Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra, K. 622

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

The youngest member of the standard orchestra, the clarinet grew out of a 16th century recorder-like instrument with a single-reed called a *chalumeau*. As instrumental ensembles grew larger during the latter half of the 15th century, the soft-voiced chalumeau became less popular. The development of the chalumeau into the larger and louder clarinet is attributed to Johann Christoph Denner (1655-1707).

It is possible that Mozart heard early clarinets while in Salzburg, but his travels through Europe brought him into contact with newer, more capable clarinets and with very capable clarinetists. He was also encountered a lower pitched instrument called a "basset horn," roughly equivalent to the modern alto clarinet. Mozart was particularly impressed with the clarinetists he heard during his 1777 visit to Mannheim, Germany, where the court orchestra was filled with excellent players. In a 1778 letter to his father, Mozart wrote, "If only we had clarinets, too! You cannot imagine the glorious effect of a symphony with flutes, oboes and clarinets!" He began including clarinets in his music; his first symphony to require them was the "Paris" symphony of 1778 (K. 297/300a).

Shortly after his move to Vienna in 1781, Mozart met Anton Stadler, once of the preeminent clarinet virtuosos of the time. There is little documentary evidence of how Mozart came to write both the Clarinet Quintet and the Clarinet Concerto for Stadler. All we have are some manuscript fragments that offer interesting possibilities. It is possible Mozart initially intended the quintet (1789, K. 581) for an extended-range clarinet that Stadler had modified so that it could play somewhat lower than the standard clarinet. We also know that Mozart originally started writing the Clarinet Concerto for the basset horn, as evidenced by a manuscript – in Mozart's hand – of part of the concerto's first movement.

Why Mozart abandoned the basset horn version will probably never be known, but there is now general agreement among musicologists that this concerto, completed in October 1791, was intended for performance on Stadler's extended-range instrument. Stadler premiered the concerto the next month in Prague, and probably continued to perform it while touring through Europe and Russia until 1795.

While the autograph manuscript of the concerto's final version was lost shortly after the composer's death, in 1801 the concerto was published in an altered form that made it playable on a standard clarinet. It was in this form that the concerto became the cornerstone of the solo clarinet repertoire and has achieved great popularity. The original version for extended range clarinet was reconstructed in the 1970s, and many clarinetists now perform the concerto on a "basset clarinet," a modern version of Stadler's extended-range instrument.

The Clarinet Concerto is Mozart's last completed instrumental work, and unlike his other concertos for wind instruments, it is a substantive work, on par with the piano concertos. The range of moods and subtlety required of the soloist far exceeds any previous clarinet work. After the orchestral *tutti* at the beginning, the soloist takes center stage for almost the entire piece. The

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mood of the first movement is, according to Michael Steinberg, "softly lit, more intimate than festive, serene rather than impassioned... The sheer sound of this movement is of transcendent beauty." The movement also has an unusual structure – it has the typical sonata form sections (exposition, development and recapitulation), but each section ends with a restatement of a portion of the opening music.

The second movement *Adagio* is one of Mozart's most sublime. Mozart rarely wrote music in this slow tempo, and its presence here indicates a movement of considerable gravity. Yet the music sings with an almost operatic aria quality. The finale is in the blend of sonata and rondo forms Mozart created for his piano concertos, where even the rondo theme itself is subject to development. Towards the end there are brief silences that seem to indicate emotional conflict of some kind. Mozart and Haydn scholar H.C. Robbins Landon describes this movement by quoting Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale* – "[The] heart dances, but not for joy."

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Serenade to Music

Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872-1958)

Generally considered Elgar's successor to the title of leading English composer of his time, Vaughan Williams came into maturity as a composer after he began collecting folk tunes he recorded in trips around the English countryside. It was from this music that, David Ewen writes, "Vaughan Williams extracted and assimilated stylistic elements which gave shape and substance to his own music. The tendency toward modal writing, the robust rhythm, the serene melody, the restrained feelings are all qualities which Vaughan Williams' music acquired from folk sources."

Vaughan Williams was frequently asked to write pieces for important occasions. In 1938, Sir Henry Wood, one of the preeminent British conductors of the day and the founder of the "Proms" concerts, wanted a piece to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of his debut as a conductor. He asked Vaughan Williams to write "a choral work that can be used at any time and for any occasion." Vaughan Williams decided to set a text from Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, tailoring the vocal lines to some of Wood's favorite singers. After the first performance, the composer noted that the vocal lines could be sung by a full chorus, allowing the *Serenade* to become one of the most popular and frequently performed pieces of music intended to celebrate music itself.

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Douze études pour piano
Claude Debussy (1862 – 1918)

In 1914 and in failing health both mentally and physically, Debussy began preparing an edition of the piano works of Chopin. The task brought on a rush of creativity that would result in the piano duet *En blanc et noir*, sonatas for Cello and Violin, and the present twelve études for solo piano. Completed in 1915, Debussy dedicated them to the memory of Chopin, perhaps inspired by the Polish composer's own études. The pieces are technically quite demanding – the composer, himself a pianist of no small ability, found parts of them quite difficult. He wrote to his publisher Durand "these *études* conceal a rigorous technique beneath flowers of harmony. To put it another way, you don't catch files with vinegar!"

Divided into two sets of six, the title of each étude gives a clue to the compositional or performing technique being exercised. Yet these are not merely technical studies and, like the similarly named works of their dedicatee, their musical qualities outweigh the technical challenges. The first étude, "For the five fingers, after Mr. Czerny," recalls the many exercises by Carl Czerny that continue to be the bane of the student pianist's existence. The next four études are each built around a particular tonal interval: thirds, fourths, sixths and octaves. The sixth piece, "For the eight fingers," includes a footnote from the composer that "the changing position of the hands makes the use of the thumbs awkward and acrobatic in performance."

The second set begins with the scherzo-like "For the chromatic scale," followed by "For the ornaments." This title refers to the practice of adding extra notes – ornaments – to melodic lines, a tradition commonly associated with French keyboard music of the Baroque era. Debussy described this étude as "a barcarolle on an Italianate sea." "For the repeated notes" is another scherzo, and the contrapuntal "For the opposing sonorities" finds the composer bringing to the piano his sense of coloration and simultaneous timbres common in his orchestral works. The final two études, "For the written arpeggios" and "For chords" recall the works of Liszt and Chopin, and it was with these pieces Debussy ended his career as a composer for the piano.

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