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CLARINET CONCERTOS



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Clarinet Concertos

Most musical instruments in use today derive from very ancient ancestors. The oboe, for example, may be traced back to the shawm, an instrument with a double-reed and wooden mouthpiece, used from the 12th century onwards. Developed by French makers, the modern oboe was perfected around the mid-17th century. The clarinet, a single-reed instrument, is an exception, having been developed from the chalumeau, a folk instrument played by shepherds, around 1700. (Nowadays the term chalumeau is most often intended to refer to the lower register of the clarinet.) It was J.C. Denner of Nuremberg, and his son Jacob, who built an instrument – the clarinet – which combined the lower register of the chalumeau with an additional upper range. The earliest clarinets were very basic, resembling a large recorder, but with two keys – later three. By the 1740s, Vivaldi and Handel were very occasionally writing for clarinets – three concerti grossi and the overture HWV424 respectively – while Telemann composed a concerto for two chalumeaux and used the instrument in other works such as his later oratorios. In the 1760s, the internationally famous Mannheim Orchestra included two clarinetists, doubling on the oboe, but by 1778 these musicians were employed purely as clarinetists. By the time Mozart wrote his concerto in 1791, the clarinet had eight finger holes and five keys. Of the various systems which have been used by clarinetists, the confusingly named Boehm system has been the most widespread for over 150 years, though not in Germany or Austria where it wasn't popular. It was Hyacinthe Klosé who (between 1839 and 1843) made the final development of the clarinet design in use today. Klosé was inspired by Theobald Boehm's flute system and, although slightly different, named his clarinet system after him.

The status of the clarinet in the symphony orchestra had become more permanent in Beethoven's day, although the distinctive tone of the instrument was not always considered suitable, depending on the character and key of the music. For instance, Schubert's Fifth Symphony has no clarinets, while Mozart omitted them from many of his symphonies and piano concertos. Mozart was especially fond of the instrument, but even after he met the virtuoso Anton Stadler, he included clarinets in his orchestration only where their tone would be consistent with that of a particular composition. In neither his last symphony or piano concerto did he include clarinets. From Beethoven's symphonies onwards the clarinet would be a standard orchestral instrument. Also in use are the small, higher-pitched E flat clarinet, the bass clarinet, and occasionally (as in Mozart's *Requiem*) the ethereal-sounding basset horn.

Born in Tiefenort near Eisenach, **Johann Melchior Molter** (1696–1765) composed more than 150 symphonies and nearly 100 concertos. His six clarinet concertos are quite possibly the very first composed for the instrument – No.1 is believed to date from 1743 –, but are of more than merely

historical interest. The solo writing – composed for a high clarinet in D – suggests the virtuosity of a coloratura soprano.

Louis Spohr (1784–1859), born in Brunswick, established a reputation as a violinist and conductor, as well as a composer. Though Spohr was considered one of the very greatest composers of his day, his music is now rarely played. Among his most frequently performed works are the clarinet concertos which he composed for his friend Johann Simon Hermstedt, whom he had met in 1808. Just as Weber was inspired by Baermann, Mozart by Stadler and Brahms by Mühlfeld, so Spohr was inspired by the virtuosity and artistry of Hermstedt. Though Spohr was familiar with the clarinet's range, he intended to take advice from Hermstedt regarding its strengths and weaknesses, and modify the clarinet part accordingly. Hermstedt was pleased with the concerto, however, and preferred to make adjustments and adaptations to his instrument in order to facilitate the very difficult passages. Spohr's four clarinet concertos are among the most beautifully idiomatic works in the repertoire, well deserving their occasional performances as alternatives to the Mozart and Weber concertos.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791) knew several outstanding wind soloists but was also blessed with an almost instinctive understanding of the technique and character of every instrument. The last and greatest of his various wind concertos is the Clarinet Concerto K622, completed only weeks before his premature death. Inspired by the musicianship of the clarinetist Anton Stadler, Mozart composed a trio with viola and piano, a clarinet quintet and this concerto especially for him. Stadler, who became a close friend of Mozart, had recently developed a new type of clarinet with a slightly extended lower range. This basset-clarinet was the instrument for which Mozart originally composed both the concerto and the quintet. However, when it soon became obsolete, the concerto was published in an adaptation for orthodox clarinet.

The German composer **Max Bruch** (1838–1920), like his close contemporary Saint-Saëns, was born in Mendelssohn's lifetime, lived through astonishing upheavals in musical language – Wagner's radical innovations, followed by those of Schoenberg and Stravinsky – and died as 20th-century modernism proliferated in many directions. His music remained almost entirely unaffected by these seismic changes. Bruch composed the Concerto for clarinet and viola for his clarinetist son, completing it in 1911.

Carl Maria von Weber (1786–1826) was one of the most important figures of early German Romanticism. He wrote several works as a direct result of his friendship with Heinrich Baermann, generally regarded as the finest clarinetist of his time. They met in Munich in 1811. Weber was preparing for a concert of his own works and quickly wrote his Concertino for Baermann to play

on this occasion. Baermann had recently been engaged as principal clarinet in the court orchestra of King Maximilian I Joseph, and the king was so impressed with his performance that he immediately commissioned Weber to write two concertos, both of which he completed in 1811. Virtuoso though always poetical and lyrical, these remain the most popular clarinet concertos after Mozart's.

The virtuoso pianist and composer **Ferruccio Busoni** (1866–1924) was Italian-born but settled in Berlin in his late twenties. While his most important composition for solo instrument and orchestra is his massive Piano Concerto, his much shorter Concertino for clarinet and small orchestra (1918) is an attractive concert piece which remains neglected.

The Swedish-Finnish composer **Bernhard Crusell** (1775–1838) learned to play the clarinet by ear. Aged 16, he became the director of the regimental band in Stockholm and the following year he was appointed principal clarinet with the Royal Court Orchestra. He composed three concertos for his own instrument, as well as several chamber works including the clarinet. In his three clarinet concertos, the first published as his Opus 1, his solo writing is beautifully idiomatic, exploiting the full range of the instrument with elegance and agility. They are some of the outstanding clarinet concertos of the early 19th century, comparable with those of Spohr, if not as distinguished as Weber's. Crusell ranks among the finest Finnish composers before Sibelius.

The Czech-born **Franz** (originally František) **Krommer** (1759–1831) spent most of his career in Vienna. Very prolific, he composed nine symphonies, nine violin concertos, 70 string quartets and many other chamber works for diverse combinations. Wind instruments feature prominently, his pieces for wind ensemble being his most popular. Among his concertante works are the Clarinet Concerto in E flat major Op.36 and two concertos for the much rarer combination of two clarinets: Opp. 35 and 91. All of these imaginative and often unpredictable works enhance the clarinet repertoire.

Carl Stamitz (1745–1801) – eldest son of the composer Johann Stamitz – was born in Mannheim. During his period as leader of the celebrated Mannheim Court Orchestra, they achieved wonderful standards of discipline and sophistication. He wrote over 50 symphonies, 38 symphonies concertantes (once a very fashionable genre), much chamber music and more than 60 concertos for many different instruments or instrumental combinations. More than ten of these concertos include the clarinet – mostly solo concertos but also a Double Clarinet Concerto and a Concerto for clarinet and bassoon, both in B flat major. These are recorded here with his Clarinet Concerto No.1 in F major, each work being in the established three-movement structure – fast, slow, fast.

The Italian **Saverio Mercadante** (1795–1870) made his name primarily as an operatic composer, composing around 90 works for the stage. He is historically important for his 'reform operas' – now

acknowledged as anticipating Verdi's developments – and for the attention he paid to orchestration. Among his compositions for soloist(s) and orchestra are clarinet concertos, a clarinet concertino and works in the *sinfonia concertante* genre, some of which include such combinations as two clarinets, flute and horn as obbligato instruments. The concertos are often characterised by a certain grandeur, as suggested by the *maestoso* in the tempo indications.

From the 1790s onwards, the German composer and prominent music publisher **Franz Anton Hoffmeister** (1754–1812) who oversaw the publication of works by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven (all of whom became good friends) started devoting more time to composition, producing more than 50 symphonies, numerous concertos (including 25 for flute), about ten operas and much chamber music. Among his solo works that include the clarinet are many chamber compositions, a Clarinet Concerto in B flat major and two symphonies concertantes with two clarinets.

The German virtuoso **Heinrich Baermann** (1784–1847), for whom Weber composed his clarinet works, wrote several pieces for his own instrument, including the *Conzertstück* in G minor, two concertinos and three sonatas for clarinet and orchestra (the third recorded here). Naturally, the clarinet writing is brilliant and idiomatic, while Baermann's orchestration sometimes shows a fondness for obbligato timpani parts.

Born into a family of successful businessmen, **Gerald Finzi** (1901–1956) had to be single-minded to pursue a musical career. Although of Jewish Italian ancestry, he developed into one of the most quintessentially English composers, his musical language generally introspective, unostentatious, yet distinctive. His relatively few orchestral, chamber and instrumental works are outnumbered by his word-settings, including dozens of songs and choral works. Finzi composed his Clarinet Concerto in C minor Op.31 (with string orchestra) to a commission from the 1949 Three Choirs Festival. Through his work as conductor of the Newbury String Players he developed an affinity for string writing, as may be heard in this concerto. The celebrated clarinetist Frederick Thurston gave the premiere on 9 September 1949 at Hereford Cathedral. Both this work and the Cello Concerto are probably the most frequently performed of Finzi's works.

The Irish composer **Charles Villiers Stanford** (1852–1924) would become one of the most influential composition teachers during his years at the Royal College of Music. He was also regarded as one of the leading figures in the so-called renaissance of British music. However, with the emergence of such major figures as Elgar and Vaughan Williams, Stanford's music became overshadowed. He completed nine operas, seven symphonies and many other orchestral and chamber works, but the only part of his output which is regularly performed is his Anglican church

music. Influenced by Brahms (true of Stanford's music generally), the occasionally performed Clarinet Concerto in A minor is an attractive addition to the repertoire.

The most distinguished and influential American composer of his generation, **Aaron Copland** (1900–1990) is most widely known for his ballet scores *Appalachian Spring*, *Rodeo* and *Billy the Kid* and for his *Fanfare for the Common Man*, but there are many facets to his musical personality, some uncompromising, others more obviously attractive. He composed his Clarinet Concerto in response to a commission from the jazz clarinetist Benny Goodman, a versatile musician who enjoyed performing Mozart and other classical composers. The best-remembered works he commissioned are not for jazz band or dance band, but are classical compositions involving a symphony orchestra or chamber ensemble. Two of the most outstanding are Bartók's *Contrasts* for clarinet, violin and piano, and Copland's Clarinet Concerto. Scored for clarinet, strings, harp and piano, Copland's jazz-influenced concerto was completed in 1948, but Copland revised it following Goodman's suggestions. The two movements are linked by a clarinet cadenza.

Denmark's greatest composer, **Carl Nielsen** (1865–1931), wrote his turbulent, profound Clarinet Concerto for Aage Oxenvad of the Copenhagen Wind Quintet. He intended to write a concerto for each member of the quintet, but lived to complete only those for flute and clarinet. Whereas Elgar had composed a series of character-sketches – 'my friends pictured within' – in his *Enigma Variations*, Nielsen extended this idea by writing an entire work based on the personality of one individual. The resulting Clarinet Concerto is arguably one of the greatest of 20th-century concertos for any instrument. The music of the Clarinet Concerto is continuous, with numerous tempo changes, while its mood ranges from aggressive, volatile or disturbing to deeply reflective and poignantly beautiful. Oxenvad was an irascible character, tending to unpredictably fly off the handle. The power of Nielsen's characterisation is most striking when anger subsides into heartbreaking tenderness or regret. The solo clarinet part is not only fiendishly difficult technically, it also demands an extremely wide expressive range and an ability to encompass sudden changes of mood.

The neglected Polish composer and virtuoso pianist **Alexandre Tansman** (1897–1986) lived in France for most of his life and was influenced by French neo-classical trends. He composed over 300 works, ranging from his nine symphonies, operas, ballets and oratorios, to film scores. His Clarinet Concerto (1957) has a finale entitled 'Cadenza e danza popolare (Alla polacca)', reminding us of his Polish origin. Accompanied by a chamber orchestra, the work is dedicated to the distinguished French clarinetist Louis Cahuzac.

Born in Hanau, near Frankfurt am Main, **Paul Hindemith** (1895–1963) was one of the most multi-faceted of 20th-century musicians, active as a violinist, viola player, theorist, teacher, administrator and conductor, in addition to composing a vast amount of music. In the 1930s he was commissioned to improve musical standards in Turkey, a task which he fulfilled with flair and enthusiasm. Hindemith's strong belief that a composer should justify his existence through practical usefulness is manifest in his contributions to the repertoires of many instruments whose solo potential is neglected. Among his chamber works are more than two dozen sonatas for instruments, including viola d'amore, double bass, bassoon, cor anglais, alto horn/saxophone, harp and tuba. He also composed concertos for violin, piano, viola, horn, organ and clarinet and for unusual combinations of solo instruments. His Clarinet Concerto of 1947, like Copland's, was commissioned by Benny Goodman. Hindemith composed most of this often virtuosic, four-movement work during a holiday in Switzerland. The premiere – 11 December 1950 – was given by Goodman with the Philadelphia Orchestra under Eugene Ormandy.

Gioachino Rossini (1792–1868) was the most sensationally successful operatic composer of his time. With their combination of fluent melodic gift and sparkling comedy, his operas intoxicated audiences. His work-rate was astonishing – nearly 40 operas in about 20 years – but then he took virtual early retirement, composing few works of major importance in his last four decades. Instrumental music features minimally in Rossini's list of works, but his delightful *Introduction, theme and variations for clarinet and orchestra*, composed when he was 18, is a brilliant showpiece with solo writing in the manner of a coloratura soprano.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847) may not immediately associated with the clarinet, but his early sonata is a fine work. He composed his two Concert Pieces for clarinet, basset horn and piano Opp.113 and 114 (1832 and 1833 respectively) for Heinrich Baermann and his son Carl. Because of their inclusion of the basset horn, the two pieces are rarely performed. Mendelssohn orchestrated the original piano accompaniment to the Concert Piece No.1 in F minor, whereas it is believed that Carl Baermann may have adapted the orchestral version of No.2 in D minor.

When Mendelssohn died, his compatriot and close friend **Julius Rietz** (1812–1877) took over from him as conductor of the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra. Rietz's Clarinet Concerto in G minor Op.29 shows some influence of Mendelssohn in the structure of three movements played without a break and the early entry of the soloist – both features of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto. Nevertheless, Rietz's fine concerto shows individuality, with a serene slow movement and a finale of infectious rhythmic character.
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