

Kailee Klein

What the Clarinet Owes to Mozart

Music History

Dr. Rebecca Raber

Introduction

Mozart is considered one of the most famous composers to this day. For his short lifespan, he was a prolific composer in multiple genres, including masses, symphonies, operas, concertos, and chamber music. Many know and love Mozart's Clarinet Quintet and Concerto; however, few realize the impact Mozart had on the popularity of this instrument. **The clarinet owes a great deal to Mozart; his love for the newly developed instrument prompted him to write uniquely for it, resulting in its increased popularity.** Through looking at Mozart's life and his experience with the clarinet, one can examine Mozart's compositions and the development of the instrument. Mozart brought the clarinet from a rarely used instrument to a distinguished solo instrument. It was because of Mozart that the clarinet earned a permanent place in an orchestra.

Mozart

Born in Salzburg on January 27, 1756, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart was a child prodigy. His father Leopold was a famous violin player and taught both Mozart and his sister Nannerl music. Mozart started composing around the age of five, and in 1763 he went on a three-year tour of the main musical centers in western Europe with his family.¹ On this tour both Mozart and his sister performed in courts, churches, and for the public. After returning to Salzburg in 1767, Mozart and his family stayed only nine months before going back to Vienna. While on tour, Mozart had great success with his compositions and performances and was appointed honorary concert master in the Salzburg Court at the age of thirteen.² Mozart and his father

¹Stanley Sadie, "Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart," Encyclopaedia Britannica, January 23, 2021, accessed January 26, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Wolfgang-Amadeus-Mozart>.

²Ibid.

continued to tour together around Europe, especially Italy, until 1777 when Mozart turned 21 and decided that he wanted to free himself of his father's control.³ He toured instead with his mother until she died in 1778.

After plenty of accomplishments while touring, Mozart settled in Vienna around 1781 and began making his living as a freelance musician.⁴ Much to his father's disapproval, he fell in love and married Constanze Weber in 1782.⁵ Mozart made his living mostly from commissions, giving lessons, and selling his works to publishers. However, he still struggled financially because of his extravagant tastes and gambling problems. It is also suggested that he had a cyclothymic personality which would explain his depression and spells of hectic creativity.⁶ Mozart found writing out his compositions to be a tedious task because he had the remarkable ability to conceive an entire piece inside his head.

Sadly, Mozart died in the prime of his life at the age of thirty-five on December 5, 1791. At the time of his death, he was in the middle of composing a Requiem Mass that he was commissioned to write, which was finished and published by some of his students.⁷ This Requiem Mass was his 626th composition to be published. Some of his other famous works include *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, Serenade No. 13 in G Major, Symphony No. 40 in G Minor, and countless others. His Clarinet Concerto in A Major is considered today to be a standard in clarinet repertoire. Mozart's clarinet compositions are considered some of the greatest works ever written for the clarinet. But what prompted Mozart to write prolifically for this new instrument?

³Ibid.

⁴Barbara Russano Hanning, *Concise History of Western Music*, 5th ed. (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc, 1998), 354.

⁵Ibid.

⁶Sadie, "Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart."

⁷Ibid.

Mozart Encounters the Clarinet

Mozart's ears were untouched by the sound of the clarinet until 1764, when its rich tone reached his ears at a performance in London.⁸ His hometown of Salzburg did not use clarinets in their compositions,⁹ therefore, Mozart only wrote for the clarinet when he had players to play them. His first piece with clarinets was the Divertimento K.113 which was composed for a patron in Milan in 1771.¹⁰ He wrote two other Divertimenti around this time and all three were not particularly challenging or revolutionary but contained some free and melodious lines for the clarinet, which was uncommon for the instrument at the time.

Mozart fell in love with the clarinet. In 1777 he raved about the difference the clarinets made to the Mannheim band which had been employing two clarinetists since 1759.¹¹ Mozart started including clarinets in some of his larger works because of his captivation with the quality it added to the wind section. The 'Paris' Symphony (K.297) written in 1778, was his first large-scale work that included clarinets.¹² At that time, it was not common practice to include clarinets in a symphony orchestra. The clarinet would not be fully accepted into the orchestra until very late in the 18th century because of its poor acoustical properties.¹³

When Mozart settled in Vienna in 1781, he befriended Anton Stadler and his brother who both played clarinet in the emperor's court orchestra.¹⁴ Mozart wrote the clarinet parts for both the Serenade for Winds in Bb (K.361) and Eb (K.375) for the Stadler brothers.¹⁵ The Serenade in

⁸Martha Kingdon Ward, "Mozart and the Clarinet," in *Music & Letters* 28, no.2 (April 1947): 126, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/855526>.

⁹Hoeprich, 100. However, Hoeprich says that he would have heard two or three key clarinets played by bandsmen in Salzburg.

¹⁰Eric Hoeprich, *The Clarinet* (Great Britain: Yale University Press, 2008), 100.

¹¹Jack Brymer, *Clarinet* (New York, NY: Schirmer Books, 1977), 33.

¹²Hoeprich, 101.

¹³Donald Stirratt George, "The Development and use of the Clarinet Choir in the American Concert Band," (Phd Diss., Columbia University, 1968), 15.

¹⁴Hoeprich, 103.

¹⁵Ibid, 104.

Bb utilizes the advantages of both the clarinet and oboe. Both contain skillful, melodious lines. In contrast, the Serenade in Eb requires the clarinetist to play with technical accuracy and speed while maintaining a simplicity in sound.¹⁶ Many people wonder how early clarinets would have been able to perform these pieces with such technical and pitch accuracy. At the time when Mozart was writing these works, the clarinet likely only had five-keys.¹⁷ It is almost as if Mozart was looking forward to the bright future the clarinet had after it fully developed.

The Clarinet in Mozart's Time

The clarinet took many years to perfect, and many people are uncertain about the exact ancestry of the clarinet. In the 17th century an instrument called the chalumeau was used in Europe. The chalumeau was a cylindrical shaped instrument that had a single reed attached to a tapered mouthpiece.¹⁸ J. C. Denner used this instrument as a guide when he invented the first clarinet. This new instrument was invented around the year 1700 and contained three pieces: the mouthpiece and barrel, the main body-joint, and the foot-joint.¹⁹ It had seven finger holes and two keys, one of which was the speaker key or register key that produced a pitch a twelfth higher than the fundamental.²⁰

From there people slowly made modifications to the clarinet by adding keys and adjusting them to produce chromatic tones. Denner's son Jacob added a third key to the clarinet around 1740.²¹ This addition increased the range and intonation accuracy of the clarinet. Some of the first pieces that included the clarinet were written for the two-keyed and three-keyed clarinet.

¹⁶Ward, 130.

¹⁷Brymer, 29.

¹⁸Ibid, 17-18.

¹⁹George, 10.

²⁰Brymer, 23.

²¹Ibid, 27.

The first known composer to include a clarinet in a major work was J. A. J. Faber in his Mass “Maria Assumpta” in 1720.²² Both Antonio Vivaldi and Handel also wrote some smaller pieces for the clarinet, including concerti grossi and overtures.²³ J. C. Bach used the clarinet in his wind symphonies for outdoor concerts.²⁴ Jean-Philippe Rameau also included clarinets in three of his operas.²⁵ Despite the use of the clarinet by these Baroque composers, the clarinet did not earn its place as a solo instrument until later in the Classical era when Mozart started to incorporate it into his works. The design of the clarinet continued to evolve to better the acoustics and tone production of the instrument.

After the development of the third key, many were hesitant to add any more. The keys were often clumsy and slow in action because of the poor mechanisms used. It was not until the late 1760s that the five-key clarinet was created.²⁶ This clarinet was the design of the clarinet that Mozart would have seen and heard. Therefore, the bulk of his music was written for the five-keyed clarinet. Mozart’s compositions required advanced technical ability from the performers of his time. The five-key clarinet is still very far away from the current seventeen-key clarinet used today. His compositions may be difficult today, but they were even more difficult for the clarinetists of the classical era. That is why Mozart wrote many of his clarinet works for a good friend of his; he knew the limits of Anton Stadler’s technical abilities.

²²George, 14.

²³Brymer, 29-30.

²⁴Ibid, 31.

²⁵Hoeprich, 38.

²⁶Brymer, 29.

Mozart's Later Clarinet Compositions

Around 1780, Mozart began to include clarinet in his major works. His first opera that included clarinets was *Idomeneo*.²⁷ The clarinet is also given a significant part in two of his most famous operas *Don Giovanni* and *Die Zauberflöte*.²⁸ Mozart used the clarinet for three of his piano concertos as well as three of his symphonies.²⁹ The first version of his Symphony in G minor (K.550) did not originally include clarinets until he decided to rewrite the whole work in 1788.³⁰ By taking away some of the oboe solos and giving it to the clarinet, Mozart shows blatant preference for the clarinet sound in his symphonies. For many of these works, the clarinets are not often heard on their own, but the compositions would be significantly weaker without them as the clarinets provide elaborations on themes while also providing the rich, dark tone quality that is unique to the clarinet.

His chamber works that include clarinets are also worth noting. His Quintet in Eb major for piano, oboe, clarinet, horn, and bassoon (K.452) is particularly unusual as the combination of the wind players and the piano is not often used. Mozart considered the wind instruments as merely accompaniment to the solo piano.³¹ He plays around with different tone colors again in his Trio in Eb major for clarinet, viola, and piano (K.498). This piece combines the rich, swelling sound of the clarinet with the viola's dark, velvet sound.³²

His first sacred work containing clarinets was the Kyrie in his Mass in D minor (K.367).³³ Interestingly, Mozart did not include the clarinet in many of his other Catholic, sacred

²⁷Ward, 131.

²⁸Ibid, 132-134.

²⁹Ibid, 141-142.

³⁰Ibid, 144.

³¹Wolfgang Marggraf, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Pianoquintet in E Flat Major, Trio, Franz Schubert, Adagio Und Rondo Concertant*. Bernd Casper, Mitglieder der Bläservereinigung Berlin, Peter Rösler, and Mitglieder des Gewandhausquartetts, Ars Vivendi 2100154, 1998, CD.

³²Ibid.

³³Ward, 139.

pieces. However, he did include the clarinet in many of his Masonic music because both him and Stadler became freemasons around 1785.³⁴ One piece that stands out among his Masonic works is the “Maurerische Trauermusik” (K.477) that includes one clarinet and two newly developed clarinets, the basset-horn.³⁵

Mozart began writing pieces for basset-horns because his good friend Anton Stadler and his brother helped developed it around the mid-1700s.³⁶ This instrument was an extended clarinet that was pitched in F and extended to a low C natural, a fourth below the already existing Bb clarinet.³⁷ It was often curved to make it easier to hold as the length of it was significantly increased to reach lower notes. Mozart took a particular liking to the dark tone of the basset-horn and used it in many of his Masonic works as well as many of the works he wrote towards the end of his lifetime. The basset-horn has a significant part in Mozart’s Requiem as the second basset-horn announces the first statement of the whole work.³⁸ It has also been proven that Mozart’s two greatest clarinet compositions were also written for basset-horn and were later altered to accommodate the modern clarinet’s range.

The Clarinet Quintet and Concerto

As stated earlier, Mozart wrote many of his clarinet pieces for his great friend Anton Stadler. This includes his most distinguished compositions for clarinet, the Quintet in A major for clarinet and string quartet (K.581) and the Clarinet Concerto in A Major (K.622). Stadler was a great clarinet player and strived to perfect his skills on both the clarinet and basset-horn. It has

³⁴Ibid, 138.

³⁵Ibid, 139.

³⁶Hoeprich, 237.

³⁷Brymer, 35.

³⁸Ibid.

been proven that the original compositions of both the Clarinet Concert and Quintet extend lower than the average range of a Bb flat clarinet.³⁹ Therefore, it has been determined that both pieces were written for the basset-horn, which Stadler would have owned and helped perfect.

The Quintet was completed in 1789.⁴⁰ The first movement shows off the full range of the clarinet with its arpeggio and scalar passages while the second movement has opportunity to explore the tenderness and charm of the instrument.⁴¹ The third movement provides opportunity for the clarinetist to rest before ending with a theme and variations in the final movement.⁴²

Shortly after Mozart composed the Clarinet Quintet, he began to write a Concerto in G for basset-horn which was also intended for Stadler to perform.⁴³ However, he only composed fragments of it before stopping and returning to it two years later, transposing it up to A major.⁴⁴ The Clarinet Concerto is very similar in nature to the Quintet as it was written in the same key and for the same performer. The simplicity of both works often causes many people to consider them easy pieces to perform. Even though it may be easy to play the notes with our modern clarinets, it was not so back in the 1700s. What was considered technically difficult for a performer such as Stadler, is taken for granted with the modern improvements of the clarinet. It is also worthy to note the deep understanding of the emotions of performing works such as these well. The virtuosity of these two pieces is hard to describe in words and will never be matched by any other composer.

³⁹Jean Gallois and Wolfgang Meyer, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Quintette Avec Clarinette K 581 and Trio "Les Quilles" K 498*, Wolfgang Meyer and Patrick Cohen with Quatuor Mosaiques, Astrée Auvidis E 8736, 1993, CD.

⁴⁰Ward, 147.

⁴¹Ibid, 148.

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ara Guzelimian, *Mozart: Clarinet Concerto in A Major K. 622*, David Shifrin with the Mostly Mozart Orchestra, Gerard Schwarz, Delos DE 3020, 1985, CD.

⁴⁴Ibid.

Conclusion

Within Mozart's short lifespan, he was able to accomplish many things, particularly the cause of the rise in popularity of the clarinet. Before Mozart, many composers were unsure of how to compose for the newly developed instrument. However, this was a challenge Mozart was interested in taking on. In Mozart's earlier compositions the clarinet was written into the accompaniment parts of many larger works. Each piece Mozart wrote expanded on the idiomatic capabilities of the clarinet. Mozart's love for the clarinet inspired him to write uniquely for the instrument resulting in great works like the Clarinet Quintet and the Clarinet Concerto. It is for this reason that the clarinet owes a great deal to Mozart. Without Mozart, the clarinet would not have earned its permanent place in an orchestra and band or be recognized as a prominent solo instrument.

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