other primary issues, such as the range of bore dimension favored by modern manufacturers of the basset horn. "The odd clarinets" ranges over such curiosities as the *clarinette d'amour*, combination clarinets, quarter-tone clarinets and walking stick clarinets. It is strange to find the E-flat clarinet in such company and (together with the D clarinet) attracting no more than a page and a half of commentary. The author's peremptory treatment of the E-flat clarinet takes no account of chamber music by Cavalli and Ponchielli, nor does it incorporate detailed

³ Cecil Forsyth, *Orchestration* (London: Macmillan, 1914); Percy Alfred Scholes, John Owen Ward, *The Oxford Companion to Music*, 10th ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1970).

⁴ Roger Heaton, "The Contemporary Clarinet," in *The Cambridge Companion to Clarinet*, ed. Colin Lawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 163-183.

investigation of the Second Viennese School. Though *Daphnis [sic] et Chloé* merits a mention, the idiomatic writing within Ravel's G major Piano Concerto is ignored; Britten's *Four Sea Interludes* from *Peter Grimes* is another illuminating context that finds no place here. "Bands, folk music and all that jazz" offers a useful historical narrative across a wide variety of genres. The author makes a brave attempt to characterize aspects of performance, though some readers will find rather clumsy and patronizing his claims in relation to jazz and folk genres: "The stability and control sought after by players of classical music are not considered an asset here, and by most technical standards many jazz or folk clarinetists may be said to possess an unformed embouchure, sloppy articulation and a less-than-perfect sound quality..." (316). Hoerich none the less allows that "...many of these players [are] masterful musicians capable of great musical expression" (316). Such comments reflect the author's personal perspective on the clarinet that is at once one of the book's greatest strengths and its weaknesses. This volume represents a milestone in research into the history of the clarinet; it is less successful in integrating the needs of the normal player into a narrative of the instrument's development.