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The British clarinet school: Legacy and legend

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At the beginning of the twenty-first century, music surrounds us on a daily basis. Instant access to recordings and immediate comparisons of performances worldwide have become an integral part of our lives. Yet arguably there has been a heavy price to pay. In Mozart's day, major European cities such as Vienna and Prague boasted distinctive musical personalities; nowadays, even such a hitherto distinctive ensemble as the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra has assumed an international aura, with a less identifiable corporate sound. Opportunities provided by air travel have further encouraged such a process. Early recordings provide valuable evidence of what has been lost in terms of individuality and national styles, and these have increasingly been the subject of detailed research. A useful case study is provided by the British Clarinet School. "The Clarinet has long been considered by the whole Musical Profession as the most beautiful of wind instruments," remarked the great English clarinetist Thomas Willman in 1826 (p. 1). "That king of the reed instruments, the clarinet…," wrote his successor Henry Lazarus in 1881 (preface, p. 1). Since 1900 or so there has been aural evidence for these assertions. As one of Mozart's contemporaries put it, some musical subtleties cannot really be described—they must be heard.

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As recording has developed over the past century, so the clarinet itself has become more and more popular. The celebrated soloist Jack Brymer (1976), principal clarinet in the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO), remarked in the 1950s and again in the 1970s that everybody one met seemed either to play the clarinet, to want to play it, or to have once played it at school and given up. A decade ago, 46,000 children in the British state-school system were taking clarinet lessons of some sort, fewer than the violin, guitar, or the flute,

but a great deal more than the mere 3000 tenacious enough to grapple with the oboe.

Does the British Clarinet School have any meaningful identity? Some prominent musical figures have certainly thought so. In the early 1890s, George Bernard Shaw (1931) reckoned that with notable exceptions the German woodwind player was content with a cheaper tone than the English one. German clarinet reeds, he remarked, produced a strident and powerful tone that gave a passion and urgency that seemed ideal for Weber's *Freischütz*. But when it comes to the *Parsifal* Prelude or the second movement of Beethoven's Fourth Symphony, he wrote, "one misses the fine tone and dignified continence of the English fashion" (vol. I, p. 91). By the 1950s, Brymer (1979) was paying tribute to the work of three or four past generations of British clarinetists who were not content merely to sit in orchestras but were also students of human psychology and philosophy, and so were inspirational teachers. One of Brymer's celebrated predecessors in the LSO and professor at the Royal College of Music, Sidney Fell (1957), declared unequivocally in the 1950s that the British School was "still the leading one among musicians the world over" (p. 42). The great British clarinetist, Reginald Kell (1957, pp. 60-62), went rather further than that; he had lived in America for almost a decade and bemoaned the lack of imagination and inspiration among the wind players there. For him the absence of real individuality meant that all American orchestras sounded the same. In contrast, the exceptional imaginative and individual qualities of the finest British wind players made for an unrivalled level of achievement.

MAIN CONTRIBUTION

Individual distinctive musicality allied to mellowness of sound is arguably a hallmark of the British Clarinet School. The second half of the nineteenth century was dominated by Henry Lazarus, whose career lasted for almost 60 years up to his death in 1895. Shaw (1889) noted that "a phrase played by Mr. Lazarus always came, even from the unnoticed ranks of the woodwind at the opera, with a distinction and fine artistic feeling that aroused a longing for an orchestra of such players". The usual clarinet player, Shaw said, was stolid, mechanical, undistinguished, correct at best, vulgar at worst. Significantly, the great Bach scholar Philipp Spitta (1889) wrote: "Wind instruments are now out of fashion for concert playing, and one seldom hears anything on such occasions but the piano and violin, instead of the pleasing variety which used to prevail with so much advantage to art" (p. 426). At the dawn of recorded clarinet history appears the highly influential Spaniard Manuel

Gomez, who studied in Paris, arrived in London in 1888, and then became the LSO's first principal clarinet in 1904. Typically, he recorded short, light virtuoso pieces, often with operatic connections.

How each of us responds to Gomez may well depend on age and individual musical experience. But there is at least one other equally important factor. As inhabitants of the digital age, are we in fact over-concerned with surface detail as opposed to overall characterization of the music? In 1904, there was no editing of any kind to feed our obsession with technical accuracy. Overall, Gomez emerges with credit from his recorded legacy, his firm tone allied to secure technique and no more than a hint of the sharpness that has been the bugbear of many a clarinet performance throughout history.

The great English virtuoso Charles Draper, born in 1869, made early records of similar material, including variations on "Home sweet home" on a wax cylinder from ca. 1901-03. In the early years of the century Draper was Elgar's favorite clarinetist, and he inscribed Draper's name in his scores whenever important clarinet passages appeared. The Brahms Clarinet Quintet was often played in Britain by its dedicatee Richard Mühlfeld in the years before his untimely death in 1907. When he heard Draper play the piece in London he was generous enough to observe that Draper's interpretation had revealed subtleties within the work that he himself had not previously observed. In these circumstances Draper's 1917 recording of abridged versions of the first two movements carries an unusual authority. His playing is epic and dramatic, providing a valuable link back to the nineteenth century.

It now seems extraordinary that Mozart's Clarinet Concerto did not feature at all in London's Philharmonic Society concerts between 1838 and 1916. Indeed, in the latter year the amateur clarinetist Oscar Street (1916) claimed only to have heard one complete performance, by Charles Draper in the early days of the Beecham Orchestra. It fell to Draper's pupil and nephew Haydn Draper in 1929 to make the first recording of the Mozart Concerto.

Haydn Draper's fellow pupil Frederick Thurston was himself a great teacher, and in his own case, the relationship between legacy and legend is especially complex. Thurston was someone for whom each performance was a fresh event, and he hated the sterile procedure of recording. He once wrote:

> ...I should be on somewhat dangerous ground if I ventured to say that perhaps a higher degree of musicianship is required from players of woodwind instruments than from those who play, for instance, the violin. However, it may be mentioned that at all parts of the register, absolute control of intonation depends on the subtle muscles of the lips and the breathing tract; changes in temperature, and the like, affect the instru-

> ment in a manner that the string player is spared, and therefore woodwind instrumentalists must be alert to the finest shades of intonation all the time they are playing (Thurston, 1948, p. 38).

Notwithstanding his dislike of recording, Thurston inspired a huge number of composers to write for the clarinet, including Malcolm Arnold, Bax, Bliss, Howells, Ireland, Lutyens, Maconchy, and Rawsthorne. In the light of Thurston's influence, it is salutary to reflect that in the early part of the twentieth century the clarinet was widely regarded as an unsatisfactory instrument for sonatas, owing to its comparative inflexibility and somewhat monotonous tone-color. One critic asserted that "even Brahms could do nothing with it" (Street, 1916, p. 113). A 1938 *Radio Times* article began: "Apart from the foxy-looking little men who patiently play the instrument at street corners and apart from the inimitable Mr. Benny Goodman...one seldom gets the chance of hearing the clarinet as a solo instrument" (Bradbury and King, 2001, p. 5). Thurston changed all that, as can be heard (for example) in the live BBC broadcast of Ireland's *Fantasy-Sonata* with the composer, dating from 1948.

The broadcast shows Ireland's piano playing to be eloquent in both left and right hands, while Thurston projects the work with strength and vitality. Clearly, the surface of the clarinet line does not have the polish we have come to expect nowadays, but neither does the effect of the microphone balance. The whole piece, like others associated with Thurston, was a huge technical challenge at the time. Its quality was immediately recognized, however. The *News Chronicle* reviewer stated that he had never imagined that clarinet and piano could be combined so satisfactorily; nor that (by a mixture of tact and daring) they could form such an exciting ensemble (cited in Bradbury and King, 2001, p. 7).

Another clarinetist who won praise for his tuning was the legendary Reginald Kell. He was especially proud of a *New York Times* review that described him as "one of the greatest Mozart interpreters of our time, on any instrument" (Kell, 1957, p. 57). All of his Mozart recordings benefit from his detailed small-scale phrasing, although his rubato certainly owes a great deal to the Drapers, while being intensified in a very personal way. Kell's discography was wide-ranging (extending into the LP era), but generally not matching Thurston's contemporary interests. It was his prominent vibrato, inspired by Léon Goossens's rich oboe sound, that proved especially controversial. Kell felt ostracized by colleagues at Covent Garden in the 1930s, when Wilhelm Furtwängler told him during a rehearsal of *Tristan* that he was the first clarinetist he had ever heard who played from the heart. Kell had once been a violinist himself; when he heard Kreisler, Casals, or the vibrancy of a singer

like Flagstad, he simply could not imagine persevering with a naïve clarinet sound as pure as a lily. But on moving to the USA in the late 1940s, he met with a mixed reception. The American clarinetist Robert Willaman (1954) gives some idea why; he described vibrato as originating on the saxophone in dance bands around 1920, as a palliative for crude tone production. “It may be that vibrato is a real improvement. Some people put sugar on ice cream. A great many do not and never will” (p. 246).

Other players drew upon both Kell and Thurston to produce an instantly recognizable and individual presence. In this respect, few could rival the fluency of Gervase de Peyer. “His style is suave and confident” wrote *The New Grove* (Weston, 1980, p. 379) and not many would argue with that on hearing his concerto and recital discs of the early 1960s. A typical example is de Peyer in the elevated company of Rostropovich and Britten at the 1964 Aldeburgh Festival, his vocalized vibrato matching the singing cello to perfection. De Peyer was a much recorded clarinetist, especially with the Melos Ensemble. At the end of the 1960s, he gave some stunning performances of the radical and innovative Clarinet Concerto by Thea Musgrave, before taking Kell’s route and settling in the USA—a move that inevitably diminished his influence in Britain.

IMPLICATIONS

New generations of British clarinetists continue to emerge in succession to the figures considered in this article. French clarinets now dominate the British market. And in our digital age within a global village, solo and orchestral sound-worlds are surely becoming increasingly international and less identifiable? It seems inevitable that the distinctiveness of national schools of performance will suffer a continued decline; in these circumstances, early recordings provide an especially valuable source of evidence for a more colorful past.

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