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“Transports of delight”? Reviews of Clarinet Performance in Paris and London, c. 1770 – c. 1810

The clarinet in context

In Paris and London in the 1750s and 1760s, the clarinet was primarily heard in military bands or in combination with other wind instruments.¹ These roles were described by the anonymous *Compleat Instuctions (sic.) for the Clarinet (c. 1781)* which commented:

“the Clarinet is considered as the life of every martial band; and as an indispensable [*sic.*] accompaniment to other wind instruments in concerts, where its tones, judiciously managed, are exhilarating and animating beyond almost any other.”²

Perhaps as a result of these perceived roles, the acceptance of the clarinet as a solo instrument took effect gradually, aided by its physical development from two- and three-keyed instruments to more advanced four- and five-keyed models, developments which probably took place during the late 1750s and early 1760s.³ The *Compleat Instuctions (sic.)* noted the use of the clarinet as a solo instrument with some trepidation, commenting that:

“though it may have some disadvantages as a solo instrument, yet a judicious player may make it something more than barely agreeable,”⁴

¹ See A. R. Rice, *The Clarinet in the Classical Period* (Oxford, 2003), 198 and 204-208.

² *Compleat Instuctions (sic.) for the Clarinet* (London, c. 1781), 1.

³ A. R. Rice, *op. cit.*, 9.

⁴ *Compleat Instuctions (sic.) for the Clarinet* (London, c. 1781), 1. These “disadvantages” could refer to the instrument’s inability to play in certain tonalities (see O.-J. Vandembroeck, *Traité général de tous les instruments à vent* (Paris, c. 1793), 51 and F. Blasius, *Nouvelle méthode de clarinette* (Paris, 1796), 46), the tonal qualities of the different registers of the instrument or the difficulties associated with playing in the chalumeau and altissimo registers (see V. Roeser, *Essai d’instruction à l’usage de ceux qui composent pour la clarinette et le cor* (Paris, 1764), 3-4, L.-J. Francœur le neveu, ‘De La Clarinette’ *Diapason général de tous les instruments à vent* (Paris, 1772), 19, A. Vanderhagen, *Nouvelle méthode de clarinette* (Paris, c. 1799), 33, J. Mahon, *A New and Complete Preceptor for the Clarinet* (London, 1801), 1-2 and X. Lefèvre, *Méthode de clarinette* (Paris, 1802), 6 and 8).

Christoph Friedrich Eley was more hopeful regarding the use of the instrument in solos and duets commenting: “And even in Solo Airs and Duets [*sic.*] it may be rendered very agreeable, [*sic.*] by a judicious management”.⁵

18th-century reviews of the clarinet in performance often marvel at what a “judicious player” could achieve on the instrument and these reviews also focus on many of the qualities which Charles Burney (1789) described as the “principal excellencies of perfect execution.”⁶ These were:

“neatness, accent, energy, spirit, and feeling; and in a . . . performer . . . where the tone depends on the player, power, clearness, sweetness; brilliancy of execution in quick movements, and touching expression in slow.”⁷

The discussion of these musical elements in contemporary reports produces valuable insights into 18th-century clarinet performance.⁸ Through these reviews, writers attempted to describe the specific sonorities, technical abilities and expressive qualities heard, suggesting a growing familiarity with the instrument in the last three decades of the 18th century.

Performance themes: 18th-century Parisian reviews of the clarinet

In Paris, several themes emerge through 18th-century reviews of the clarinet in solo and chamber performance contexts. These include an awareness of the skill of the individual in performing on a temperamental instrument, discussions of specific tonal qualities and descriptions of the contrasting registers of the instrument. Some reviews also consider the agility and virtuosity exhibited by clarinetists and the musical expression evident in their performances. It is also notable in Parisian reviews that similar descriptive terminology (such as clarity, purity, lightness and delicacy) is used in critiquing clarinet performance, further highlighting the performance themes discussed in this article.⁹

⁵ C. F. Eley, *A New Tutor for the Clarinet* (London, c. 1795), 1.

⁶ C. Burney, ‘Essay on Musical Criticism’, *A General History of Music from the Earliest Ages to the Present Period* (London, 1789) reprinted with critical and historical notes by Frank Mercer (New York, 1935), 2 Vols. Vol. 2, 8.

⁷ C. Burney, *loc. cit.*

⁸ On a wider scale, many of these performance qualities are also discussed in reviews of other woodwind instruments in Paris and London. These reviews are referred to in this article to provide context.

⁹ All primary sources in French employed in this article are taken from the online site (Gallica) of the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*, Paris (<https://gallica.bnf.fr/accueil/?mode=desktop>). All newspaper advertisements in English used in this article are taken from 17th- and 18th-century

A temperamental instrument

Contemporary reviews demonstrate that late 18th-century Parisian audiences were aware that the clarinet could be a somewhat temperamental instrument which required careful manipulation by a skilled musician. Performers such as Michel (1754-1786), Rathé, Étienne Solère (1753-1817) and Wachter were all praised for successfully overcoming the inherent difficulties often associated with the instrument. The *Tablettes de renommée* (1785), when describing Rathé's virtuosic performances, commented on the unreliability of the clarinet, describing it as an instrument "on which it is a skill to produce naturally and without effort sounds which are most agreeable and flattering."¹⁰ Rathé's performances, therefore, appear to have been doubly impressive in light of this knowledge. Similarly, Michel was also praised for exhibiting through his playing "the greatest amount of skill".¹¹ Furthermore, at a performance of a concerto for clarinet and bassoon at the *Concert Spirituel*, Solère and Ozi, the bassoonist (1754-1813), were enthusiastically complimented:

"Messrs. Ozi and Soler [Solère] on the clarinet and bassoon astonished the audience by their skilful management of those difficult instruments."¹²

The clarinetist Wachter appears to have merited the most effusive praise from contemporary Parisian audiences. In a review of a performance he gave in 1782, the *Mémoires secrets* remarked:

"one above all admires the clarity and purity of the sounds which he has the skill of drawing from an instrument as unreliable as the clarinet."¹³

Burney Collection Newspapers and 19th-century Burney Collection Newspapers (Gale databases) (<http://find.galegroup.com>).

¹⁰ All translations are the work of the author unless otherwise specified. "dont il a l'art de tirer naturellement et sans effort les sons les plus agréables et les plus flatteurs." 'Musique Compositeurs, Virtuoses, Amateurs et Maîtres de Musique pour les Instruments à vent Flûtes, Haut-bois et Clarinettes' *Tablettes de renommée des Musiciens, auteurs, compositeurs, virtuoses, amateurs et maîtres de musique vocale et instrumentale, les plus connus en chaque genre*. (Paris, 1785), unpaginated.

¹¹ "le plus grand art" 'Musique Compositeurs, Virtuoses, Amateurs et Maîtres de Musique pour les Instruments à vent Flûtes, Haut-bois et Clarinettes' *ibid.*, unpaginated.

¹² 'Parisian Intelligence' *General Evening Post*, April 6, 1786 – April 8, 1786.

¹³ "on a surtout admiré la netteté & la pureté des sons qu'il a l'art de tirer d'un instrument aussi ingrat que la clarinette" L. P. de Bachaumont, M.-F. Pidansat de Mairobert and B.-F.-J Mouffle

This sentiment was also reinforced in a review of a later performance given by Wachter:

“He plays the clarinet with such superiority that this instrument, as unreliable as it is, appears marvellous in his mouth. He uniquely turns it to his own advantage”.¹⁴

The specific terminology employed in these reviews concerning the unreliability and difficulty of the clarinet allows an insight into the perception of the instrument in 18th-century Paris. In light of this, the comments praising the skill of the performer are even more impressive.

Clarity and purity of tone and tonal contrasts

Descriptions of performances given by these clarinetists particularly praise clarity and purity of tone. Michel’s tone was described as “plein de netteté” (full of clarity) and Wachter was admired for “la netteté & la pureté des sons” (the clarity and purity of his sounds).¹⁵ A further review regarding Wachter’s tonal quality also commented: “The sounds he draws from this instrument often resemble those of the glass harmonica, whose purity they have”.¹⁶

d’Angerville, ‘3 February 1782’ *Mémoires secrets pour servir à l’histoire de la République des lettres en France Depuis MDCCLXII jusqu’à nos jours; ou Journal d’un Observateur* (London, 1783-89), 36 Vols. Vol. 20, 61.

¹⁴ “Il joue de la clarinette avec une telle supériorité, que cet instrument, tout ingrat qu’il soit, paroît merveilleux dans sa bouche. Il en tire un parti unique” ‘31 December 1786’ *ibid.*, 36 Vols. Vol. 33, 319. The bassoon was also described as a temperamental instrument which required careful management by a skilful performer. In a review of bassoonist Étienne Ozi it was noted that: “This instrument takes on, under his fingers, a life, a soul and an expressive character which is almost unbelievable and of all instruments, [these qualities are] furthest from its nature.” “Cet instrument prend, sous ses doigts, une vie, une âme & un caractère d’expression, qui le seroient presque confondre avec les instruments dont il est le plus éloigné par sa nature.” ‘2 February 1780’ *Almanach Musical* (Paris, 1781) Vol. 6, 74, (Reprinted Geneva, 1972), 1226.

¹⁵ “plein de netteté” See ‘Musique Compositeurs, Virtuoses, Amateurs et Maîtres de Musique pour les Instruments à vent Flûtes, Haut-bois et Clarinettes’ *Tablettes de renommée des Musiciens* (Paris, 1785), unpaginated and “la netteté & la pureté des sons” ‘3 February 1782’ *ibid.*, 36 Vols. Vol. 20, 61.

¹⁶ “Les sons qu’il tire de cet instrument ressemblent souvent à ceux de l’harmonica dont ils ont la pureté” ‘27 December 1786’ *Journal de Paris*, 1513-14. Translation by D. Charlton, ‘Classical clarinet technique: documentary approaches’ *Early Music* Vol. 16, No. 3 (August, 1988), 397. Similarly, the flautist Pierre-Evard Taillart was complimented on his “easy, clear and superb” sound “facile, nette & superbe” and the oboist François Sallentin was praised for “a delicacy of touch which renders the sounds of his instrument clear and transparent.” “une finesse de tact qui rendoit

The glass harmonica's distinct tonal quality occasioned many comments in late 18th-century Paris and these contemporary descriptions successfully convey the effect on the listener.¹⁷ A report on the instrument published in 1788 commented that the glass harmonica was:

“the most attractive, the most melodious, one goes as far as to say the most dramatic [instrument] that has ever been known & whose magical sounds, penetrating and pure, whose harmonious and sweet notes, which one can sustain, swell, draw out, develop & die away imperceptibly, touch, enchant, charm the soul & plunge you into the most delightful meditation”¹⁸

The comparison of Wachter's tone with the glass harmonica is therefore significant. Although the review of his performance only directly compares the purity of tone, it is possible that the writer may also have felt that his playing resembled the other tonal and timbral qualities associated with the glass harmonica and had a similar effect on the senses of the listener.¹⁹

Wachter's performance appears to have been further enhanced by a strength and brilliancy of sound quality. He was praised for his tone which was said to be

les sons de son instrument clairs & transparents.” See ‘3 March 1782. Mort de M. Taillart, l'aîné, Joueur de flûte’ *Almanach Musical* (Paris, 1783) Vol. 8, 152, (Reprinted Geneva, 1972), 1796 and ‘1 November 1780’ *ibid.* (Paris, 1781) Vol. 6, 139, (Reprinted Geneva, 1972), 1291.

¹⁷ The glass harmonica used in late 18th-century Paris refers to the instrument developed by Benjamin Franklin who in 1761 “took the bowls of . . . glasses and fitted them concentrically (the largest on the left) on a horizontal rod, which was actuated by a crank attached to a pedal.” This is in contrast to the original ‘musical glasses’ where free-standing glasses were used. A. Hyatt King, ‘Musical glasses [armonica; harmonica; glass harmonica]’ *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online* (accessed 2 October 2018) <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.19422>

¹⁸ “le plus attrayant, le plus mélodieux, on ose dire le plus dramatique qui fût encore connu, & don't les sons magiques, pénétrants & purs, don't les accords harmonieux & doux, qu'on peut soutenir, enfler, filer, faire naître & mourir insensiblement, touchent, enchantment, séduisent l'ame & la plongent dans le plus délicieux recueillement.” F. Rozier, J.-A. Mongez and J.-C. de la Métherie, ‘Harmonica perfectionné, Examiné & approuvé par l'Académie des Sciences de Paris; le 5 Mars 1788; par M. Deudon.’ *Observations sur la physique, sur l'histoire naturelle et sur les arts* (Paris, 1773-1793), 43 Vols. Vol. 33 (July 1788), 184.

¹⁹ Furthermore, in 1780s Paris, the effect of the glass harmonica was employed by Anton Mesmer (who pioneered the idea of magnetism) to allegedly treat nervous disorders in his patients. His playing was said to elicit “sounds which speak to the soul.” (“des sons qui vont à l'ame.”) and it is possible that the reviewer of Wachter's performance felt that his playing inspired the same response in his audience. M.-A. Thouret, *Recherches et doutes sur le magnétisme animal* (Paris, 1784), 186.

“one of strength and surprising beauty.” with “a vigorous brightness,”²⁰ Louis Lefèvre was also complimented on his “firm and vigorous way of playing,” and Rathé praised for his “lively, fiery temperament,” and “great depth of chest”.²¹ These comments probably indicate the vast quantity of breath support and the resulting strength of sound with which they performed.²²

One notable exception to these favourable reviews describes Rathé’s tone quality. The review effectively describes the contrasting registers of the instrument and his management of them, expressing dissatisfaction at the perceived tonal deficiencies of the chalumeau register in comparison with the higher registers. The *Almanach Musical* of 1781 commented on:

“the agreeable sounds he “[Rathé] draws from his clarinet in the highest and middle [registers]. We were not as satisfied with the volume, and the quality of the lowest notes of the instrument because it appeared that he gave them too much force and harshness.”²³

Another review of this performance, published in the *Mercure de France* (June, 1780) provided a similar comparison of the different registers and contained the reviewer’s opinion on how Rathé could have improved the lower register notes:

“he [Rathé] draws most pleasant sounds from its [the instrument’s] upper and middle range; but the volume and quality of the low sounds are so ill-matched with the rest, that one would think they issued from

²⁰ “d’une force & d’une beauté suprenante.” See ‘Musique. Concert Spirituel’ *Nouvelles de la republiques, des letters et des arts* (Paris, Wednesday 27 June 1787) Vol. 8, No. 26, 292 and “d’une vigueur éclatante,” ‘31 December 1786’ *Mémoires secrets*, 36 Vols. Vol. 33, 319.

²¹ “une execution ferme et vigoureuse,” Cocatrix (ed.), *Correspondance des Professeurs et Amateurs de Musique* (Paris, Saturday 9 March 1805) No. 10, Columns 76-77, Reprinted as *Correspondance des Amateurs Musiciens suivie de la Correspondance des Professeurs et Amateurs de Musique* (Geneva, 1972) and “une vive chaleur de tête, [et] un grand fond de poitrine,” ‘Musique Compositeurs, Virtuoses, Amateurs et Maîtres de Musique pour les Instruments à vent Flûtes, Haut-bois et Clarinettes’ *Tablettes de renommée des Musiciens* (Paris, 1785), unpaginated. See also a similar quotation regarding Rathé’s playing – “Cet Artiste paroît avoir une vive chaleur de tête & une grande force de poitrine.” “This artist appears to have intense fervour and much strength of chest.” *Mercure de France* (Paris, June 1780), 41. Translation by D. Charlton, *op. cit.*, 397.

²² The combination of clarity, power and brilliance of tone is also commented upon in further Parisian reviews of woodwind performance. For example, the flautist, François Devienne was praised for his “natural, clear, [and] brilliant [sound which is] full of fire.” “naturelle, nette, brillante & plein de feu.” ‘17 March 1782’ *Almanach Musical* (Paris, 1783) Vol. 8, 179, (Reprinted Geneva, 1972), 1821.

²³ “les sons agréables qu’il tire de sa clarinette dans l’aigu & le medium. On n’a pas été aussi satisfait du volume, & de la qualité des sons graves de cet instrument, parce qu’il a paru qu’il leur donnoit trop de force & de roideur.” ‘1780, 25 May Concert Spirituel’ *Almanach Musical* (Paris, 1781) Vol. 6, 110-111, (Reprinted Geneva, 1972), 1262-1263.

a different kind of instrument: instead of strengthening them, M. Rathé should have attempted to soften them, or at least to blend them with the orchestra.”²⁴

These unfavourable assessments perhaps indicate that Rathé was attempting to modify and improve the tonal quality and tuning of the chalumeau register. In his efforts to do so however, it appears that the resulting sound became unfocused and ill-matched with the much more even tone of the higher registers. To produce the chalumeau register notes on an 18th-century clarinet, it is necessary for the player to employ a combination of cross-fingerings and half-holings due to the lack of keywork. As a result, this register presents a variety of different tonal colours, but is more unreliable in terms of sound quality and tuning with some notes proving unfocused and lacking in clarity. By contrast, in the middle and upper registers, cross-fingering is not used to the same extent as in the chalumeau register and therefore the tone is much more even. The early clarinet player must experiment with a wide variety of fingerings in the chalumeau register in order to choose the best option for each note and these decisions are dictated by the individual instrument, the tonality of the work, the speed of difficult passages, the length of awkward notes, the combination of notes and fingerings and the tuning and tonal quality of each individual fingering. It is possible therefore that in the reviews of Rathé’s playing included above, both the natural challenges of the instrument and his selection of fingering choices may have been deciding factors in the opinions expressed here.

The design of French clarinets at this time may have also been a contributory factor to the effect created by Rathé’s performance. Clarinet design varied throughout Europe in the 18th-century with Germany and Bohemia, rather than France, becoming centres of innovative instrumental development. In 1784-5 Daniel Schubart commented that the finest clarinets in Europe were made in Nuremberg, Munich, Berlin and Vienna, omitting any mention of Parisian instruments.²⁵

Viennese clarinets of this period are particularly fine in quality “including well-designed keywork and large tone-holes for the right hand, which enhanced the chalumeau register.”²⁶ Parisian clarinets by contrast, include similar sized holes

²⁴ “il [Rathé] . . . en tire des sons forts agréables dans l’aigu & le médium; mais le volume & la qualité des sons graves sont une telle disparate avec le reste, qu’on les croiroit sortis d’une autre espèce d’instrument: [Translation by D. Charlton, *op. cit.*, 397] au lieu de les renforcer, M. Rathé devoit s’attacher à les adoucir, ou du moins à les fondre dans l’orchestre.” (my translation) *Mercure de France* (Paris, Saturday 3 June 1780), 41.

²⁵ C. F. D. Schubart, ‘Clarinetten’ *Ideen zu einer Ästhetik der Tonkunst* (Vienna, 1806), 320-321. The editor of this posthumously published work, Ludwig Schubart, confirms in his preface that the assembly of materials and preparation for this work began in 1784-85. See *ibid.*, IV.

²⁶ C. Lawson and R. Stowell, *The Historical Performance of Music An Introduction* (Cambridge, 1999), 116.

for the left and right hands and therefore do not have the natural advantage of Viennese clarinets in improving the sound of the chalumeau register.²⁷ The superior quality of the lower register notes of Viennese instruments is particularly significant in light of Mozart's use of this register. As Nicholas Shackleton comments: "the rather larger tone holes in the Bohemian clarinets, especially at the lower end of the instrument, led to a fuller tone in the chalumeau register that was exploited more effectively by Mozart than by his predecessors."²⁸ In addition, this also indicates that "The Bohemian clarinet of Mozart's time had already evolved somewhat further than in other countries." and provided performers with greater opportunities to enjoy the sonorities of the chalumeau register effectively.²⁹

The surprise expressed in the reviews of Rathé's performance regarding the differing tonal qualities heard, may also suggest that Parisian audiences were used to hearing the instrument primarily in its middle and upper ranges, rather than in the less secure chalumeau register. In contemporary Parisian clarinet concertos it is noticeable that the chalumeau register is used sparingly and in specific contexts. In the outer movements the chalumeau register is generally only included in rapid scale and arpeggio passagework which moves across the range of the instrument, or as a special effect in wide leaps across different registers. As a result of this, the clarinetist is rarely required to sustain the chalumeau register notes, avoiding many of the difficulties associated with maintaining consistent tone and tuning in this register. This consideration may also perhaps explain why the slow movements of these concertos only rarely employ chalumeau register notes.³⁰

²⁷ See for example the following Parisian clarinets made in the 1770s and 1780s, all housed in the Sir Nicholas Shackleton Collection, Edinburgh: five-keyed clarinet (originally four-keyed) in B flat by Prudent (1770-1780), Catalogue number: 5115, five-keyed clarinet in B flat by Amlingue (c. 1780), Catalogue number: 5118, five-keyed clarinet in B flat/A by Porthaux (c. 1780), Catalogue number: 5195. A. Myers (ed.), *Historic Musical Instruments in the Edinburgh University Collection Catalogue of the Sir Nicholas Shackleton Collection* (Edinburgh, 2007). 188, 189 and 561.

²⁸ N. Shackleton, 'II. The clarinet of Western art music, 4. Organological history, (i) Early history' *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online* (accessed 17 September, 2018) <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.52768>

²⁹ N. Shackleton, *loc. cit.*

³⁰ For some examples of these uses of the chalumeau register and its omission in concertos published in 1770s and 1780s Paris see C. Stamitz, *Concertos a clarinette principale, deux violons, alto et basse, hautbois et cors ad libitum* (Paris, 1777), C. Stamitz, *Concertos a clarinette principale, deux violons, alto et basse, hautbois et cors ad libitum* (Paris, 1780), M. Yost, *Concerto a clarinette principal, deux violons, alto et basse, deux hautbois, deux cors* (No. 2 in B flat major) (Paris, 1781), M. Yost, *Concerto a clarinette principal, deux violons, alto et basse, deux hautbois, deux cors* (No. 3 in B flat major) (Paris, 1781), M. Yost, *Dixième et dernier concerto pour la clarinette* (Paris, 1786), L. Schmitt, *Concerto pour une clarinette principale avec accompagnement de deux violons, deux alto obligés, basse, hautbois et cors ad libitum* (Paris, 1787), J. M. Hostié, *Premier Concerto pour la clarinette avec deux violons, alto, basse obligés,*

The deficiency of tonal quality in the chalumeau range corresponds with concerns expressed in contemporary pedagogical material. Othon-Joseph Vandebroëck in his *Traité général de tous les instruments à vent* (c. 1793) commented that: clarinets have “tones which are very muffled and [those] which are very difficult to produce from the instrument”. He cites four notes which are particularly difficult to produce - *bb c#'*, *eb'* and *ab'* - all of which are in the chalumeau register.³¹

The concern regarding tuning and tonal quality in this register persisted into the 19th century and was commented upon by Xavier Lefèvre (1763-1829) in his *Méthode de clarinette* (1802):

“The clarinet has sounds which are muffled [dull], others which lack accuracy and others which are too high [sharp] or too low [flat]”³²

Lefèvre then lists those notes which are problematical and need to be corrected and improved by the means of lip pressure and/or various combinations of fingers. All of the notes Lefèvre cites are in the chalumeau register, confirming the unreliability and deficiencies of this register in tone quality and tuning.³³

For contemporary audiences therefore, directly comparing the tone quality of the chalumeau range with the more secure middle and high registers may indeed have given the impression that they were listening to two different instruments.

Agility and Fluency

A number of reviews also attempted to describe the playing techniques evident in performances given by clarinetists, in particular, the agility and fluency of their playing. The *Mercure de France* (June 1780) praised the clarinetist Rathé, commenting that: “He runs over the whole compass of the instrument with

cors et hautbois ad libitum. (Paris, 1788) and M. Yost, *XIIe Concerto pour une clarinette principale avec accompagnement de deux violons, alto, basse, cors et hautbois* (Paris, 1788).

³¹ “des tons qui sont très sourds et qui ont bien de la peine à sortir de l’instrument.” O.-J. Vandebroëck, *op. cit.*, 44.

³² “La clarinette a des sons sourds, d’autres qui manquent de justesse et d’autres qui sont trop hauts ou trop bas” X. Lefèvre, *op. cit.*, 6. Lefèvre’s *Méthode de Clarinette* of 1802 was one of the first instrumental tutors to be published by the Paris Conservatoire and was specifically intended for and employed by aspiring clarinetists studying at the Conservatoire. See C. Pierre, ‘Méthodes’ *Le Magasin de Musique à l’usage des Fêtes Nationales et du Conservatoire* (Paris, 1895), 158.

³³ X. Lefèvre, *loc. cit.*

marvellous agility”.³⁴ This was a somewhat curious comment considering that this review then described in unfavourable terms the deficiencies of his playing in the lower register, as detailed above.³⁵

Joseph Beer (1744-1812) was also praised for the fluency and agility evident in his performances, the *Mercure de France* (March, 1772) reporting:

“We very much applauded the brilliant and precise execution of M. Baër [Beer], who played a clarinet concerto of the composition of M. Stamitz.”³⁶

Nearly 40 years after this review was published, Choron and Fayolle’s *Dictionnaire historique des musiciens* (1810) commented that Beer:

“became in a short time the premier clarinet[tist] of France . . . We have never, before him, heard a Bohemian play the clarinet with the nimbleness and fluency which characterises his playing.”³⁷

This quotation relating to Beer is notable for the surprise expressed that he, as a Bohemian, could perform with such “nimbleness and fluency”, possibly a veiled reference to his learning the clarinet only after his move to Paris, c. 1760.³⁸

³⁴ “Il parcourt avec une agilité merveilleuse toutes les dimensions possibles de son instrument,” *Mercure de France* (Paris, June 1780), 41. Translation by D. Charlton, *op. cit.*, 397.

³⁵ In addition, the *Tablettes de renommée des Musiciens* of 1785 also commented that Rathé played “avec une agilité suprenante et merveilleuse,” “with a surprising and marvellous agility,” See ‘Musique Compositeurs, Virtuoses, Amateurs et Maîtres de Musique pour les Instruments à vent Flûtes, Haut-bois et Clarinettes’ *Tablettes de renommée des Musiciens* (Paris, 1785), unpaginated.

³⁶ “On a beaucoup applaudi l’exécution brillante & precise de M. Baër [Beer], qui a joué un concerto de clarinette de la composition de M. Stamitz.” ‘Sunday 2 February 1772’ *Mercure de France* (Paris, March 1772) 159. Beer is often referred to as Baër in contemporary advertisements. The agility and virtuosity of other woodwind players in Paris was also noted. For example, the flautist Taillart was complimented on his “brilliant execution, full of soul and fire” “une exécution vive, brillante, plein d’âme & de feu” ‘3 March 1782. Mort de M. Taillart, l’aîné, Joueur de flûte’ *Almanach Musical* (Paris, 1783) Vol. 8, 152, (Reprinted Geneva, 1972), 1796.

³⁷ “[I] devint en peu de tems [*sic.*] la première clarinette de France . . . On n’avait jamais, avant lui, entendu en Bohême jouer de la clarinette avec la prestesse et la facilité qui caractérisent son jeu.” A. É. Choron and F. J. Fayolle, *Dictionnaire historique des musiciens: artistes et amateurs morts ou vivants, précédé d’un sommaire de l’histoire de la musique* (Paris, 1810/Hildesheim and New York, R1971) 2 Vols. Vol. 1, 44.

³⁸ A. É. Choron and F. J. Fayolle, *loc. cit.*, F.-J. Fétis, *Biographie universelle des musiciens et bibliographie générale de la musique* (Paris, 1835-1844) 8 Vols. Vol. 2, 99-100 and A. R. Rice, ‘Beer, Joseph’ *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online* (accessed 6 January, 2018) <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.02513>. The reference to Beer’s Bohemian origins could also be an indication of national chauvinism and bias against Bohemian musicians. Burney commented that all town and village schools in Bohemia taught music to “the children of

The references to agility, fluency and execution in these reviews offer an insight into the technical prowess of these performers and indicate that these qualities were particularly prized and merited effusive praise from contemporary reviewers.

Musical Expression and Character

The musical expression and character of a performance is always difficult to describe, with some reviews referring to these qualities in complimentary, but vague terms. For example, Beer was judged to have “put much soul and taste into his playing”.³⁹ However, individual reviews discuss how musical expression was evident in performances given by contemporary clarinetists. Michel was praised for the “vivid and brilliant colours” evident in his performance and a review concerning Wachter commented:

“He varies the passages according to his own taste. Some sounds are of a vigorous brightness, which are then followed by others full of sweetness and one cannot perceive the transitions as they are so carefully handled.”⁴⁰

The wide range of expressive contrasts described in Wachter’s playing, from sounds “of a vigorous brightness” to “others full of sweetness”, are notable for their similarity to Xavier Lefèvre’s later discussion concerning the capabilities of the instrument. In his *Méthode de clarinette*, Lefèvre commented that: “It [the clarinet] renders equally well the battle hymn and the shepherd’s song”, a description reinforced in practical terms by this review of Wachter’s expressive performance.⁴¹

the peasants and trades-people”. Music performance in these schools was “rude and coarse, and . . . perfection seems never aimed at amongst them”. There may therefore have been lower expectations of musicians originating from Bohemia (both in terms of talent and class) and this also may account for the surprise expressed regarding the quality of Beer’s clarinet playing. See C. Burney, *The Present State of Music in Germany, The Netherlands, and United Provinces* (London, 1773) 2 Vols. Vol. 2, 11-12.

³⁹ ‘Friday 7 April 1775’ *L’Esprit des Journaux* (Paris, May 1775) Vol. 5, 285.

⁴⁰ “un coloris vif et brillant” ‘Musique Compositeurs, Virtuoses, Amateurs et Maîtres de Musique pour les Instruments à vent Flûtes, Haut-bois et Clarinettes’ *Tablettes de renommée des Musiciens* (Paris, 1785), unpaginated and “il varie ces passages à son gré, a des sons d’une vigueur éclatante, il en fait succéder d’autres pleins de douceur, sans qu’on s’aperçoive des transitions, tant elles sont habilement ménagées.” ‘31 December 1786’ *Mémoires secrets*, 36 Vols. Vol. 33, 319.

⁴¹ “Elle [la clarinette] rend également bien l’hymne du guerrier et le chant des bergers;” X. Lefèvre, *op. cit.*, 17. Discussions of musical expression can also be observed in contemporary Parisian reviews of other woodwind performers. For example, the flautist Félix Rault, was praised for achieving “throughout the whole range, the lightness and nuances of the most melodious and most

In addition, several reviews also described the dynamic contrasts achieved by individual clarinetists. For example, Beer was described as “especially inimitable in the [execution of the] decrescendo” and Wachter was complimented on his “volubility of expression”, the reviewer adding that: “one could only admire the art with which he swelled and shaded off the sounds”⁴²

Audience response

Several reviews also commented on how audiences responded to performances (and proposed performances) by clarinetists in Paris and a sense of anticipation is evident in some reports. The following extract is taken from an entry in the *Mémoires secrets* of 1773:

“Yesterday there was a large crowd at Wauxhall, brought about by the announcement of a great concert where Mr Baër [Beer] would play a clarinet concerto,”⁴³

A clarinet concerto would have been considered a novelty in early 1770s Paris and this description effectively conveys the excitement and enthusiasm with which the Parisian public met this proposed performance.

agreeable voice.” “toute l’étendue, la légereté & les nuances de la voix la plus mélodieuse & la plus agreeable.” ‘Musique Compositeurs, Virtuoses, Amateurs et Maîtres de Musique pour les Instruments à vent Flûtes, Haut-bois et Clarinettes’ *Tablettes de renommée des Musiciens* (Paris, 1785), unpaginated.

⁴² “surtout inimitable dans le decrescendo.” A. É. Choron and F. J. Fayolle, *op. cit.*, 2 Vols. Vol. 1, 44 and “volubilité à l’expression, & l’on ne sauroit trop admirer l’art avec lequel il enfle & dégrade les sons.” ‘Musique. Concert Spirituel’ *Nouvelles de la republiques des letters et des arts* (Paris, Wednesday 27 June 1787) Vol. 8, No. 26, 292. See also an almost identical quotation regarding Wachter’s playing – “On a sur-tout admiré l’art avec lequel il nuance son jeu & la manière dont il enfle & degrade les sons.” “One above all admired the skill with which he nuanced his playing and the way he swelled and shaded off the sounds.” *Mercure de France* (Paris, January 1787), 40-42. Translation by D. Charlton, *op. cit.*, 397. Similarly, the flautist Rault was described as “the first who has discovered the art of swelling and diminishing, according to his own taste, the natural sounds of this instrument,” “le premier qui ait trouvé l’art d’enfler & diminuer à son gré les sons naturels sur cet instrument,” ‘Musique Compositeurs, Virtuoses, Amateurs et Maîtres de Musique pour les Instruments à vent Flûtes, Haut-bois et Clarinettes’ *Tablettes de renommée des Musiciens* (Paris, 1785), unpaginated.

⁴³ “Il y a eu un grand concours de monde hier au wauxhall, amené par l’annonce d’un fameux concert, où le sieur Baër [Beer] devoit exécuter un concerto de clarinettes,” ‘18 July 1773’ *Mémoires secrets*, 36 Vols. Vol. 24, 280. Concerts were given on a regular basis in *La Salle du Wauxhall* in the Saint Germain district of Paris. C.-H. Watelet, *Programme de l’opéra de "Deucalion et Pyrrha", exécuté au concert des écoles gratuites de dessin, le 29 avril 1772, dans la salle du Wauxhall de la foire St-Germain* (Paris, 1772), Titlepage.

Some contemporary reports refer only to a general sense of public satisfaction with performances given by clarinetists. For example, Charles Duvernoy performed a concerto at the *Elysée-Bourbon* in 1797 “which enchanted the listeners [audience].” and in 1805 Louis Lefèvre was said to have “deserved the vigorous applause which was lavished upon him” in a performance of a symphony concertante for clarinet and bassoon performed at the *Concert des Amateurs*.⁴⁴

However, a number of reviews were more specific, referring to various characteristics of the performance which merited particular praise. For example, in his debut performance at the *Concert Spirituel* in April 1781, Michel’s playing “displayed strength, fluency, very agreeable sounds, [and] a way of playing which made many hope for his talent”.⁴⁵

Following his impressive debut, Michel’s initial promise developed into a successful performance career and he continued to enthral audiences. One reviewer at the *Concert Spirituel* of 9 September 1781 commented on:

“Mr. Michel, who played the clarinet with an assurance and ease which excited the liveliest transports [transports of delight]”⁴⁶

Furthermore, a review of a performance given by him at the *Concert Spirituel* in 1782 also commented:

“The public appeared very satisfied with the lightness and delicacy of his sounds and of their beautiful clarity.”⁴⁷

In addition, the clarinetist Wachter was also favourably received. At the *Concert Spirituel* of 2 February 1782, it was reported that: “The beautiful playing of the first performer [Wachter] gave great pleasure.”⁴⁸ Another review of the same performance elaborated on those qualities which most delighted the audience:

⁴⁴ “qui a enchanté les auditeurs.” ‘L’Elysée-Bourbon’ *Feuilleton de Littérature, Spectacles, Anecdotes, Modes et Avis Divers* (Paris, 1797), 1-2 and “il a mérité les nombreux applaudissemens qui lui ont été prodigués.” Cocatrix (ed.), *op. cit.*, (Paris, Saturday 9 March 1805) No. 10, Columns 76-77.

⁴⁵ “[M. Michel] a déployé de la force, de l’aisance, des sons très-agréables, une manière d’exécuter qui fait beaucoup espérer de son talent.” *Mercur de France* (Paris, April 1781) 32.

⁴⁶ “M. Michel, qui a joué de la clarinette avec une sûreté, avec une facilité, qui ont excité les transports le plus vifs” ‘9 September 1781’ *Mémoires secrets*, 36 Vols. Vol. 18, 32.

⁴⁷ “Le Public a paru très-satisfait de la légèreté & de la délicatesse de ses sons & de leur belle limpidité.” ‘26 March 1782’ *Almanach Musical* (Paris, 1782) Vol. 7, 95, (Reprinted Geneva, 1972), 1475.

⁴⁸ “La belle exécution du premier [Wachter] a fait grand plaisir.” ‘3 February 1782’ *ibid.* 36 Vols. Vol. 20, 61.

“M. Wachtres [Wachter] played a concerto by M. Punto on the clarinet. We were generally pleased by the fluency of his playing, by the clarity of the sounds that he drew from this instrument and by the pure taste of his execution.”⁴⁹

Perhaps the most revealing review was published following Wachter’s performances at the *Concert Spirituel* on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day 1786. The entry, in the *Mémoires secrets* of 31 December 1786, commented:

“Mr. Wachter is an artist who especially shone at the concerts on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day which would have been truly mediocre without him . . . He has excited a general enthusiasm.”⁵⁰

This ‘general enthusiasm’ may have referred solely to Wachter’s playing, however the favourable comments regarding a number of clarinetists suggests that a variety of performers became increasingly popular, promoting the clarinet in solo and chamber music amongst Parisian society from the 1770s onwards.

Contemporary advertisements and reviews of the *Concert Spirituel* record performances of clarinet concertos between 1771 and 1790 and it is possible to observe a dramatic increase in the performance of these works during this time frame – 22 in the 1770s, compared with 81 in the 1780s.⁵¹ In 1783 for example, 20 clarinet concertos were performed. This number was only two less than the total number of clarinet concertos heard in the previous decade, indicating an increasingly favourable audience reception to the instrument and performers. The 1780s also witnessed a greater number of clarinetists performing these solo concertos at the *Concert Spirituel*. In the 1770s, Beer and Wolff were the only solo clarinetists featured. However, in the 1780s eight clarinetists performed concertos

⁴⁹ “M. Wachtres [Wachter] a joué un concerto de M. Punto sur la clarinette. Il a plu généralement par la facilité de son jeu, par la netteté des sons qu’il a tires de cet instrument & par le gout pur de son execution.” ‘2 February, 1782, Concert Spirituel’ *Almanach Musical* (Paris, 1783) Vol. 8, 115, (Reprinted Geneva, 1972), 1759.

⁵⁰ “M. Wachter est l’artiste qui a principalement brillé aux concerts de la veille & du jour de Noël, qui auroient été fort médiocres sans lui. Il a excité un enthousiasme général” ‘31 December 1786’ *Mémoires secrets*, 36 Vols. Vol. 33, 319.

⁵¹ The first recorded performance of a clarinet concerto at the *Concert Spirituel* was on 25 March 1750 and was given by France de Kermasin performing a concerto by an unknown composer. It was not until 21 years later, following a performance of a clarinet concerto by Beer on 24 December 1771, that clarinet concertos began to be included more frequently in the *Concert Spirituel*’s programmes. See C. Pierre, *Histoire de Concert Spirituel, 1725-1790* (Paris, 1900/R1975), 257 and 299.

and in a single year (1787), five clarinetists performed eight different clarinet concertos.⁵²

In addition, in the 1780s clarinet players were also heard at the *Concert Spirituel* performing chamber works such as symphony concertantes, airs and variations and quartets with other wind instruments. The clarinet appeared in the role of chamber instrument 15 times between 1780 and 1790, compared with only four performances in this context between 1755 and 1779.⁵³ The *Concert Spirituel* was an effective showcase for the newest woodwind instrument, bringing the clarinet to the attention of Parisian audiences and further inspiring the ‘general enthusiasm’ commented upon in the review above.

Performance themes: 18th-century London reviews of the clarinet

Contemporary reviews published in Paris discussed a number of different clarinet players. In London however, 18th-century reviews of the clarinet were dominated by one figure, John Mahon (c. 1749-1834). As a result, many of the performance themes observed in reviews published in London are viewed through Mahon’s performances and are therefore inextricably linked with this performer. These include: an appreciation by London audiences that the clarinet’s tone was dependent on the individual performer, discussions of the specific tonal qualities and descriptions of the technical prowess, execution and virtuosity evident in the performances. Contemporary reviews also comment favourably upon the effect of the clarinet in combination with the voice. In spite of Mahon’s dominance in this centre however, there are some valuable reports of performances given by several other clarinetists in London at this time which echo the performance themes identified in Mahon’s playing.

John Mahon

The clarinetist John Mahon arguably became the most important figure in the promotion of the instrument in London at this time and he received effusive praise from London audiences:

“Mahon. – The clarinet in this performer’s hands assumes the softness of a pastoral pipe. None of those horrid notes, resembling the screaming

⁵² These clarinetists were Wachter, Jean-Marie Hostié, Barbay, Solère and X. Lefèvre. See C. Pierre, *ibid.*, 269-344 and C. J. Crisp, *The Clarinet Comes of Age, c. 1760 – c. 1810: A Tale of Two Cities* (unpublished PhD dissertation, Royal College of Music, London, July 2016), 127-128.

⁵³ C. Pierre, *loc. cit.* and C. J. Crisp, *ibid.*, 123-125

and screeching of an enraged goose, are ever heard from him. Energy, however, he also preserves, and joins to it great volubility and facility of execution.”⁵⁴

The comparison of his playing with the sound of the pastoral pipe is an interesting one as it suggests that he performed with a sweet tone quality which could enchant the listener with its beauty and melodious nature. This review is also notable for its description of how the instrument could potentially sound in the hands of significantly less-skilled performers.

The description of the screaming and screeching that the clarinet could produce in lesser hands is reinforced by reports of performances given by clarinet players at Bartholomew Fair where the performers were clearly employed for attracting attention, rather than for the quality of their music making. A contemporary observer recorded the presence of a clarinet player employed at the fair in 1776 and the reader is left in no doubt as to the author’s opinion!

“The most troublesome animal within the limits of the fair is a dismal son of a b---h, who makes a most infernal noise from a two pair of stairs window, upon an instrument he calls a clarinet, to invite those customers whose pockets will allow them to regale upon roast pig and currant sauce.”⁵⁵

A quarter of a century later the musical entertainments of this place had apparently not improved:

“Upon arriving at Cloth Fair the Lord Mayor proclaimed Bartholomew Fair with the usual formalities. At this instant the most hideous noise commenced.—The screaming of fiddles, the belching and bursting of French-horns and trumpets out of tune, the squeaking and squalling of wretched clarionets, flutes, and hautboys, not to mention the delectable solos on the salt-box, formed a concert superior to what Discord herself could have invented.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ *Stuart’s Star and Evening Advertiser*, Thursday April 9, 1789.

⁵⁵ *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, Thursday September 5, 1776.

⁵⁶ *The Morning Chronicle*, Saturday September 4, 1802. The saltbox, usually to be found “hung on kitchen walls, appears as a musical or noise-producing instrument in many descriptions and images of English street . . . music in the 18th and 19th centuries”. It could be played placed on the knee or hung round the neck with cord. The lid was opened and a spoon used as a beater moving between the box and the lid to create the sound. In addition, some performers used the box itself, rattling the lid to produce the sound. Jeremy Barlow also comments that “The presence of the saltbox signifies a low class of theatrical entertainment,” as in the case of the band at Bartholomew Fair quoted above. See J. Barlow, *The Enraged Musician: Hogarth’s Musical Imagery* (Aldershot, 2005), 261-263.

These quotations confirm that clarinets were also heard in unfavourable contexts in London, their vivid descriptions proving that the public had experienced the “hideous” sounds that lesser performers could produce. The knowledge that Mahon therefore could draw such beautiful sounds from this instrument, contrary to some expectations of the clarinet, must have made this performer appear even more talented.⁵⁷

The comments above regarding Mahon’s “great volubility and facility of execution.” are also reminiscent of his first London review which reported on the execution and grace evident in his playing. Mahon made his London debut as a clarinetist in 1773 at the Theatre Royal, Haymarket, performing a clarinet concerto between the acts of the oratorio *Messiah* by Handel.⁵⁸ In a review of the oratorio, Mahon’s performance is commented upon, suggesting that the work was so well received that it was worthy of comment alongside the main part of the entertainment:

“Mr. Mahoon’s [Mahon’s] concerto on the clarinet surprised every person; his masterly execution of the lighter parts of the concerto beggar description. The lovers of music cannot have a higher treat; but let them not trust to report; let them hear, and be convinced.”⁵⁹

The surprise may have been purely as a result of hearing a solo clarinetist, a novel experience at a time when the instrument was usually heard playing in military

Further performances by wind bands in popular settings also appear to have been lacking in quality. Whilst visiting Vienna, Charles Burney commented: “There was music every day, during dinner, and in the evening at the inn, where I lodged, which was the Golden Ox; but it was usually bad, particularly that of a band of wind instruments, which constantly attended the ordinary. This consisted of French horns, clarinets, hautboys, and bassoons; all so miserably out of tune, that I wished them a hundred miles off.” C. Burney, *op. cit.* (London, 1773), 2 Vols. Vol. 1, 330-331.

⁵⁷ Similarly, the oboist Giuseppe Sammartini, who arrived in London in 1729, was praised for the “tone which he had the art of giving it [the oboe]” and it was remarked that “Before his time the tone of the instrument was rank, and, in the hands of the ablest proficients, harsh and grating to the ear; by great study and application, and by some peculiar management of the reed, he [Sammartini] contrived to produce such a tone as approached the nearest to that of the human voice of any we know of”. See J. Hawkins, *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music* (London, 1776/R1875), 3 Vols. Vol. 2, 894-895. See also J. K. Page, ‘The Hautboy in London’s Musical Life, 1730-1770’, *Early Music*, 16, No. 3 (August, 1988), 362.

⁵⁸ *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, Wednesday February 17, 1773 and Thursday February 25, 1773. Also quoted in *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, Friday February 19, 1773 and Wednesday February 24, 1773 and *Public Advertiser*, Tuesday February 23, 1773. The *Messiah* was also performed at the same venue on Friday 26 March 1773, again with Mahon performing a clarinet concerto between the acts. See *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, Friday March 26, 1773, *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, Thursday March 25, 1773 and Friday March 26, 1773 and *Public Advertiser*, Friday March 26, 1773.

⁵⁹ *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, Saturday February 27, 1773.

bands or performing in partnership with horns at the London pleasure gardens. The audience may therefore have been unprepared for the solo sound of the instrument. The latter part of the review also suggests that the audience may have been surprised by the high quality of Mahon's performance, indicating that they may have had little perception of what the instrument could achieve technically. The reference to Mahon's "masterly execution of the lighter parts of the concerto" suggests that his playing was technically impressive and delicately phrased. This comment is most likely to have referred to the outer movements of the concerto and it is probable that Mahon would have been performing a concerto of his own composition for his debut performance. Concerto No. 2 (the only extant concerto by Mahon), features lively first and third movements with light-hearted melodies and challenging semiquaver passagework. This is particularly true of the closing 6/8 rondo movement. Based on the theme of 'The wanton God who pierces hearts' from Arne's *Comus*, this movement would certainly have allowed Mahon to display his "masterly execution".⁶⁰

Following Mahon's impressive debut, he appeared at the same venue on Wednesday 3 March 1773 performing a clarinet concerto for an event entitled "A Concerto Spirituale".⁶¹ In this concert, Mahon performed his concerto as part of the main entertainment and the review was again full of praise, commenting that the work contained:

"such exquisite variations, such pleasing notes, and is executed with such graceful sprightliness, that it is wonderful the merit of that Concerto alone does not fill the House."⁶²

This review echoes the first report of Mahon's playing regarding the "graceful sprightliness" with which he performed, suggesting that his technical assurance and virtuosity impressed the audience. Indeed, Mahon's playing appears to have been

⁶⁰ J. Mahon, *Clarinet Concerto no. 2*, ed. Elaine Thomas (London, 1989). Although the date of composition of Concerto No. 2 is uncertain, it certainly predates February 1775. In a rare example of the details of the work being included in a newspaper advertisement, the *Public Advertiser* of 16 February 1775 advertised that a performance at the Haymarket would include: "After the Second Part, a Concerto on the Clarinet, with Variations on the Wanton God, by Mr. Mahon." See *Public Advertiser*, Thursday February, 1775 and T. A. Arne, *The Musick in the Masque of Comus* (London, c. 1740), 32-33.

⁶¹ *Public Advertiser*, Wednesday March 3, 1773. The advertisement claimed that this was a new form of entertainment, including sacred works and solo performances and clearly taking its inspiration from its Parisian counterpart. The *Concerto Spirituale* was repeated "By Particular Desire" on Wednesday 17 March, 1773 and again featured a clarinet concerto performed by Mahon. See *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, Saturday March 13, 1773 and Monday March 15, 1773 and *Public Advertiser*, Saturday March 13, 1773, Monday March 15, 1773 and Wednesday March 17, 1773.

⁶² *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, Thursday March 4, 1773.

the high point of the evening for this reviewer, who clearly felt that the performance deserved a more numerous audience than was present. The reviews quoted above demonstrate that audiences appreciated many elements of Mahon's playing, including his sweet and beautiful tone quality, his technical assurance, virtuosity and the energy and ease with which he played, allowing a useful insight into the complete performance.⁶³

Whilst the majority of reviews of Mahon's performances are favourable, there is however one notable exception. A 1783 review of a performance of *Alexander's Feast*, where Mahon performed a clarinet concerto between the acts, reads:

“Mahon's Clarinet is as well as a Clarinet can be—it would be much aided by combining it with the Hautboy and Bassoon.”⁶⁴

The grudging praise of this review, where the author takes issue with the instrument itself rather than Mahon's playing, is particularly revealing concerning the expectations of the clarinet at this time. It is interesting that the reviewer felt that combining the clarinet with other instruments, as heard in the London pleasure gardens, would render its sound acceptable and suggests that solo clarinet performances were still considered as something of a novelty. Clearly this reviewer had usually heard the clarinet in combination with other instruments and was unimpressed by its transition into a solo instrument. In spite of this however, the author did acknowledge that Mahon had made the most of the instrument and that he had performed as well as the instrument would allow.

Apart from this review, Mahon's performances, both solo and ensemble, appear to have been very well received and there also appears to have been a certain amount of pride felt in his status as the first British, rather than foreign virtuoso clarinetist. This is proved by a 1787 review entitled *Music in Paris* which reads:

“There is an excellent Clarinet – Hoster [Hostié] – a concerto player – but not so excellent as our Mahon.”⁶⁵

⁶³ Similarly, William Parke when commenting on fellow oboist Johann Christian Fischer remarked that: “The tone of Fischer was soft and sweet, his style expressive, and his execution was at once neat and brilliant.” W. T. Parke, *Musical Memoirs; Comprising An Account of the General State of Music in England* (London, 1830), 2 Vols. Vol. 1, 335.

⁶⁴ *Public Advertiser*, Saturday April 5, 1783. For an advertisement for the performance of *Alexander's Feast* see *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, Thursday April 3, 1783.

⁶⁵ *World and Fashionable Advertiser*, Thursday September 6, 1787. For further favourable reviews of Mahon's performances see *Morning Chronicle*, Tuesday October 18, 1796 and *Times*, Tuesday October 18, 1796.

Indeed, his fame as a clarinetist was immortalised in two contemporary poems. The first was a satirical poem published in 1797 by Jenkin Jones, part of which is devoted to describing the most celebrated instrumentalists in London at this time:⁶⁶

“See our Musicians seize with skilful hand,
Of tuneful steeds a well united band,
All act in Concert, meet in one design,
And in the same pursuit accordant join.
To no rude hand commit the tuneful rein,
Let no unskilful touch such steeds profane.
For Dragonetti’s Bass let none dispute,
Give Salomon the Fiddle, Ashe the Flute,
Let Krumpholtz in her Harp concerto sport,
Clementi sit at the Piano Forte.
Let either Parke the dulcet Hautboy tune,
Send Holmes and Parkinson to the Bassoon.
Entrust the Vi’loncellos to the care
Of Linley, Ashley, Reinagle and Ware.
Let Sargeant swell the Trumpet’s silver tone,
And give the Clarinet to its Mahon [Mahone].”⁶⁷

The second poem was published in 1805 in the memoirs of an English actor named Charles Lee Lewes. Here, Lee Lewes quotes a poem written by a Mr. Bell who staged a benefit concert on 29 April, 1793 at the New Theatre in Edinburgh. The poem, perhaps designed to entice an audience to attend, describes the performers taking part in this benefit and Mahon is featured amongst them:⁶⁸

“’Tis humbly hop’d the audience thinks it right,
To see Jack Tar return’d in health to-night;
They’ll be inform’d their foes were made to tremble;
In a Duet by Bell and Mrs. Kemble.

⁶⁶ Extract of poem taken from J. Jones, *Hobby Horses, A Poetic Allegory in Five Parts* (London, 1797), Part V, 125-126.

⁶⁷ Although John Mahon was born in Oxford, it has been suggested that the Mahon family were of Irish origin. As such, his name may perhaps have been pronounced ‘Mahone’. The rhyming couplets in this poem support this idea, rhyming the word ‘tone’ with ‘Mahone’. See P. Weston, ‘Mahon family’ *Grove Music Online. Oxford Music Online* (accessed 7 January, 2018) <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.17462>.

⁶⁸ Extract of poem quoted in C. Lee Lewes and J. Lee Lewes, *Memoirs of Charles Lee Lewes, containing Anecdotes, Historical and Biographical, of the English and Scottish Stages, During a period of forty years. Written by himself.* (London, 1805), 4 Vols. Vol. 4, 234-235.

And to sustain true mirth, he has not fears,
When Mr. Mahon on the stage appears:
The audience of this night will ne'er forget,
The sounds that issue from his clarionet,
Which will contribute to support their glee,
With compositions ta'en from Langolee."

Performance qualities of visiting clarinet players

Reviews relating to the performance qualities of further clarinetists are scarce; however, there are some valuable references. For example, as early as 1774, two unnamed German musicians who performed at a number of private musical parties were said "to select the finest tones ever heard from the bassoon and clarinet:" suggesting that the reviewer had heard a number of previous performances including the clarinet in order to make a favourable judgement.⁶⁹

Another clarinetist, Mr. Hartman, performed a clarinet concerto at a subscription concert hosted by Johann Peter Salomon (1745-1815), a review commenting:

"Mr. Hartman, on the clarinet, was favourably received. Sweetness of tone has been his principle [*sic.*] study, and this he has very effectually attained. But musicians who aspire after excellence should never forget that if they want passion, the defect cannot be compensated by any other excellence, however great."⁷⁰

Despite complimenting Hartman's tonal quality, it is the reviewer's pointed comments regarding the detrimental effects of performing with a lack of "passion" and musicality which provide greater insight into his performance.

The cautionary advice that an absence of feeling "cannot be compensated by any other excellence, however great" is also reminiscent of Xavier Lefèvre's advice to clarinetists in his *Méthode de clarinette* regarding the vital importance of

⁶⁹ *Middlesex Journal and Evening Advertiser*, January 18, 1774 – January 20, 1774.

⁷⁰ *Morning Chronicle*, Wednesday March 26, 1794. Hartman is thought to have been a visiting German musician who performed in concerts in London in 1792, 1794-96 and 1800. See P. H. Highfill, K. A. Burnim and E. A. Longhans, *A biographical dictionary of actors, actresses, musicians, dancers, managers & other stage personnel in London, 1660-1800* (Illinois, 1973) 16 Vols. Vol 7, 164 and P. Weston, *More Clarinet Virtuosi of the Past* (London, 1977), 123. See also *Diary or Woodfall's Register*, Monday February 6, 1792, *Morning Chronicle*, Wednesday April 22, 1795, *Morning Chronicle*, Friday January 22, 1796, *Morning Herald*, Saturday February 22, 1800 and *Sun*, Saturday March 8, 1800 for concert advertisements including Hartman.

playing expressively. In article 10 – ‘The manner of nuancing sounds’ – Lefèvre cautioned that:

“The playing of the clarinet is monotonous when the artist doesn’t nuance their sounds and their articulation and they play without intention, without expression and without assurance . . . ; uniformity of playing or of articulation has often attributed to the nature of the instrument a coldness and monotony which should only be attributed to the performer who does not know how to take advantage of their instrument.”⁷¹

Xavier Lefèvre

In 1790, this celebrated Parisian-based clarinetist visited London with fellow musicians, horn players Frédéric Duvernoy (1765-1838) and Buch, and the bassoonist Perret.⁷² These four instrumentalists first appeared at a private concert given for the members of the *Anacreontic Society* on Wednesday 17 February 1790. The *Argus* commented favourably on this concert, remarking:

“four strangers appeared, two of whom with horns, one bassoon, and a clarinet—they performed quartettos adapted to their respective instruments, in a very high finished and engaging style—they merited, and they received the most unbounded applause.”⁷³

Their performance would have produced a sound and harmonic texture that the London public would have been well acquainted with from hearing this combination in military and wind bands. This may have accounted in part for the success of the performance, however the description of their playing as “very high finished and engaging” suggests that the audience also recognized the high quality of their performance and showed their appreciation accordingly. The appearance of this report in the newspaper, full of praise for the “wind instrument geniuses”

⁷¹ “Le jeu de la clarinette est monotone lorsque l’artiste ne nuance pas ses sons et son articulation et qu’il exécute sans intention, sans expression et sans à-plomb . . . ; l’uniformité du jeu ou de l’articulation a souvent fait attribuer à la nature de l’instrument une froideur et une monotonie qu’on ne doit imputer qu’à l’exécutant qui ne savait pas tirer parti de son instrument.” X. Lefèvre, *op. cit.*, 13-14.

⁷² In contemporary advertisements Duvernoy is also referred to as Duvernois and Vivernois and Buch is also referred to as Buck.

⁷³ *Argus*, Saturday February 20, 1790.

may also have captured a prospective audience's attention in preparation for the first public performances given by these musicians.

In another review of the same performance, it was Lefèvre's clarinet playing which garnered the most effusive praise, the report commenting upon:

“an unrivalled execution on the French horns, bassoon and clarionet [*sic.*]; the latter instrument was brought to a perfection hitherto unknown in England.”⁷⁴

Although providing little detail, this review does suggest that, for this critic, Lefèvre's playing was more impressive than any performance he had previously heard on this instrument. The “unrivalled execution” of the performance may perhaps indicate that the works performed were technically impressive and that Lefèvre's virtuosity astounded the audience.

The clarinet and voice in performance

A number of reviews published in London are notable for the favourable comparisons they draw between the tone qualities of the clarinet and the human voice, reflecting the close association between these two instruments. These reviews feature either John Mahon or his brother and fellow clarinetist William Mahon (*c.* 1751-1816) accompanying their sisters, the singers Mrs. Second (*c.* 1767-1805) and Mrs. Ambrose, in performances.

At a performance of *The Woodman* given at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden on Monday 17 October 1796, John Mahon accompanied his sister Mrs. Second in two new songs which had been written especially for the performance. One review commented that:

“His tone approaches nearer to the human voice than that of any performer we ever heard; indeed in some of the passages it was difficult to distinguish the voice from the instrument.”⁷⁵

Contemporary reports also reveal the essential part Mahon played in the success of the performance, for in another review of *The Woodman*, a critic recorded:

⁷⁴ *Diary or Woodfall's Register*, Friday February 19, 1790.

⁷⁵ *Morning Chronicle*, Tuesday October 18, 1796. Favourable comparisons were also drawn between other woodwind instruments and the voice. For example, the oboist Sammartini was said “to produce such a tone as approached the nearest to that of the human voice of any we know of”. See J. Hawkins, *op. cit.*, 3 Vols. Vol. 2, 895.

“Mr. Mahon’s accompaniments on the clarionet were received with the warmest plaudits, and from being an auxiliary to the performance, he became a principal by the brilliancy of his variations and the grace of his cadences.”⁷⁶

The recognition of the crucial importance of his accompanying role in this performance indicates Mahon’s musical intelligence in successfully complementing the vocal melody. The specific comments regarding the brilliancy of his variations and the grace of his cadences suggest that Mahon was able to incorporate tasteful and expressive ornamentation, phrasing and harmonic variations which rendered the performance closer to a duet rather than a soloist and accompanist.

Likewise, William Mahon is also reported to have accompanied Mrs. Second in a concert which took place as part of the Blandford race meeting in 1801. A review of a duet performance commented:

“Mrs. Second sung Sweet Echo! Accompanied by the clarionet, most sweetly; the effect of which was much heightened by the admirable imitation of the Echo, contrived by Mr. W. Mahon making the responses from without the room, where he was unseen by the audience.”⁷⁷

This favourable description of the performance, noting especially the effective relationship between the voice and the clarinet, indicates that William must have possessed a fine tone quality with a sweetness which echoed the tone of the human voice successfully.

The aria, ‘Sweet Echo, sweetest nymph that liv’st unseen’ is taken from Thomas Arne’s masque of 1738, *Comus*. In the original play by Milton, the character ‘The Lady’ said the verse of ‘Sweet Echo’ however in the masque, Mrs. Cibber (playing ‘The Lady’) “mimed the sentiments of the lyric.” whilst Mrs. Arne (playing the ‘Pastoral Nymph’) sang the aria off-stage.⁷⁸ The performance instruction reads “Performed by Mrs Arne (behind the scenes)” with the echo performed by a flute.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ *Times*, Tuesday October 18, 1796. A further report also commented on the “delicacy and neatness” with which he accompanied. See *Oracle and Public Advertiser*, Tuesday October 18, 1796.

⁷⁷ *The Morning Post and Gazetteer*, Tuesday August 4, 1801. In addition, at the first concert William Mahon and Holmes performed a Concertante for Clarinet and Bassoon which was also favourably received.

⁷⁸ R. Fiske, *English Theatre Music in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1973), 181.

⁷⁹ T. A. Arne, *op. cit.*, 16.

The position of the flautist providing the echo is not indicated on the score, however it would appear likely that they would have remained within the orchestra for practical reasons. Roger Fiske notes that: “As in almost all English works of this period, the flutes and oboes were played by the same two players” and that “Towards the end of ‘Sweet Eccho’ (*sic.*) the flute is given seven and a half bars rest during which the player was expected to switch to the oboe.”⁸⁰ As a result of this, it would appear likely that the flute player would have remained in the orchestra in order to change instruments quickly and perform as a pair with his fellow oboist in the final Allegro movement which follows Sweet Echo.

In the concert performance of this aria given by Mrs. Second and William Mahon, it is the ‘echo’ (Mahon) that is hidden from view and contemporary concert performances of this aria often feature musicians experimenting with space, acoustic and different positionings of the voice and its ‘echo’.

For example, Mrs. Second performed this aria at a Catch Club concert where it was noted that:

“Mrs. Second, . . . sung “Sweet Echo,” and was echoed by her sister Mrs. Ambrose who sat at the other end of the room, to the great gratification of the company.”⁸¹

In addition, the oboist William Parke (1830) recounted two performances of this aria where he performed the echo. For the first, given in Portsmouth in 1791, Parke performed the echo from “an adjoining room”.⁸² In the second performance, at Vauxhall Gardens, Birmingham in 1794, Parke comments that he:

“accompanied Mrs. Martyr . . . in the song of ‘Sweet echo;’ and the situation of the gardens being such as permitted me to be concealed from view whilst making the responses to the voice on the oboe, the effect it produced called forth a tumultuous encore.”⁸³

These experiments with concert performances of this aria suggest that these musicians were attempting to recreate the effects of distance and mystery that Arne sought to create in the theatrical performance of this aria. In addition, the enthusiastic audience response to each of these concert performances indicates that the clarinet, oboe and voice were considered to be just as effective as the flute in echoing the vocal melody.

⁸⁰ R. Fiske, *op. cit.*, 187.

⁸¹ *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*, Wednesday March 16, 1791.

⁸² W. T. Parke, *op. cit.*, 2 Vols. Vol. 1, 173.

⁸³ W. T. Parke, *ibid.*, 2 Vols. Vol. 1, 191.

Further reviews also comment favourably on performances where the clarinettist accompanied the voice and all could refer to either John or William Mahon. For example, at the Cambridge Music Meeting of 1788, Mrs. Ambrose performed:

“a beautiful song, accompanied on the clarinet by Mahon . . . the voice and clarinet were in most perfect unison, and left us at a loss which to admire most.”⁸⁴

Another performance, which took place a month later at the Worcester Music Meeting, also featured Mrs. Ambrose accompanied by Mahon in the performance of an Italian song. A letter published in the *London Chronicle* describes this part of the concert exclusively, merely commenting that “The other parts of the concert went off well.”⁸⁵ Both performers received lavish praise with the reviewer commenting particularly on the effect of the performance on a numerous audience which also included Royalty:

“last night the Royal Family [King George III, Queen Charlotte and three of the Princesses] honoured the Concert at the College Hall; . . . Mrs. Ambrose sung an Italian song, accompanied by her brother’s clarinet. The execution was so very great, and at the same time so beautiful, that the Royal Visitors, and an overflowing audience, were lost in admiration.”⁸⁶

The reviews discussed above provide an insight into the performances of clarinet players in a variety of different contexts and are particularly useful in the vivid descriptions they provide. Specific tonal qualities, such as softness and sweetness, impressive technical virtuosity in faster and lighter sections and contrasts of musical expression such as grace, energy and sprightliness are all commented upon. In addition, the close alliance between the clarinet and the voice is also highlighted, likening the sweetness of sound produced on the instrument to the tone and texture of the voice itself. Finally, these reviews also confirm an appreciation by London audiences of how the instrument could potentially sound in lesser hands, lending credence to the descriptions and judgements of clarinet performance discussed in this article.

⁸⁴ *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*, Wednesday July 2, 1788.

⁸⁵ *London Chronicle*, August 9, 1788 – August 12, 1788 and *Morning Chronicle and London Advertiser*, Monday August 11, 1788.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* A further review of Mahon accompanying Mrs. Ambrose at the Norwich Music Meeting is also contained in *London Chronicle*, September 27, 1788 – September 30, 1788.

Conclusion

This examination of contemporary reviews of performances provides a detailed picture of the tonal, expressive and performance qualities of the 18th-century clarinet and clarinet players in Paris and London. These sources impart valuable information regarding the recognition and reception of the instrument and clarinet players in each centre, offering critiques of individual performers and their performances. The identification of specific themes and the amount of detail observed through these reviews also indicates the acceptance of the clarinet as a solo and chamber instrument in the last three decades of the 18th century. Finally, these reviews also offer revealing new insights into the playing careers and performance qualities of early exponents of the instrument in each centre.

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