

Twentieth Century Bassoon Concertos

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We are now a few months into the twenty-first century, but I guess it will be quite a while before we feel comfortable with the shift of perspective implied by the flip of the calendar. In any case the last 100 years have been a pretty turbulent time where music is concerned. Perhaps it was only to be expected that after some very radical experiments in the early and middle years of the century, the pendulum should swing back and the century end on a note of consolidation.

This is not to suggest that the new-won ground has been abandoned. It has not. But the impetus towards experimentation has become less urgent, and the new techniques are being used more selectively and with greater subtlety. Also, composers have discovered that they can pen a good tune without being dismissed as “naïf” - not least because our understanding of what makes such a tune has itself been deepened and broadened by the very experimentation that has taken place. The twenty-first century audience - exposed as it has been to a torrent of music in all its forms, made possible by broadcasting and recording technology - is more open than ever.

Twentieth-century music written for the bassoon has not of course been exempt from such musical *Sturm und Drang*. Judging by the modern bassoon concertos in my CD collection, the composers did not shrink from tackling the problems and exploring new possibilities. Looked at from the soloists' point of view, many of these works make extreme technical demands and cannot be easy to learn. The performers must make time in the midst of other commitments to learn them, knowing that they are unlikely to perform them more than once or twice, and may not even be invited to record them. As listeners, we owe a great debt of gratitude to performers who take this on. At least history shows that what may sound difficult or even incomprehensible to contemporary ears has a way of becoming part of the accepted musical heritage to later generations. But even that cannot happen unless the music is performed - only then can it begin the subtle

process of insinuating itself into people's minds and eroding and subverting the *idées fixes* of the time.

I have no idea how many concertos have been written for the bassoon in the last 100 years. Of the nine concertos considered in this article, not all might be said to offer immediate appeal, but the fact that they have been performed and recorded means that they are already part of our cultural patina. It is no longer a shock to hear a composer exploiting the bassoon's non-traditional sonic possibilities, such as playing glissandi, quarter-tones and indeed micro-tones. And a recent concerto was specifically written for amplified bassoon - the equivalent of equipping classical opera singers with mics!

The concertos in my collection are as follows:

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| André Jolivet | Concerto for Bassoon, Strings, Harp and Piano (1954) Soloist: Pascal Gallois REM 311234 XCD |
| Villa Lobos | Ciranda da Sete Notas Soloist: Milan Turkovic OREEO C223 911A |
| John Williams | Five Sacred Trees (1995) Soloist: Judith LeClair SONY SK62729 |
| David Amram | Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra (1972) Soloist: Kenneth Pasmanick NEWPORT XCLASSIC NPD 85601 |
| Sofia Gubaidulina | Concerto for Bassoon and Low Strings (1975) Soloist: Valery Popov CHANDOS CHAN 9717 |
| Kjell Karlsen | Serenata for Bassoon and String Orchestra Soloist: Robert Rønnes MOOSMAN ARTISTS SAMPLER DISC |
| Dietrick Erdmann | Concerto for Bassoon, Contrabassoon and Orchestra (1996) Soloists: Helge Bartholomäus and Stanislav Riha QUERSTAND VKJK 9806 |
| Gisbert Nather | Concerto for 3 Bassoons, Contrabassoon and Orchestra, Op. 51 Soloists: The Berlin Bassoon |

Stephen Frost **Quartet** QUERSTAND VKJK 9802
 Bassoon Concerto (1999)
 Soloist: Sigyn Birkeland
 CHANDOS CHAN 9763

All the works are for solo bassoon and orchestra except for the Nather and Erdmann concertos, which were written about the same time for the Berlin Bassoon Quartet and two of its members respectively. I have included the Karlsen *Serenata* and Villa Lobos although they are not actually called concertos. The Karlsen could just as well have been; the Villa Lobos is more of a character piece.

The Jolivet lasts fourteen minutes. It begins with an impassioned recitative for the soloist, which leads into an aptly titled *Allegro Gioviale* - a perky theme and lots of *presto* chromatic runs. The *Largo Cantabile* has a lovely melody in the high register of the instrument and soloist **Pascal Gallois** shows just how effective the French instrument is in this register. The *Fugato* provides a vigorous conclusion. A fine concerto, beautifully played.

Milan Turkovic is the soloist in the Villa Lobos (seventeen minutes). The accompaniment is scored for strings only and is provided by a rather wirey sounding Stuttgart Chamber Ensemble. The musical material could hardly be more basic - seven notes of an ascending major scale - but nothing is ever straightforward with Villa Lobos, and there are some delicious surprises. The piece has a Latin flavor and Turkovic has no inhibitions about exploiting the idiom to the full. An individual and accessible piece.

John Williams' *Five Sacred Trees* (twenty-four minutes) poses more of a challenge to the listener, in that it has a distinctive modern feel and is based more on sound painting and atmosphere than melody. Percussion and harp feature strongly. The five movements are nicely contrasted and the idea behind each is on the whole readily discernible. **Judith LeClair** has an individual and rather reedy tone which at times comes close to sounding like a saxophone, and may not be to all listeners' taste, but she gives this work a totally committed performance and the overall effect is thoroughly persuasive. A fine addition to the repertoire.

I am particularly fond of David Amram's *Concerto* (twenty-four minutes), which is modern in quite a different way. It is very much a "personal" concerto, tailored to a particular player, **Kenneth Pasmanick** who, we are told, had the jazzman's talent for improvisation. The *Concerto* is bluesy and funky by turns, and frankly improvisatory in the treatment of the musical material. It starts strongly with a six-note "motto" theme; uses a lovely song-

like melody in the second movement which might have come from a Bernstein show; and finishes with a short *scherzo*. This is a concerto with a distinctive personality and which successfully blends elements of the jazz and classical traditions.

With Sofia Gubaidulina's *Concerto for Bassoon and Low Strings* (twenty-eight minutes) we move into a very different area. This is an uncompromisingly modern concerto, using quarter-tones, micro-tones and other unconventional techniques. The low strings are themselves required to employ a wide palette of effects, harmonics, glissandi, notes played *sul ponticello* and using the wood of the bow to strike the strings. The overall effect is one of surprising color and richness and, although it is by some way the most "difficult" of the works under review, the music repays the effort of careful listening. Needless to say, great virtuosity is demanded of the soloist and the work was in fact written for the guest bassoonist at this year's BDRS Annual Conference, **Valery Popov**. As far as I can tell, it is the only one of the concertos considered here to make use of the micro-tone techniques researched and developed by Bruno Bartolozzi, whose book *New Sounds for Woodwind* was published in 1967.

Kjell Karlsen is a Norwegian composer and his work (seventeen minutes) is also written for bassoon and strings only, but in a much more conventional idiom. It is an excellent vehicle for **Robert Rønnes'** full-blooded style and Berndt Moosman must be delighted to have such a fine advertisement for his bassoons - this one certainly does him credit. A notable feature of the recording is Rønnes' color and use of vibrato. Both are finely shaded and very musical. Rønnes studied with Popov who, as we heard at the BDRS Annual Conference, varies his vibrato to suit the piece. This recording is conducted by Popov himself. Karlsen's concerto is idiomatic and beautifully written for the bassoon. It deserves to be much better known and commercial recording available in this country would be a first step.

Stephen Frost's *Concerto* (at twenty-nine minutes the longest of the concertos under review) is the most recently written (1999). It also has a very distinctive personality, not least because it was written for amplified bassoon, which permits a larger than normal array of forces and hence a difference of scale. Perhaps the use of percussion - particularly rock band style drumming is its single most striking feature; that and the sheer scale of the sound, associate it in my mind with the spotlights and heightened adrenaline of a "gig" rather than a concert hall. There are elements of film music, West End show and popular music

fused with the more traditional classical music. This mixture will appeal to some listeners and alienate others, but there is no denying its energy and color. The playing of the soloist is also a tour de force. I would like to experience a live performance of this concerto, but from the description of the processes involved in the recording, performances outside a studio may be difficult to set up.

That leaves the two concertos written for different combinations of bassoons, both with a link to the Berlin Bassoon Quartet.

Dietrich Erdmann's *Concerto* (eighteen minutes) gives plenty of space to the two soloists, who conduct an animated dialogue. In spite of large forces, the orchestration is very transparent, and there are fine contributions from other members of the orchestra, particularly the principal clarinet. This is a fresh-sounding, cheerful work, which makes much of the individual characteristics of the instruments. **Helge Bartholomäus** (bassoon) and **Stainislav Riha** (contra) are the excellent soloists. They are both members of the Berlin Bassoon Quartet and this partnership is reflected in the sense of communication which pervades their playing.

The above does not exhaust the lists of concertos written since 1900, but constitutes a good selection to be going on with. France, Germany, Britain, Norway, the United States and Brazil are represented; Italy, conspicuously, is not. Is there, perhaps a latter-day Vivaldi in hiding who will burst upon us with another thirty-nine concertos? We can but hope! ❖

About the author ...

Jefferey Cox is a Counselor in the Foreign Office and a bassoon enthusiast. His postings have enabled him to play with a number of overseas orchestras and ensembles, including the Rand Chamber Orchestra in Johannesburg and Akademischer Orchesterverein in Vienna. He has also been involved in several opera productions, including a memorable "Merry Wives of Windsor" in Windhoek, Namibia. His most recent posting was to Munich, where he helped found the Prinzregenten Wind Ensemble (See DRN 44). This started as a conventional octet, but chance meetings with Gunther Joppig, curator of the city's collection of musical instruments and author of a book on the oboe and bassoon, and with Graham Waterhouse, professional composer, conductor and cellist, took it in innovative directions. The Ensemble flourished and has played at functions sponsored by the British Council and Bavarian Government. Since returning to England, Jefferey has played with the Surrey Mozart Players and Kingston Sinfonia and been a regular contributor to **Double Reed News** as BASSONICUS.

It was **Archie Camden** who inspired Jefferey to take up the bassoon, when the then doyen of British bassoonists gave a recital at his school. Since then, Jefferey has tried to promote interest in the bassoon and in that cause commissioned a suite of pieces for bassoon and piano, collectively entitled "Diplo-Diversions", from Graham Waterhouse. This was published in 1997 by Hofmeister Verlag and premiered by **Bill** and **Graham Waterhouse** at the IDRS Congress in Tempe, Arizona, in summer 1998.