

On Playing the Classical Clarinet

– Craig Hill

With so many younger players becoming interested in period instruments, and several universities in Australia owning classical clarinets, the Editor invited Craig Hill to share some thoughts on starting out.

One of the great things about period instrument playing is that it allows and encourages a re-assessment of every aspect of our playing – what kind of sound we make, how we phrase, the way we use our body and so on – to re-evaluate the whole experience of making and listening to music. To take up the early clarinet and not undergo this process of discovery is arguably a wasted opportunity. I remember some wonderful advice from Deborah de Graaf along these lines: “What we want to do is sing, but with the tone of the clarinet.” To play the classical clarinet is to find a new voice, or rather, to rediscover an old one, which has been lost as musical styles have changed.

How do we begin to reconstruct earlier performance styles?

Well it's a huge jigsaw puzzle. As a clarinetist I can start by reading a few early methods, say by Vanderhagen (1785), Blasius (1796), Roeser (1764), Lefevre (1802) and Backofen (1803).¹ It's not really much to go on, although all the technical aspects such as fingerings, reeds, embouchure, tone production and articulation etc. are covered. More information about the artistic performance of music can be gleaned by reading a few methods of other instruments, such as Leopold Mozart's *Violinschule* (1756), the writings of CPE Bach relating to keyboard performance (1753, 1762), Daniel Gottlob Türk's *Klavierschule* (1789) and Joachim Quantz's *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen* (1752).² In each case we have to ask ourselves: Is this technique appropriate to my instrument? Is this advice applicable to the music I am playing – or is it from another time and place? Who was this method written for? A beginner or an advanced performer or a teacher?

The next area of investigation is the conditions of early performances,

for instance where they were given, in order to discover what implications this has for the music. What was the acoustic like? How many performers were there and how were they arranged? We can do this from accounts by writers such as Charles Burney, theorists and lexicographers, from iconographical evidence, employment records, invoices, letters, advertisements, musical newsletters such as the AMZ and so on. Many of these sources have been reprinted in facsimile editions.

Journals such as *Early Music* (OUP) and the *Galpin Society Journal*³ have articles covering a wide range of areas of relevance to us – the wider you read the greater will be your appreciation of the broader musical and historical context. The *Cambridge Companion to the Clarinet*⁴ includes a good introduction to early playing, and much can be learned from Colin Lawson's handbook to the Mozart Concerto.⁵

Performance practice or Beyond “Urtext”⁶

The very idea of performance practice asserts that there are many things essential to the rendition of a score that are not written down; perhaps because performance conventions would make such markings redundant – after all the composer was writing for their century not ours. To say “If Mozart had wanted it like that he would have written it” might provoke two responses, firstly: He did write it – if only you understood the implications of the notation, and secondly: He would never have dreamed of notating it that way – it was not part of his notational practice.

Studying the notational practice of a composer can yield some insight. Dots, dashes, and even the slur have changed their meaning since they first came into use. Even our tempo

indications of Allegro, Vivace, Adagio, Andante and so on have acquired different meanings since earlier centuries. But even here caution! The often noted difference between dots and dashes in Mozart has gained wide currency because the Bärenreiter urtext edition made the editorial decision to preserve the difference in their edition. Yet more than one scholar has shown that this may be nothing more than the product of writing quickly with a quill. If we had all still been using quills we would probably have worked that one out a lot sooner! Then there is the question of what was done with all those marks that looked like something between a dot and dash. If anything can usefully be said about dots it is that it can mean short or simply lightly. Dashes can also mean short, or they may be used to override the normal metrical stress – the composer says “these notes receive the same degree of accentuation.” An excellent introduction to classical performance practice can be found in “Mozart's Symphonies – Context, Performance Practice, Reception” by Neal Zaslaw.⁷

Letting the instruments teach us

Is it possible to rediscover the idioms of these earlier instruments – what works and what doesn't – without being prejudiced by our knowledge of modern instruments?

Although we speak of “classical” clarinet, “baroque” flutes and oboes this covers up the fact that until the beginning of this century there were a vast array of instrument designs in use.⁸ In the eighteenth century the clarinets in England, Germany France and Austria made considerably different sounds. The English instrument is bright and forthright, the German more filled out, the French somewhere in-between but tending to the lighter

side of the spectrum – the Austrian instrument is well vented in the lower register and a small sweet tone in the upper register. Hearing a Simiot clarinet (France, early 19th cent.) one cannot help but agree with Berlioz's assessment of the clarinet possessing a heroic, romantic character; a character which I can't imagine so well on any other clarinet.⁹ Of course these are generalisations; the variations from maker to maker and even from the same maker are considerable. Tonally, every classical clarinetist has their own sound, which is to be welcomed when it would be all too easy to develop a uniform "historical" style.

Questioning long held beliefs:

Here is a list of advice I think we have probably all encountered at some stage of our development on the modern instrument:

- Support more.
- Maintain the tension in the sound.
- Hold the notes for their full value.
- Play through to the end of the phrase. To where it's going....
- Hold that note so we don't get a gap.

- Drop the dynamic on that long held note.
- It doesn't matter what instrument you play on, eventually you will sound the same. Don't bulge on that note.
- If you don't need a breath there don't take it.
- Don't be late after a breath.
- Crescendo means each note is louder than the previous one.

Each of these ideas (and many more) needs to be evaluated for its usefulness to playing a classical clarinet – for instance less emphasis on the diaphragm. (Or, expressed the other way round – the experience with the early clarinet will tell you to support more on your modern instrument.¹⁰) Find where the phrase comes from, rather than always playing through to a goal – start with enough energy to get you through the phrase. (The phrase as a natural system which loses energy with time.) Find relaxation in the tone. Express contentment or warmth through a gentle rise and fall of the tone. Modulate the quality of the forte to avoid a feeling of belligerence. (Beethoven!) Leave enough space between the phrases – a refined execution articulates phrases, phrase-units, and the larger formal sections with corresponding space.

Finding the detail

Perhaps the greatest advantage of the period clarinet is its capacity for nuance. The instrument speaks easily and reacts quickly to any change in the air stream; a melody can be coloured and inflected without the need to halt the rhythmic flow. While the modern clarinet has an enormous range of expression, I do not find that it reacts so quickly – it is always easier to control a quick crescendo than a rapid diminuendo; to release the sound takes effort and time – it is more in the nature of the instrument to play evenly and with a sustained tone. Consider the opening phrase of the Mozart clarinet concerto for a moment (minim, dotted crochet, quaver, four quavers, crotchet). On the classical clarinet one can easily play in the following manner:

First note G: a gentle attack and release.

Starting off.....

- In assembling the clarinet start off by aligning the tone holes. This makes for different wrist and little finger positions than you will be used to, and this can be tiring at first. You may eventually want to vary this slightly.
- Practice standing often, clarinet held at a good 45 degrees.
- Avoid the temptation to add a thumb-rest to your instrument! Playing without it forces you to be really creative with your choice of fingerings – you will discover more about your instrument.
- Find a standard throat G which is perfectly in tune with the clarion C and G, and use it as much as you can. While some fingering charts show G as "open" i.e. no fingers, if you try this standing (and without the thumb-rest!) you will soon discover that this is impractical. Add a support finger in the right hand (perhaps the fourth or fifth finger).
- Some (many) clarinets are designed so that the throat G is fingered with the middle finger of the left hand plus some venting in the right hand – I use the first three fingers of the right hand. Leave the left hand middle finger down when you play the throat A. This set-up has the advantage that in the upper register you will be able to produce a beautiful high D from an overblown A.
- Find a throat F which is a pure fifth lower than your clarion C. Your upper register F may be slightly high. With a bit of practice you will learn to "voice" this automatically. Insist on good intonation!
- Expect that you will have to use different fingerings on the A clarinet. However, I suggest that the instruments should be set up so that the throat G's are the same, as this is an important reference note. Throat E on the A clarinet is often quite flat – correct this with the fourth and fifth fingers of the right hand. (Try doing that on the Boehm system!)
- Use free blowing reeds. Depending on your mouthpiece use Eb reeds or cut down Bb clarinet reeds. I don't particularly recommend using modern German reeds, though some players do. The scrape of the reed should be slightly shorter than the window of the mouthpiece.
- Remember: Slur = diminuendo.
- Use metrical stress to shape the music if articulation, harmony or contour don't suggest something.
- Create relaxation in the sound rather than tension.
- Practice slurring pairs of notes with a stress on the beginning of the first note which moves smoothly and quietly on to the second note.
- Incorporate the forked notes into your phrasing – let them be a source of inspiration.
- Try improvising non-thematic cadenzas or simple melodies, such as a minuet.

Second note E: matching attack to the G, a small rise or swell which then relaxes on to the next note F.

Second bar: A – top of the phrase, and with more stress than the first bar, releasing quickly over the four

quavers, the second pair of which are tongued and quiet.

Last note E: louder than the tongued E immediately preceding, but appreciably softer than either the A or the first

note G.

To play in this style expresses the metre, the contour of the phrase and the articulation – a difficult balancing act which is all too familiar. Mostly, we

Care of your boxwood clarinet

- e Pull through regularly and always wipe the instrument dry after use, paying careful attention to the socket and tenons as boxwood is extremely moisture absorbent. Then let your boxwood instrument air for an hour or two. As with any clarinet, don't leave it out as modern heating and air-conditioning will dry the instrument out.
- e The maker should give you instructions about oiling the bore with almond oil and the exterior with almond or linseed oil. Remove all the keys when you do this as the tiniest amount of oil on the pad will make the leather go hard.
- e The joints of the clarinet should be looser fitting than on a modern instrument

1. For readers of German and French these methods are available in facsimile:

Backofen, J.G.H., Anweisung zur Klarinette, nebst einer kurzen Abhandlung über das Basset-Horn (Leipzig, c.1803) facsimile: Moeck, Celle 1986.

Blasius, F., Nouvelle Méthode de clarinette (Paris, c. 1796) facsimile: Minkoff, Geneva 1972.

Roeser, V., Essai d'instruction à l'usage de ceux qui composent pour la clarinette (Paris, 1764) facsimile: Minkoff, Geneva 1972.

Vanderhagen. A., Méthode nouvelle et raisonnée pour la clarinette (Paris, 1776) facsimile: Minkoff, Geneva 1972.

Lefèvre, J.X., Méthode de clarinette (Paris, 1802) facsimile: Minkoff, Geneva 1974;

2. These methods are all available in English translations:

Mozart, L., Versuch einer gründlichen Violinschule (Augsburg, 1756) Translated E. Knocker 1948 as A Treatise on the Fundamental Principles of Violin Playing, Oxford 1951, reprinted 1985.

Türk, D.G., Klavierschule (Leipzig and Halle, 1789) translated R.H. Hagg as School of Clavier Playing (Lincoln, Nb, and London 1982).

Quantz, J. J., Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen (Berlin, 1752) translated E.R. Reilly as On Playing the Flute, London and New York, 1966.

3. In particular see Albert Rice Clarinet Fingering Charts 1732-1816 in Galpin Society Journal, 37 (1984) pp.99-103 which gives a compilation of all the fingerings from these charts together with an interesting commentary.

4. Lawson, C., ed. The Cambridge Companion to the Clarinet, Cambridge University Press 1997.

5. Lawson, C., Mozart Clarinet Concerto Cambridge Music Handbook Series, Cambridge University Press 1996.

6. "Urtext" is German for "original text" and is often used to describe editions where the editor has tried to represent the autograph manuscript (if available) and other copies such as first edition or parts from the first performance etc. as faithfully as possible.

7. Oxford University Press, 1989.

8. Regarding the number of keys in use at various times: for Mozart / Haydn 5 keys (speaker, A, E/B, F#/C# & G#/D#) - the 6th key: L.H. C#/G# - added about 1800, will get you through most Beethoven, Weber/Crusell solo works - 9 - 10 keys, 12 keys - Spohr/ Mendelssohn etc. Six keyed instruments remained in use until the 1840's. A detailed account of the development of the clarinet by Nicholas Shackleton is contained in The Cambridge Companion to the Clarinet, noted above.

9. Berlioz, L.H., Grand Traité de l'instrumentation et d'orchestration modernes (Paris, 1843) translated M.C. Clarke as A treatise on Modern Instrumentation, London 1858.

– *Craig Hill is a clarinetist with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. As an enthusiastic period instrument performer he has given recitals with Quintetto Concertante and Elysium and appeared in concertos with the Australian Brandenburg Orchestra. Further information and responses may be emailed to: hutchill@mira.net*