

Standards of the Clarinet Repertoire

An Honors Thesis (MUSPE 498/HONRS 499)

by

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A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Caroline A. Hartig". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'C'.

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Abstract

This recital program was chosen based on two factors. First, I wanted the program to reflect a variety of works for clarinet, each considered a standard of the repertoire. My intent was to perform some of the most historically significant and well-loved pieces for clarinet, by composers from various style periods. Second, I wanted the program to reflect my previous work while also incorporating works that were new to me; consequently, some pieces on my recital were ones that I had previously performed (the Stravinsky and Mozart pieces), while others I worked on specifically for my recital (the Poulenc and Brahms). The program is representative of my best work, and provides an interesting sample of the standards works of the clarinet repertoire.

The program notes were compiled based on research, study of the pieces themselves, discussions with my clarinet professor, and my previous musical and historical knowledge. They explain the significance of each piece, providing the historical context and examining aspects which qualify the work as a standard of the repertoire. The program notes, distributed at the recital, also give a short analysis of each piece or movement that was performed, and include several quotations that I found interesting and relevant.

Standards of the Clarinet Repertoire Program Notes

The program for this recital was chosen to reflect a variety of clarinet works and composers held in high regard by musicians today. These pieces all have two main things in common: aesthetic appeal and historical significance. In fact, the former seems to lead to the latter; the works on this program have achieved "standard" status precisely because they are such a joy to play and listen to. Many of these works were written by composers at the peak of their careers, who had mastered the art of writing for the clarinet and so were able to use it to its full potential. With a range easily larger than three octaves, a tone quality ranging from reedy and mellow to brilliant and piercing, and an abundance of technical possibilities, the clarinet is the perfect instrument to showcase the best aspects of each composer's style. These pieces vary greatly in mood, and each has its own technical challenges, but they all have been favorites of performers and audiences for years, and in some cases, centuries. Without a doubt, the works featured here are valued as some of the greatest treasures of the clarinet repertoire.

Sonata for Clarinet in B \flat and Piano

Francis Poulenc

The sonata for clarinet was intended to be part of a cycle of woodwind sonatas, begun when Poulenc wrote the Flute Sonata in 1956. He wrote both the oboe and clarinet sonatas in the summer of 1962, but unfortunately these were to be his last works; Poulenc died of a heart attack before he could write a bassoon sonata to complete the cycle. The oboe and clarinet sonatas are considered to be the best examples of Poulenc's mature composition, representing a synthesis of various traits of his style. Shortly after his death in 1963, Benny Goodman and Leonard Bernstein gave the premiere of the Clarinet Sonata. In the forty years since, it has grown to be recognized as one of the great works of the clarinet repertoire, and is always an audience favorite.

The first movement begins with a wild introduction punctuated by dissonances on the piano. Tonality is not clearly established until after a brief silence when the piano enters with eighth-note octaves, thought by some to represent the clock of time, ticking away underneath the arching melody of the clarinet. Poulenc's melodies frequently appear in this arch form, rising and falling. The contrasting middle section is in slow triple meter, with constant use of double-dotted rhythms (a trait found in many of Poulenc's works). This section, to me, evokes Erik Satie (who was a friend of Poulenc's) with its simple yet moving harmonies. A recapitulation of the first theme seems to begin, although it soon disintegrates, ending on a pianissimo tremolo.

The second movement, titled "Romanza," begins with four pianissimo notes played by the clarinet only, immediately followed by a passionate outcry. After the introduction, the clarinet expresses one of the most beautiful melodies of the piece. As Dr. Caroline Hartig puts it, "The whole world, as you know it, is contained in these notes." Indeed, the second movement is too profound to be just a love song. More double-dotted rhythms and ornaments decorate these

phrases, and the interplay between the clarinet and piano is especially poignant. Poulenc always intended with his sonatas to make the piano an equal partner, as it certainly is in this movement.

The driving rhythm and melody that begin the third movement reoccur several times as a sort of rondo theme. This movement is full of life, absolutely teeming with memorable melodies. The raucous coda has been described as "wild peasant-music," leading to the "clarinet's ultimate screech." So ends the Clarinet Sonata, and with it the impressive compositional career of Francis Poulenc.

"I have always adored wind instruments ... Stravinsky's solo clarinet pieces stimulated my taste for winds, but I had developed the taste as a child."

-Francis Poulenc

Three Pieces for Solo Clarinet

Igor Stravinsky

Moving backwards in time to 1919, we encounter the first substantial piece written for solo clarinet: Stravinsky's *Three Pieces*. This work influenced Poulenc's clarinet writing, and is a precursor to all other twentieth-century works for solo clarinet. Libby Larsen, Joan Tower, and Meyer Kupferman are just a few of the twentieth-century composers who have since risen to the challenge of writing a piece for solo clarinet. Stravinsky dedicated this work to Werner Reinhart, an amateur clarinetist who had helped to finance the production of his *A Soldier's Tale* in 1918. Most likely, Stravinsky dedicated the *Three Pieces* to Reinhart in return for his help, although it is possible that Reinhart actually commissioned the work.

In *A Soldier's Tale*, Stravinsky had already come close to writing for a solo instrument – the *Tango* movement featured only solo violin with percussion. However, the *Three Pieces* presented the challenge of writing for a solo wind instrument, which cannot imply chords as obviously as can a violin using double-stops. Stravinsky created a very idiomatic but difficult work, only about 3'45" in duration but bound to remain a staple of the clarinet literature for many years to come.

The first piece, written for "preferably Clarinet in A," is tranquil and meditative. It never exceeds the chalumeau range, frequently descending to the lowest note on the clarinet (D \flat when played on an A clarinet). The second piece, still for clarinet in A, has no barlines. For the most part, it presents sixteenth-notes in groupings of two or three, although the middle section utilizes eighth-note rhythms with grace notes. This piece has an improvisatory mood; perhaps because in writing the *Three Pieces* Stravinsky was said to be influenced by the jazz improvisations of Sidney Bechet, whom he had heard in Europe the previous year. The third piece calls for the brilliance of the clarinet in B \flat . The rhythms are syncopated, repeated, and accented, driving relentlessly until the clarinet's final chirp.

Concerto for Clarinet in A major K. 622

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Mozart wrote this piece, his only concerto for clarinet, in the last months of his life. It was his penultimate work and the last of over forty concerti he wrote, beginning at age nine. In the late eighteenth century, the clarinet was still a relatively new instrument, although it was spreading quickly across Europe. Mozart had encountered the clarinet before, but it was while visiting in Mannheim in 1777 that he fell in love with the instrument. The Mannheim Orchestra was one of the first to add clarinets to the established woodwind section of flutes, oboes, and bassoons, and in hearing this orchestra, Mozart began to recognize the potential of the clarinet. He started using clarinets in his symphonies and chamber music, and in 1791 he wrote the Concerto in A major, arguably the best concerto ever written for the instrument.

Mozart wrote many of his clarinet works, including this one, for his friend Anton Stadler, Vienna's first renowned clarinetist. The concerto was intended for a clarinet quite different from the one we are familiar with today, however; it is believed that the concerto was originally written for Stadler's basset clarinet, an A clarinet with the range extended to a low C (four notes lower than usual). There are several passages in the concerto that have been altered to be playable on today's A clarinet – at times you may even notice octave displacements that would not have been necessary with the original version for basset clarinet. Also, the clarinet of the late eighteenth century had much less sophisticated mechanisms and could only play comfortably in certain keys.

With these limitations, it is simply amazing that Mozart produced a concerto with such full use of the range and technical possibilities of the clarinet. He often juxtaposes the high and low registers, exploiting the difference in tone color. His rhythms are simple, but not repetitive, with evenness being the largest challenge for the clarinetist. And his melodies, while mostly diatonic, are always interesting. They possess a transparent quality that allows the performer constant opportunity for expression, enabling them to combine Mozart's musical intent with their own, and so create a truly meaningful performance. Perhaps this is why Mozart's clarinet concerto stands far above the other works in its genre and style period, and is still one of the most frequently performed clarinet works today.

In the first movement of the concerto, Mozart uses a combination of sonata and ritornello form, in which the clarinet has the usual exposition, development, and recapitulation sections but there is also an orchestral tutti to begin, end, and separate each section. One unusual aspect of this exposition is that before the second theme, Mozart moves through the parallel minor (A minor) and mediant (C major) keys before arriving in the dominant key of E major. The movement also features diminished seventh chords which tend to bring the melodic line to a climax.

“Alas, if only we also had clarinets ... You cannot imagine the wonderful effect of a symphony with flutes, oboes, and clarinets.”

- Mozart, in a letter to his father, after hearing the Mannheim Orchestra

Sonata for Piano and Clarinet in E \flat Major

Johannes Brahms

With this sonata we see a pattern beginning to emerge; here is yet another work written for a prominent clarinetist of the composer's acquaintance, at the end of the composer's lifetime and at the peak of his mature style. Sixty-one years old in the summer of 1894, Brahms wrote a pair of clarinet sonatas, the first in F minor and the second in E \flat major. They were dedicated to Richard Mühlfeld, referred to by Brahms as "Fräulein Klarinette (Miss Clarinet)" because of the sweetness of his tone on the instrument. Brahms often composed pieces in pairs, making them complimentary in mood. Thus, the F minor sonata is restless and turbulent, while the E \flat is more gentle and warm. In both, he makes use of the contrast between the low and high registers of the clarinet (as did Mozart), and features the beautiful tone of the clarinet. These two sonatas are of a quality to be expected of Brahms's last chamber works – they are among the most perfect of their kind, showing an incredible range of color and emotion.

The first movement of the E \flat sonata is described by various authors as being "dreamy," "musing," "Brahms in his warmest and most nostalgic mood," "fantasia-like," and, my favorite, "sweetly ecstatic." The opening "turn" melody is unforgettable, and is developed almost immediately, transposed and reshaped into a triplet line. Abundant in this movement are such examples of Brahms's "developing variation", in which short motives are dynamically varied, intermingled, and used throughout the piece in both themes and accompaniments, providing a sense of unity. This technique of motivic variation later inspired some serial composers such as Arnold Schoenberg.

The movement is roughly in sonata form, although there are no clear divisions between the exposition, development, and recapitulation. Brahms is endlessly creative in his use of the two instruments; he often creates a canon between clarinet and piano, or juxtaposes triplets against a duple melody. Points of melodic and rhythmic interest abound throughout the movement, and the subdued ecstasy of its mood is quite unforgettable.

Clarinet Quintet in A major, K. 581

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

The historical circumstances surrounding the composition of the clarinet quintet are much the same as with Mozart's clarinet concerto. The quintet was also written for Anton Stadler's basset clarinet, and so has the same issues of adaptation for the modern A clarinet. The original manuscripts of both works have been lost, and only the first adaptations for publication remain, so we can only guess at how the passages for basset clarinet originally were scored. However, a few performers, including John Bruce Yeh of the Chicago Symphony, are currently performing these works on a basset clarinet, in their best attempt to perform the works as Mozart had originally intended them.

The quintet, completed in 1789, is generally considered one of Mozart's finest chamber music compositions. It provided a model for Brahms's Clarinet Quintet, considered along with Mozart's to be the most important of their kind. Mozart avoids featuring the clarinet as a solo instrument, as might be expected with the combination of a clarinet and string quartet. In fact, in the exposition of the first movement, the first statements of all three themes are by the strings,

without the clarinet. The lucid first theme is introduced by the string quartet, with the clarinet interjecting arpeggios. The second theme, a lilting eighth-note line, is played first by the cello and then with variation by the clarinet. And after the first violin presents the third theme, the clarinet echoes it in a minor key. The counterpoint in this movement is superb, especially notable in the development's finely crafted fugue.

The fourth movement of the quintet presents a simple, stately theme followed by a set of variations. While based on a simple eight-measure theme, the brilliant counterpoint and constant changes in mood and tempo make this movement a true masterpiece. The viola's plaintive minor melody, the clarinet's jaunty arpeggios, and the operatic adagio section lead to a final allegro which ends the work with energy and excitement.

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RACHEL YODER
clarinet
in a
SENIOR HONORS RECITAL
with

Barbara Briner-Jones, piano
David Blakley and Gregory Dixon, violin
Sean Diller, viola – Arthur Hill, cello

- Sonata for Clarinet and Piano Francis Poulenc
I. Allegro trisamente
II. Romanza
III. Allegro con fuoco
- Three Pieces for Clarinet Solo Igor Stravinsky
I. (1882-1971)
II.
III.
- Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra in A Major Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
I. Allegro (1685-1750)
- ... Intermission ...
- Sonata in E-flat for Clarinet, Op. 120 No. 2 Johannes Brahms
I. Allegro amabile (1833-1897)
- Quintet for Clarinet and String Quartet Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
I. Allegro
IV. Allegretto con Variazioni

Rachel Yoder is a student of Caroline Hartig.

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