

LISTENING TO MUSIC: PEOPLE, PRACTICES AND EXPERIENCES

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Listening and performing: experiences of twentieth-century British wind players

Ingrid E. Pearson

Ingrid Pearson performs with major UK period ensembles, while also maintaining a profile as a modern clarinettist. An interest in performance practice brought her to the UK from Australia to undertake doctoral studies. In 2005 Ingrid joined the professoriate at London's Royal College of Music (RCM) and is currently the RCM's Research Fellow in Performance Practice. This role allows her a broad remit of activities across theory and practice. Ingrid's research has been supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and the Galpin Society. Her publications appear in English, Chinese, German and Spanish.

Abstract

Accounts of life in the music profession by orchestral woodwind players have often been neglected in favour of didactic and aural sources. While scholars have interrogated recorded performances, evidence from the players themselves is vital in understanding the profession as a whole and thus the bigger picture. Reflecting on material gathered for [The Listening Experience Database \(LED\)](#), particularly by the clarinettist Jack Brymer (1915–2003), we appreciate the importance of a player's listening in shaping their performing practices. Brymer was primarily a *listener*, and a clarinettist only second. His listening to the playing of the oboist Léon Goossens (1897–1988) with its prominent use of vibrato became profoundly important to Brymer and to subsequent generations.

In examining contemporary attitudes towards vibrato, we realise that Brymer's use of the effect was quite controversial for its time. Indeed, the importance of the listening

experience is reflected in many accounts by woodwind players whose experiences are included in LED. These musicians, among the first for whom the aural and sonic experience of listening to a recording or broadcast began to resemble the sound itself, enjoyed careers before the era of globalisation. While technological advances have made music more easily accessible, they have also already eroded, and sometimes even eradicated, individual or regional or national characteristics and performing practices.

Introduction

Scholarly attention to the area of musical listening has blossomed since the late 1990s, when at least four international journals independently devoted an issue to the subject.¹ In recognising the value of musicians' own accounts of listening and of performing, LED has facilitated access to these materials, helping us to fill in some of the gaps left by recordings, themselves the object of much fruitful research.² For many musicians, recordings provided access to repertoire and to musicians and also therefore to performing practices that they would not otherwise have been able to experience. This complemented the listening they did in the act of live performance, to themselves and to their fellow musicians. Furthermore, in making recordings these performers were also able to interrogate their own practices in a way that had been unthinkable a generation before.

This chapter discusses evidence from prominent British wind players of the twentieth century, including clarinettists Jack Brymer (1915–2003) and Reginald Kell (1906–1981) and the oboist Léon Goossens (1897–1988), focusing particularly on their pioneering and often controversial use of vibrato.³ In detailing approaches to performance and to listening, these fascinating, surprising and often entertaining reports allow us to understand the changing nature of the music profession during the formative years of major UK musical institutions such as the then Covent Garden Opera Company, the London Philharmonic Orchestra (LPO), the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (RPO) and the BBC Symphony Orchestra. These testimonies also confirm Leon Botstein's assertion that 'the historical significance of music, or, rather, the significance of music in history, rests not so much with its creators and performers but with amateurs and those who heard and listened'.⁴ Indeed, as Rob C. Wegman argues:

the question of listening does seem to offer a constructive way out of the current debate between work- and author-centred approaches and their critiques, a debate that is in danger of

becoming increasingly stale.⁵ While musicological attention focused on listening often differentiates between 'hearing' and 'listening', most players whose experiences have been documented use these terms interchangeably. Both these activities are in fact reflexive and dialectic acts, and elsewhere Ian Cross has argued that 'musical listening can be interpreted as containing residues of action and interaction'.⁶ The experiences of twentieth-century British woodwind players certainly confirms these observations and their value lies in their location within 'the broader category of musical experience'.⁷ The listening undertaken by Brymer and his colleagues was very much a part of a more holistic musical experience, indeed one with the overtly practical outcome of either a performance or a recorded performance. There is not space here to interrogate what Georgina Born describes as:

the considerable methodological and conceptual challenges posed by the focus on listening as a changing relation or mediation between subjects and objects.⁸

Nonetheless, it is appropriate to consider three anthropological and sociological perspectives she offers.⁹ The first of these unsettles received notions of the delineated roles of composer, performer and listener.¹⁰ The second positions listeners as cultural consumers, shaped by their gender, age, social class and ethnicity, and it is these factors which shape their listening.¹¹ A third perspective considers the impact of recording and of electronic and digital technologies in mediating the musical experience provided by listening.¹² The woodwind players whose experiences are included in LED functioned as both performer and listener, their performances shaping their listening and vice versa. Many were middle-class males of Caucasian ethnicity, but increasing numbers of women were able to enjoy careers as professional orchestral wind players. And, finally, while not in the region of the fidelity we enjoy in the twenty-first century, these players were among the first for whom the aural and sonic experience of listening to a recording or broadcast began to resemble the sound itself. They were playing and listening before the era of globalisation, which, through technological advances, has certainly made music more easily accessible, but has also already eroded, and sometimes even eradicated, individual, regional and national characteristics and performing practices.

Jack Brymer, Léon Goossens and Reginald Kell

Born in 1915, Brymer was largely a self-taught player. His musical ability and instincts were fundamentally shaped by the amateur bands and orchestras of Tyneside and County Durham during the 1920s, as both performer and listener, as well as by other musicians Brymer heard via radio broadcasts and gramophone records. Recalling listening experiences from his formative years as a clarinettist, Brymer mentions:

... the great clarinettists of the day – Charles Draper, his nephew Haydn Draper and Frederick Thurston and well as Reginald Kell would have been astounded at the things they taught me, without a penny piece changing hands. I had no desire to be a carbon copy of any of them, fortunately.¹³

In July 1947 when Brymer was 32 years old he received an invitation via telephone from Sir Thomas Beecham, founder and conductor of the RPO, to play to him. Beecham enjoyed that particular listening experience to the extent that he immediately appointed Brymer the RPO's principal clarinet, to replace Reginald Kell. Following the RPO, Brymer was co-principal of the BBC SO from 1963 to 1972 and then principal of the London Symphony Orchestra (LSO) from 1972 to 1986.

During his life he recorded and broadcast orchestral, solo and chamber music.¹⁴ Brymer's obituary in *The Times* following his death in 2003 reported that:

in the 30 or so years during which Brymer was at the height of his powers, few could rival him for solid technique, golden tone and superior, undogmatic musicianship.¹⁵

Brymer's 1962 recording of Mozart's Adagio K411 for two clarinets and three basset horns demonstrates his delicate use of vibrato, an important but not the only audible characteristic of his finely-nuanced playing.¹⁶ Brymer is joined by Thomas Kelly, Stephen Trier, Walter Lear and Wilfred Hambleton. As one situated outside any pedagogical lineage, real or perceived, Brymer's playing was truly a synthesis of *the sounds he heard* or, to put it another way, *of his listening*. Despite the rapid advances in recording technology he witnessed during his lifetime, Brymer's music-making was characterised by spontaneity and finesse.

Brymer became a colleague and friend of the oboist Léon Goossens in the years following World War Two. However, Brymer had long been acquainted with, and influenced by, Goossens, as he recalled in an interview in 1991:

My affection for him started at the age of thirteen when I heard him play Ravel's Habañéra...¹⁷ In that special moment I became aware of the sounds of the Spanish night, of warmth and mystery and a hint of the distant flamenco singing. It was an equal revelation every time thereafter when I heard him perform either on radio or on record. He became my idol and ... I went to hear him as often as I could. The first time was in an LPO concert in 1933.¹⁸ Benvenuto Cellini overture and the Mozart Sinfonia Concertante for Oboe, Clarinet, Horn and Bassoon showed off the virtuosity of the woodwind and the majesty of the orchestral balance that Beecham was able to achieve.¹⁹ There was a tremendous crystallisation with Léon right in the middle, the central figure in the orchestra despite other great players...²⁰

Eighteen years Brymer's senior, Goossens had been born in 1897, into a musical family.²¹ He studied at the Royal College of Music, as did his brother Eugene (1893–1962) a conductor and composer, his harpist sisters Marie (1894–1991) and Sidonie (1899–2004) and his brother Adolphe (1896–1916), who played the French horn.²² Léon Goossens's RCM professor, William Malsch (1855–1924), taught at all four London conservatoires at the same time, from the late nineteenth into the turn of the twentieth century, and through this pedagogical lineage was able to exert a significant influence on the next generation of oboists.²³

To experience something of the Goossens sound we may refer to his 1931 recording with the pianist Clarence Raybould (1886–1972) in an arrangement of The Swan from Camille Saint-Saëns's Carnival of the Animals.²⁴ The sound for which Goossens is still remembered today uses a prominent but varying vibrato and is characterised by a warmth unlike that of his predecessors, assisted by a control of breathing which allowed him to weave long melodic lines with ease.²⁵ These characteristics were admired by Goossens's pupils Helen Gaskell (1906–2002), Evelyn Rothwell (1911–2008), Natalie James (1909–2008) and Joy Boughton (1913–1963), who sought actively to emulate their teacher's sound.²⁶

Brymer and Goossens first performed together in 1951, in a work by Darius Milhaud for a BBC Thursday concert. The clarinettist recalled that Goossens 'played with absolute

majesty and complete dedication'.²⁷ Brymer treasured the recordings of Russian music they both made with the RPO in 1954 and of the visiting conductor Artur Rodziński (1892–1958), when Goossens was deputising for an indisposed Terence McDonagh (1908–1986).²⁸ As a person, Brymer remembered that Goossens was:

*... incredibly adaptable; it's difficult for some players to readjust to orchestral playing after a solo career but he had no problems. He was never a pompous individual; he never threw his weight about as a colleague. He was always willing to discuss rather than override anyone's opinion. He was very well tempered and humorous.*²⁹

Goossens co-authored a monograph on the oboe with Edwin Roxburgh (b. 1937), which was published in 1977. Describing his first orchestral position, as principal oboe in the Queen's Hall Orchestra,³⁰ Goossens recalls:

*Those first days... represented for me a period of isolation from the prevalent style of sound reproduction. I suffered a great deal of abuse and jibing from other players at this time for persisting with my own concept of a beautiful oboe sound incorporating vibrato as an essential aspect of its singing quality. However, critics were favourably disposed and conductors liked it; so my confidence in the approach was ultimately justified.*³¹

Goossens later explains that:

*If all the physical conditions of good playing along with freedom from tensions are achieved, vibrato becomes an expressive inflection of musical personality and sensibility.*³²

And finally:

*There are an infinite number of possibilities which affect the interpretation of a piece. The freshness of each performance can only be maintained if the artist is continually exploring alternative avenues of nuance and expression. Discriminating use of vibrato can be the most valuable of assets in these discoveries.*³³

The clarinettist Reginald Kell had experienced Goossens's distinctive and effective sound, with its prominent and varied use of vibrato, first-hand when, in 1932, both

became principals in Beecham's LPO in 1932. They were colleagues until Kell left in 1936/7 to join the LSO. By the time of his emigration to the USA in 1948, Kell had held principal positions in most of the British orchestras. We recall that Brymer had in fact succeeded Kell in the RPO so the two had never been colleagues. Kell's 1953 recording of the first of Schumann's Fantasy Pieces op. 73, with the pianist Joel Rosen, typifies his idiosyncratic approach, particularly in terms of tempo rubato and timbre.³⁴ By moving to the USA at the height of his career, ostensibly to concentrate on solo and chamber repertoire, Kell was able to establish and consolidate his reputation on both sides of the Atlantic, a fact which may also account for his position as the most well-documented British clarinettist to play with vibrato in the early twentieth century.

Listening to wind playing

Jack Brymer lived at a time when the recording industry was enjoying a golden age, an era before globalisation began to homogenise national performance practices and erode idiosyncrasies. The ease with which we are now able to access so much music, and the fidelity of digital recordings, can both easily be taken for granted.³⁵ Robert Philip suggests that matters of competence and those of style account for changes in orchestral woodwind playing, as heard in recordings made during the course of the twentieth century.³⁶ And, specifically as regards wind playing in London orchestras between 1909 and 1939, Emily Worthington observes how:

*the advent of recording and broadcasting helped to facilitate the expression of changing musical aesthetics in the realm of orchestral wind playing.*³⁷

Accounts of British wind sections up to the immediate post-war years have often commented on the instability of the intonation in the section as a whole, but as Philip rightly comments 'the development of woodwind-playing involves more than just rising standards'.³⁸ He continues:

*The styles of individual instruments, and the concept of how they should blend together, changed throughout the twentieth century.*³⁹

Philip explains that:

Over the twentieth century British woodwind-playing underwent great change. It began with the appointment of a Belgian oboist, Henri de Busscher,⁴⁰ to succeed Malsch in the Queen's Hall Orchestra. De Busscher played with greater delicacy and flexibility than Malsch, and with a French-style vibrato. It was he who inspired Léon Goossens... Goossens in turn influenced other woodwind players to play more flexibly and with vibrato.⁴¹

A growing awareness of the role of individual critical listening during Brymer's formative years appears in 1923 in Gustave Langenus's advice to 'the ambitious young player', to whom he suggests imagining an audience listening to their practice.⁴² The following comment published fifteen years later, in *The Radio Times* in 1938, serves to remind us how times have changed:

Apart from the foxy-looking little men who patiently play the instrument at street corners and from the inimitable Mr. Benny Goodman ("Swing low, sweet clarinet"), who broadcast a few weeks ago, one seldom get a chance of hearing the clarinet as a solo instrument.⁴³

This opinion was confirmed by Rendall some fourteen years later:

It is only within the last thirty-five years or so that the clarinet has really come into its own. This is in the writer's opinion due largely to broadcasting. No instrument lends itself better to recording or is more frequently heard upon the air; there is little doubt that many of its present devotees first heard its voice upon the ether and succumbed to its charm... Every school of playing has its own particular character, its own peculiar excellence... Each makes its own contribution. Fortunately the wireless and the gramophone have made it possible to hear them all... They should do much to mould our taste.⁴⁴

In his *Clarinet Technique*, first published in 1956 shortly after his death, Frederick Thurston (1901–53) acknowledges the importance of the listening experience:

All the books, all the articles and technical advice in the world are of little note unless you have in your 'mind's ear' the particular sound you wish to make. Presumably you will have decided this by listening to various fine players, if possible at public

*performances, because even nowadays the radio and the gramophone cannot reproduce tone quality completely faithfully.*⁴⁵

Clarinetist Gervase de Peyer (1926–2017) also advocated this type of inner listening, remarking in 1957 that if the student cultivates:

*a clear ideal of good tone and always keeps this in his ‘mental ear’, he will... almost subconsciously develop the means to produce it.*⁴⁶

In 1987 Brymer recounted that, as an orchestral clarinetist becomes more experienced, he has also:

*developed the ability to listen while playing, which is his greatest achievement... this may sound simple, but it has its difficulties. You may not always be able to hear everything you need... In spite of all this, everything finally sorts itself out, and that all-important skill, the ability to hear the whole score from the inside, with a sense of balance which makes it intelligible from outside, is achieved.*⁴⁷

And finally:

*A generation ago this was a question of instinct... young people are not only better taught than their fathers and mothers, and play on better instruments; they have also heard more, and absorbed more of the message of music... These are old heads on their young shoulders because they have learnt to listen.*⁴⁸

Rather curiously, at the current time, many players of historical clarinets have commissioned copies of Richard Mühlfeld’s rather old-fashioned Ottensteiner instruments, on which they not only play all of Brahms’s music for the clarinet but much Teutonic repertoire written between c. 1850 and 1910. The same players, however, fail to consider the evidence that Mühlfeld himself played with vibrato.⁴⁹ As Brymer remarks:

It seems scarcely likely that, for over two hundred years, clarinetists should have failed to respond to, and at least to attempt to answer the shapes of phrases and the style of playing

which they must have heard around them, both instrumentally and vocally.⁵⁰

Reconciling documentary accounts of vibrato and wind playing

It is surprising to note that the majority of English-language publications for and about the clarinet provide no information on vibrato. Furthermore, scant documentary evidence exists in support of its use among players of art music.⁵¹ Nonetheless, we can discern something of the changing attitude towards clarinet vibrato during the lifetimes of Jack Brymer and Léon Goossens from the various editions of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* and its successor *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*.⁵² It is also helpful to reconcile these with commentaries by players themselves, many of which emphasise the role of a player's critical listening in the judicious, intelligent and musical use of vibrato.

Dating from 1893 Harry Deacon's article on vibrato, published in the first edition of *Grove*, mentions that:

*It is sometimes heard on the flute or cornet. When the vibrato is really an emotional thrill it can be highly effective... but when, as is too often the case, it degenerates into a mannerism, its effect is either painful, ridiculous, or nauseous, entirely opposed to good taste and common sense, and to be severely reprehended in all students whether of vocal or instrumental music.*⁵³

Remembered as a singing teacher and piano accompanist who worked mostly in London, Deacon died suddenly in 1890 at the age of 68 and did not therefore live to see the publication of *Grove's Dictionary*.⁵⁴ While capturing something of the sound world into which Léon Goossens was born, we must consider the possibility that vibrato was more commonly used than Deacon's listening experiences had led him to believe. Despite the addition of new material on vibrato in practice by Olga Racster, *Grove's* second edition from 1910 is largely a repetition of information from the first.⁵⁵ That this information is written almost exclusively from a string player's point of view is not surprising given that Racster had been a pupil of Eugène Ysaÿe.⁵⁶ By this time the 13 year old Léon Goossens had already made his debut as a professional oboist, and was to commence lessons with Malsch the following year.

One of the earliest didactic works to mention clarinet vibrato is Gustave Langenus's 1917 translation of Carl Baermann's 1861 *Vollständige Clarinett-Schule*.⁵⁷ While no mention of vibrato appears in Baermann's original, Langenus describes the effect as 'a wavering tone-effect, which should be sparingly used'.⁵⁸ By 1923, with the publication of his own clarinet tutor Langenus advises the player studiously to avoid vibrato, which he considered 'extremely obnoxious on any wind instrument' and a hindrance to maintaining the clarinet's 'pure, clear and steady' tone.⁵⁹ However, it could be tolerated to enhance the tone 'when playing very loudly' or for notes in the altissimo register.⁶⁰ Robert Philip notes a similar restraint among string players until the 1920s.⁶¹

In the third edition of *Grove* from 1928 Racster's contribution is shorter, although instrumental and vocal vibrato are discussed separately.⁶² The gradual adoption of string vibrato is echoed by remarks from the editor Henry Colles, no doubt aware that Deacon's original commentary on vibrato had certainly begun to age.⁶³ Colles reports that the effect 'belongs essentially to the art of the string-player' and is 'obtainable to a limited extent on wind instruments, notably the flute and cornet...'.⁶⁴ By this time Goossens had gained valuable orchestral experience as principal oboe in the Queen's Hall Orchestra, and life experience as a soldier in World War One. He was teaching at both the RCM and the Royal Academy of Music, and had joined the orchestra at Covent Garden. The teenage Brymer had been teaching himself the clarinet for at least eight years and, as a member of the cadets, had performed with the band of the 1st Battalion of the Durham Light Infantry. At the age of 13 Brymer joined a local amateur orchestra in the town of Tynemouth, journeying each week across the river Tyne by ferry. He later recalled the value of this encounter for bringing him into contact with 'the glories of Beethoven and Mozart'.⁶⁵

The fourth edition of *Grove's Dictionary* from 1940 reprints the vibrato entry from the third edition verbatim, no doubt due to the exigencies of wartime. By this time Goossens had been a member of the LPO since its foundation in 1932 and was establishing an international reputation, through live performances, broadcasts and recordings. In contrast, 24 year old Brymer, having spent some time in his intended profession as a school teacher, was now Corporal Brymer in the RAF. Based in Morecambe, on the north-west coast of England, Brymer's work as a physical training instructor also allowed him to maintain his performing activities with local dance bands and in chamber music. For string players and singers, vibrato was no longer a timbral ornament but an integral part of technique.⁶⁶

Motivated by his desire to impart his practical knowledge towards the end of his performing career, the American clarinettist Robert Willaman (1893–1980) published

two monographs on the clarinet, in 1949 and 1954. Willaman enjoyed a substantial freelance career with many of the leading New York-based ensembles across popular and art musics.⁶⁷ His first book, one of the earliest English-language monographs on the clarinet, considers vibrato exclusively a jazz technique, and a ‘radical departure from ordinary methods of playing’.⁶⁸ Willaman views the device as ‘a matter of taste’, which can be varied in width and speed, ultimately to obtain a homogenous reed timbre within the ensemble.⁶⁹ Nonetheless, by the early 1950s practices and attitudes concerning clarinet vibrato had changed to the extent that Willaman’s 1954 revision of his book devotes a whole chapter to the subject. He defines vibrato as:

*... the rhythmic interruption of the mechanical uniformity of a musical tone. The need for or desirability of it is in direct ratio to this uniformity, which can result in monotony.*⁷⁰

This confirms that both performers and listeners had outgrown a straight clarinet tone. Since the 1920s jazz saxophonists and their audiences had been accustomed to the presence of vibrato, which was used to mitigate against the sax’s smaller range as well as to add timbral contrast. When these players ‘migrated en masse to the clarinet’ they continued to use vibrato.⁷¹ Willaman’s performing career had embraced a wide range of musical styles. He esteemed players who were similarly versatile in employing ‘a straight pure “concert” tone’ in art music, although he believed that ‘the need for vibrato in the clarinet tone is not very great’.⁷² He continues:

*At best, a reed tone needs only the slightest pulsation, either of continuity or of quality to relieve any sense of monotony.*⁷³

Willaman’s closing remarks on vibrato leave the reader in no doubt where his preference lies, despite the prevalence of the effect in performances on most other wind instruments by the mid-twentieth century:

*It may be that vibrato is a real improvement. Some people put sugar on ice cream. A great many do not and never will.*⁷⁴

A contemporary account from the Belgian émigré, the 72 year old Langenus, distinguishes between saxophone and clarinet vibrato. While Langenus remains unconvinced by the latter he acknowledges that:

... when the composer tells you to play molto espressivo, then the tone must glow with warmth. To obtain this effect most singers

and players obtain the vibrato from the diaphragm. Others get it through motion of the glottis, throat, or jaw.⁷⁵

Across the pond, in the UK attitudes to clarinet vibrato remained ‘controversial’, although the technique was a preoccupation particularly among players of art music.⁷⁶

Like earlier commentators, Rendall concedes that:

It is of course firstly and lastly a matter of taste in both player and listener. If vibrato is used at all, it is hardly necessary to say that it must be used sparingly and with great discretion. Excessive, even regular use of it cannot but offend in calling to mind the worst excesses of jazz technique and of the theatre organ. Other obvious dangers are damage to purity of tone and particularly to accuracy of intonation and to the musical line in classical music ... It may be observed not infrequently in military music when many clarinets are playing together in unison. It is not to be encouraged, however, in the concert hall.⁷⁷

A more balanced and realistic account of the popularity of vibrato and the role of a practitioner’s own listening appears in a contemporary account by oboist Evelyn Rothwell, a former pupil of Goossens’s. Rothwell writes:

*...the use of vibrato has become widely accepted during recent years. Its detractors claim that it destroys the truly characteristic sound of the oboe and prevents it blending well with other instruments in the orchestra. Its advocates feel, I think quite rightly, that a vibrato, **wisely** used, only enhances the natural tone of the instrument.⁷⁸*

She continues:

A good vibrato should liven the tone as the music demands, but using too much vibrato (or too wide a vibrato) may make the oboe player sound like a second-rate violinist playing cheap café music... it can easily be overdone, particularly in the orchestra when you are playing (and should be blending) with other instruments. Vibrato must be used and varied intelligently and musically... Listen most critically to yourself...⁷⁹

Robert Donington's vibrato article for the fifth and final edition of *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* is newly-written, prioritising historical primary source materials, reflecting the author's expertise in this area. Published in 1954, it is divided into three parts, discussing string, wind and vocal vibrato. Apart from the organ, the flute is the only non-string instrument mentioned, and only in an historical context.⁸⁰ At this time Goossens was pursuing a solo career and Brymer was firmly established as principal clarinet of the RPO, including regular appearances at the Edinburgh Festival, the Glyndebourne Festival and in concerts of the Royal Philharmonic Society.

In the mid-1950s Alphonse Leduc reissued Hyacinthe Klosé's 1843 *Méthode Complète de Clarinette*, with text in French and English.⁸¹ Remarkably, this publication is the first of Klosé's tutors to mention clarinet vibrato.⁸² This is even more surprising, given the prominence of a fast vibrato in recordings by French clarinetists from about 1920.⁸³ This mid-twentieth-century edition of Klosé also likens clarinet vibrato to that produced by strings, describing it as:

*a kind of undulating sound, which, added to its constituent vibrations, gives it a particular intensity and expressiveness... It is used in expressive phrases which demand a sonority touched with emotion. Vibrato, the subject of special practice, should never go as far as bleating.*⁸⁴

Perhaps we should read these remarks as an attempt to dissuade French clarinetists of the time against the fast vibrato of some of their predecessors.⁸⁵ This apparent disjunction between printed sources and listening experiences, however, reminds us of the need to reconcile the widest possible range of sources in understanding performing practices of the past.

Jack Brymer's own monograph on the clarinet was published in 1976.⁸⁶ In this work and two further publications Brymer reflects on his life in music, providing a particularly fulsome commentary on his career with the RPO, the BBC SO and the LSO.⁸⁷ Brymer's remarks on vibrato were informed by a lifetime's practical music-making and a belief in the effect as an expressive device, recognising its use by flautists and violinists, and to a lesser extent by oboists and bassoonists. For Brymer, vibrato was a means by which he transmitted his 'enjoyment as a performer'.⁸⁸ He identifies two reasons for its neglect among clarinetists, citing a belief in the clarinet's ability to:

... depict the sort of cool, flawless beauty of a marble statue or a piece of perfectly polished wood. The pure sound has a

fascination which makes one think at times that the slightest dimple on its surface would be a blemish...⁸⁹

The second reason concerns his dissatisfaction with the manner in which jazz players have used vibrato.⁹⁰ Brymer continues:

Whichever method is used, one thing seems certain – it should not be used all the time, nor should it be switched on and off like the vox humana stop of an organ. In fact, although it must be very much under the control of the player, in the end it should be so much a part of his technique that he is not aware... The choice should in fact.. be ... dictated by the music, out of which it must grow naturally, or not at all.⁹¹

In acknowledging the role of a player's listening, Brymer's comments remind us of the impact of the advent of recorded sound for players of his generation, remarking:

The player himself, in these days of electronic marvels, may be surprised at the absence or presence of vibrato in the recording he has just made, because he was thinking only of the music as he played. He would be wise to ponder before making a decision to alter his first impulse, because such studied decisions can sound what they are – the result of cogitation rather than instinct.⁹²

Obviously a musician who placed a high value on intuition, the practically-minded Brymer acknowledges the role of vibrato in correcting intonation. His connection between a lack of clarinet vibrato among clarinetists in art-music repertoires and its prevalence among jazz players is confirmed by listening to recordings made in the first half of the twentieth century.

In *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, published in 1980, Donington expands on his previous article on vibrato while still prioritising an historical approach.⁹³ Given the overwhelming evidence of the frequent use of vibrato by wind players in performances, recordings and broadcasts since the middle of the twentieth century, Donington's account does not accurately represent musical practices. Furthermore, its bias against non-art music is surprising for the time. While Goossens, aged 83, had retired from teaching at this time, he was still performing. The 65 year old Brymer was half-way through his tenure as principal clarinet of the LSO. He was about

to take up a teaching post at the then Guildhall School of Music, following similar positions at the RAM and the Royal Military School of Music, Kneller Hall.

In 2001, with the second edition of the *New Grove Dictionary*, a more balanced and comprehensive article on vibrato by Greta Moens-Haenen observes that vibrato was ‘accepted as an ornament until the first quarter of the twentieth century when its continuous use gradually became the norm.’⁹⁴ Nonetheless, she reminds us that vibrato is still eschewed by many clarinetists, as well as horn players and exponents of the Viennese oboe.⁹⁵ In the light of these remarks, we could argue that Jack Brymer managed to combine the predominant British woodwind sounds of his era, that is, the somewhat self-effacing, straight-toned playing of Frederick Thurston,⁹⁶ the more rhythmically-liberal and timbrally-colourful playing of Léon Goossens and a similar approach to the clarinet manifest in performances by Reginald Kell with a prominent use of vibrato.

Conclusion

It could be claimed that by 1890, with the existence of three music institutions in London alone, an identifiably English if not British clarinet school had emerged.⁹⁷ And, by 1947 when Brymer joined the RPO, the majority of orchestral clarinetists, based in or emanating from the UK, were performing on Boehm-system instruments. Brymer himself used the *Symphony 10-10* model, made in London by the Boosey & Hawkes firm for about 50 years from the early 1930s.⁹⁸ Nonetheless, claims for a national clarinet school have yet sufficiently to reconcile the differing approaches of Brymer and his contemporaries Thurston and Kell. It seems more likely that any such tradition has been invented, in order to mitigate against an increasing homogenisation of style, a result of the effects of globalisation.⁹⁹ It seems more likely that Brymer was able to synthesise the sounds around him to create an engaging and sensitive style, because he was firstly and foremostly a *listener*, and a clarinetist only second.

The importance of his listening experiences in shaping Brymer’s musical practices also allows us to appreciate his use of vibrato, a controversial performance practice which still divides clarinetists today. Vibrato, as with most performance practices, in particular western art repertoires, continues to be employed according to each player’s taste and intuition, reflecting the priorities of each era. As an expressive device it relies on the player exercising a judgement about its suitability for the particular music concerned. While there is little doubt that the advent and impact of recording technology on the musicians themselves is partly responsible for the emergence of a

homogenised international style of vibrato, most of the wind players discussed here were not exponents of continuous vibrato. By ensuring its judicious use, players such as Goossens and Brymer were helping to maintain the expressive potential of vibrato. Furthermore, in enhancing a player's own musical personality and sensitivity vibrato enabled some to make their mark as an individual and a non-conformist.

For mid-twentieth-century commentators, including Willaman and Rothwell, the subject of vibrato allows them deliberately to distance art music from jazz. Perhaps this reflects an underlying bias towards the type of training and education needed to become a leading orchestral musician at this time, against a tradition of auto-didacts and more relaxed approaches to musical literacy and the realisation of the score.

In conclusion, we should let the music speak for itself by listening to Jack Brymer in the opening of the third movement, *Andante*, of Mily Balakirev's Symphony No. 1 in C. This recording, with the RPO under Sir Thomas Beecham, was made in Studio One at Abbey Road in November and December 1955, and was produced by Lawrance Collingwood.

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 **PRACTITIONER LISTENING**

**# BRYMER, CLARINET, GOOSSENS, LISTENING, PERFORMANCE PRACTICE,
RECORDINGS, VIBRATO, WOODWIND**

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