BRAHMS, DEBUSSY AND BEYOND... A LOOK AT THE CLARINET REPERTOIRE AND THE INFLUENCE BRAHMS HAD ON MODERN COMPOSERS

A RESEARCH PAPER

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE

MASTERS OF MUSIC

BY

ANDREA HOYT

DR. ELIZABETH CRAWFORD – ADVISOR

BALL STATE UNIVERSITY

MUNCIE, IN

MAY 2010
For nearly three centuries, the clarinet has played a major role in all genres and forms of music. The popularity of the instrument and composers interest in it has increased greatly since the time of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. The clarinet’s unique ability to play at extremely soft dynamic levels, its use of a wide variety of tone colors, combined with an ability to execute large intervals, easily piqued the interest of many composers including Johannes Brahms, Claude Debussy, Igor Stravinsky, and Aaron Copland. Brahms and Mozart were each influenced by a famous clarinetist and were inspired to write for the clarinet because of them. Many composers during the Classical and Romantic Era had been influenced by famous clarinetists. Mozart was inspired by Anton Stadler; Carl Maria von Weber and Giacomo Meyerbeer were influenced by Heinrich Baermann. Each of these composers wrote clarinet works that have become some of the standards of the clarinet repertoire. I will be exploring the relationship between Brahms and Richard Mühlfeld and the influence this relationship had on repertoire for clarinet as well as its impact on modern composers.

Brahms was a leading composer during the Romantic Era and wrote for many instruments. Brahms’s use of the clarinet was fairly minimal up until the later part of his life. He had used the clarinet in his symphonies, but had not written any solo repertoire or chamber music for the instrument. Brahms was ready to retire from composing when he met Mühlfeld (1856-1907), a musician with the Meiningen orchestra and a virtuoso clarinetist at this time. He was considered equal to the Viennese clarinetists, who were held in a very high regard during this time. Brahms met Mühlfeld at a rehearsal for the orchestra and immediately was impressed and inspired by Mühlfeld’s musicianship. Up until meeting Mühlfeld, Brahms thought the “art of
clarinet playing had deteriorated” and had no intention to write solo repertoire for the instrument.¹

Brahms spent many hours listening to Mühlfeld play, which helped to expand his knowledge of the clarinet. Brahms was aware of the clarinet early in his career, but appreciated the versatility and character of the different registers of the instrument after studying Mühlfeld. Brahms said that Mühlfeld was the “Nightingale of the Orchestra” and that he was the finest wind player he had ever heard. ² Having been inspired by him, Brahms proceeded to write the Clarinet Trio Op. 114 and Clarinet Quintet Op. 115 in 1891 and the two Sonatas in 1894.

Colin Lawson, author of a book about Brahms’s clarinet quintet notes that “Brahms’s work contains some highly idiomatic clarinet writing…”³ and “many of the idioms which were expanded and exploited in Brahms’s late clarinet music under the influence of Richard Mühlfeld were part of his means of musical expression from the outset.”⁴ Brahms had a great understanding of the emotional power of the clarinet and exploited its abilities throughout his solo and chamber works for the instrument.

Brahms had a love for the chalumeau or low register of the clarinet and wrote using it for emotional and dramatic effect. Several examples of this can be seen in his clarinet Sonata No. 1 in F Minor Op. 120. In example one, Brahms uses the low register of the clarinet effectively as he transitions the music to the new melodic content of the “B” section of the first movement.

Ex. 1

This change of style, marked by the indication of *ma ben marcato*, is supplemented by the use of the chalumeau register. This allows for a whole new character to be portrayed.

Another instance from the second movement of the sonata is in example 2.

Ex. 2

In measure 49, Brahms repeats the opening melody, but an octave lower and at a dynamic of *piano* instead of *forte*. The use of the chalumeau register at the softer dynamic creates a special moment in the piece. A similar instance occurs in the third movement of the sonata, where Brahms writes melodic lines in the chalumeau register along with a soft dynamic to allow the music to be uniquely expressive. This can be seen in example 3 from measures 29-62.

Ex. 3
The marking of *grazioso e dolcissimo sempre*, or always gracefully and sweetly, shows Brahms’s knowledge of the clarinet to play intimately in the low register as well as its ability to portray an innocent character.

A final example from the sonata comes from the fourth movement in measures 137-145.

Ex. 4

![Ex. 4](image)

Again we see the use of a soft dynamic, which is particularly fitting for the chalumeau register. This section occurs right before the coda section and is used as an interlude between it and the preceding recapitulation section. Brahms uses the chalumeau register here so that the clarinet can provide accompaniment for the piano, which carries the melodic line. The low register was a perfect fit for this section, as the chalumeau register can be played very softly and provides a harmonically stable background for the piano.

Many other composers have also used the chalumeau register of the clarinet for emotional and dramatic effect. Debussy, who was a leading composer during the turn of the nineteenth century, used the chalumeau register in his *Prèmiere Rhapsodie*. His use of the register can be seen in example 5 below during the scherzando section.

Ex. 5

![Ex. 5](image)
This section occurs two-thirds of the way through the piece and is a precursor to the dramatic and frantic ending. Debussy uses the alternation of all three registers of the clarinet in conjunction with imitative passages to create a sense of urgency and direction in the piece. The use of a soft dynamic shows the underlying intimate nature of the passage, and like Brahms, Debussy uses the range of the instrument to convey emotion and changing character.

The twentieth century has been a productive era in terms of clarinet music. There has been a great deal of solo clarinet repertoire written within the last 100 years, although not all of it may be as familiar to as the standard works of Brahms and Debussy.

George Gershwin was born in 1898 and was an important composer during the beginning of the twentieth century. Many of his pieces in the classical repertoire remain highly popular as do his stage, film, and jazz works. Gershwin studied piano during his childhood and wrote many pieces for the instrument. Some of these pieces have been transcribed for other instruments including his *Preludes for Piano*, which was arranged for clarinet and piano in the late 1980s.⁵

*Preludes for Piano* has many jazz-inspired themes that can immediately be heard in the opening statement of the piece. The second movement, transcribed for A clarinet, has clear implications of jazz such as syncopated rhythms and harmonies that are typical of jazz. In the following example, we can see the chalumeau register being used during the swing rhythm section of the movement.

Ex. 6

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The chalumeau is unique because of its distinct color and ability to play at a supremely soft dynamic. The combination of a low register and the use of A clarinet make this passage special because it is passionate and exciting. It allows Gershwin to use the deep color of the chalumeau while incorporating jazz elements into the movement. An important thing to note here is the use of a *piano* dynamic. This is similar to Brahms and Debussy in that the soft playing draws the listener in and makes the passage quite expressive.

Moving even further into the twentieth century, we find many composers writing for unaccompanied clarinet. Pieces of an unaccompanied nature often take on new and creative approaches to extend the abilities of instruments and intensify a player’s expressive capability. Shulamit Ran is one of these composers. Born in 1949 in Israel, Ran is an innovative composer whose Middle Eastern experiences can be heard in her works. Her compositions are often referred to as “compelling not only for their white-hot emotional content but for their intelligence and compositional clarity.” In her composition *Three Scenes for Clarinet*, Ran exploits all ranges of the instrument, but uses the chalumeau register quite effectively. In example seven below, we see the use of the chalumeau register at the beginning of movement one.

Ex. 7

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6 “Shulamit Ran”, Theodore Presser Company, 22 April, 2009
This immediately grabs the listeners’ attention and draws them into the intense melody. She repeats the same melodic material two lines later with some variant in melody as seen in example eight.

Ex. 8

This movement, entitled “Bold and Dramatic,” is clearly exemplified by the use of these chalumeau register statements. It draws the listener in and conveys the intense, chaotic emotion and exciting character of the piece right away.

Other important uses of the chalumeau register can be seen in movements two and three. For example in movement two, entitled “Chameleon,” the chalumeau register is used to depict the character of maniacal madness.

Ex. 9

The clarinet sound here is quite different from that of Brahms or Debussy, but the use of range is the same. The third movement bears the title, *Song*, and is more subtle in nature. Ran uses the chalumeau register of the clarinet to display the instrument’s ability to sing like the human voice.
Like Brahms, Ran uses a soft dynamic to bring a great sense of emotion to the listener.

Compositions of Brahms and Debussy are staples of the clarinet repertoire and their influence can be seen in these contemporary works.

Richard Mühlfeld’s ability to execute wide intervals between the chalumeau and upper registers was another great source of influence for Brahms because he appreciated the agility of the clarinet. These leaps were a standard of his clarinet works. Virtuosity was often a goal for composers and performers, thus the use of leaps became quite popular. A good example of this is in the opening of his clarinet Sonata No. 1 in F Minor Op. 120. The following measures are from the beginning of the piece:

Brahms’s use of leaps in the beginning of this sonata immediately shows off the clarinet’s agility and no doubt Mühlfeld’s virtuosity at the time he wrote the sonata. Another example of this can

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be seen in example twelve. In this passage, Brahms experiments with descending intervals of a fifth, sixth and seventh, and then later over an octave.

Ex. 12

Movement four has a few prime examples of Brahms’s use of leaps as well. In measures 42-45, he requires the clarinet to play through three registers in ascending octaves.

Ex. 13

A similar idea is repeated before the Coda section in measures 150-154 and greatly resembles the above example.

Ex. 14

All of these examples demonstrate Brahms’s awareness of the clarinet’s capabilities and shows how Mühlfeld’s superb playing encouraged him to write in a way that showed the real virtuosity of the instrument.
Debussy’s work is virtuosic in many ways and uses wide leaps as well. In his composition *Prèmiere Rhapsodie*, Debussy uses leaps as a way to draw the listener into the sensuous and romantic melodies. One place this can be observed is in measures 75-79 as seen in example 15.

Ex. 15

The marking of *doux et expressif*, or “soft and expressive,” is Debussy’s indication of how the melody should be played and his use of intervals are remarkable in this passage. This is quite difficult for the clarinetist, but sounds pristinely beautiful if executed properly. A similar passage occurs later in the piece where Debussy uses the same thematic idea, but extends it for added emotional effect.

Ex. 16

In measures 154-162, the similar thematic ideas extend throughout the range of the clarinet. This section is much like the other example and is hard to execute, but is quite amazing when played properly.

Gershwin’s *Preludes for Piano* as transcribed for the clarinet also includes sections of wide intervals. The use of wide intervals in jazz is common as they are virtuosic especially in the
altissimo (high) register of the clarinet. The example below shows this in movement one of the preludes.

Ex. 17

The use of octave glissandos is prevalent throughout the piece and the extreme leaps can be seen here in measure 49. This is extremely virtuosic in nature and the altissimo section at measure 50 shows off the player’s ability to execute high notes. Gershwin clearly portrays the character by use of glissandi and allowing the player to play with great virtuosity in the altissimo range at a fortissimo dynamic.

The use of wide leaps carries all the way through present day. Shulamit Ran uses them many times in her *Three Scenes for Clarinet*. In the first movement, Ran uses wide intervals, which is reflective of the bold and dramatic setting of the piece as well as the singing quality that is noted at the beginning of the line.
Ran’s use of wide intervals in conjunction with a soft dynamic at the beginning of the line contributes to the expressive nature of the piece.

The second movement has many examples of wide interval usage. The middle section is described in the score as being dance-like and sensuous. Ran’s Middle Eastern roots are prevalent in this section as she uses many augmented seconds, an interval that is often associated with that region.

Example 19 illustrates of this.

In this instance the wide intervals add to the playful nature of the passage and assist in bringing out the character of the passage.
Right before the third movement begins there is a small section entitled *Entr’acte*. It is an interlude and transition into the third movement.

Ex. 20

The entire *Entr’acte* is comprised of wide intervals and is marked to be played calmly, without expression and as legato as possible. This sets the mood for the third movement.

The third movement, as described before, is a slow movement that is entitled *Song*. Like the other movements there are many examples of Ran’s use of wide intervals. The movement carries on the character of the *Entr’acte* and is very expressive in nature. The following section is from the middle of the movement, which represents a typical “B” section in a sonata.

Ex. 21

Ran describes this section in the score as “growing progressively more impassioned”. This section grows both in dynamic and rhythmic intensity and then leads back to a reflective and slow ending. The use of wide intervals here is indicative of the growing intensity and change in character.

The work of Brahms was influential on other composers. Gustav Jenner, one of Brahms’s pupils, dedicated his Sonata op. 5 in G to Mühlfeld, and closely resembles Brahms’s F-minor sonata. Much of the chamber music written after Brahms did not receive the international recognition that his music did. Brahms set the style for what chamber music should be and many
composers were inspired to write their own clarinet sonatas after hearing Brahms’s. His use of the chalumeau register inspired other composer to use it both for dramatic and expressive effect. His unique use of large intervals showed the intimate virtuosity of the instrument and has inspired many contemporary composers to use the same conventions. There are many instances in the pieces discussed here as well as countless other pieces in the clarinet repertoire. This is indicative of the great influence the relationship between Mühlfeld and Brahms had on the musical world. Brahms’s influence on composers will continue to be seen for years to come as he continues to be viewed as one of the greatest composers of all time.

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Bibliography


“Shulamit Ran”, Theodore Presser Company, 22 April, 2009