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## The Bass Clarinet: Its History and Role in the Symphony Orchestra

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THE BASS CLARINET:  
ITS HISTORY AND ROLE IN THE SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA

A Thesis  
Submitted  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Designation  
University Honors

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## *Introduction*

This thesis is a three-sectioned guide to the bass clarinet to be used by players starting out their orchestral careers. Research was done to provide insight for the orchestral bass clarinetist about auditions and compositions that have an important bass clarinet part.

The first section focuses on the origins of the bass clarinet. In this section, the reader will learn why it was invented, the difficulties inventors had in creating it, and the first compositions for this instrument. Knowing the structural history of the bass clarinet gives the performer knowledge of the bass clarinets available when a piece was written, which would allow the musician to better understand the composer's intent.

When musicians start participating in orchestral auditions, they must know the orchestral repertoire. *The Clarinet* is a quarterly journal in which clarinetists and scholars around the world write articles discussing the instrument and its literature. In 1990 and 2000, two reports were published in that journal that presented research of clarinet and bass clarinet audition repertoire and determined the popular excerpts asked at orchestral auditions. Ten years later, in 2010, I did research to constitute a third installment. That summer, I contacted 80 orchestras in the United States and received audition lists from 18 of them. While I did not have the same size of audition lists to draw from as the others, I still had a variety of orchestra sizes respond, and it is a representative study of the orchestral world today. The second section of this paper describes the three different studies and shows the results from each.

Section three analyzes the frequently selected excerpts and provides more information on the piece and its composer. This provides the player with insight into the piece and important information to note when preparing the excerpt for an audition.

Through this research, I wish to find if there is any change in audition material from 1990 until today. With the updated bass clarinet audition material list, a bass clarinetist will be more prepared for an orchestral audition in 2010. When that knowledge is paired with a structural history of the instrument and a working understanding of the frequently selected excerpts, the musician auditioning will have a better chance at getting the bass clarinet spot in the orchestra. But more importantly, after analyzing the frequently asked excerpts, one learns what is expected of the bass clarinet in compositions with crucial bass clarinet parts. With that knowledge, one can clearly define the bass clarinet's role in the symphony orchestra.

## Chapter One

### History

As early as the 1800's, clarinet mechanics and parts became more complex allowing for continuing improvements on the instrument. For example, the key system on the clarinet increased from six keys up to seventeen, which allowed the clarinetist to play in multiple keys on one clarinet instead of several clarinets. Inventors saw potential in this new idea and used it to help improve other instruments they were trying to make, like the bass clarinet. Previous to this, bass clarinets were very difficult to play because of their antiquated design.

When the Industrial Revolution began in the 1700's, it created "a burgeoning middle class ready and eager to spend money on entertainment."<sup>1</sup> This new way of life affected the orchestra and its capabilities. More seemed possible at this time; therefore, "there was a steady demand for stronger, large-size woodwind instruments by players willing to learn. . . and composers ready to utilize their special attributes."<sup>2</sup> While this creative mindset affected multiple sections in the orchestra, "no other period can be said to have witnessed such a wealth of imagination and creative energy focused on the clarinet."<sup>3</sup>

The bass clarinet was not the only result of this revolution in the clarinet family. Previous to the bass clarinet, was the clarinet d'amour, alto clarinet and basset horn; each progressively lower in pitch and larger than the soprano clarinet. The bass clarinet is

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Hoeprich, *The Clarinet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 123.

<sup>2</sup> Albert R. Rice, *From the Clarinet d'Amour to the Contra Bass* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2009), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Hoeprich, *The Clarinet*, 123.

distinguished from others in the clarinet family because it plays an octave below the soprano clarinet and, therefore, has, “a wider bore, greater air column length, and larger mouthpiece and reed.”<sup>4</sup> It contrasted enough from the soprano clarinet that the player needs some special expertise to play it.

As the bass clarinet was more widely adopted, inventors and composers continued to widen its range. Later in the nineteenth century, some of the same inventors of the low clarinets invented contra alto and contra bass clarinets, which play an octave lower than the alto clarinet and bass clarinet respectively. While the bore size is comparable to the bass clarinet, they are much longer allowing them to play that much lower. Instrument inventors succeeded in building the instruments, but the instrument’s use was not as widespread as the bass clarinet. The contra alto and contra bass instruments remained popular in military and wind ensembles, and only a few composers wrote parts for the contra alto or bass clarinet in the symphony orchestra.<sup>5</sup>

Bass clarinet makers had difficulty creating the ideal design for a low clarinet, and as a result, “eighteenth- and nineteenth-century bass clarinet designs are more diverse than any other woodwind.”<sup>6</sup> Seven general shapes were tried and eventually discarded. In chronological order they are: plank/prototype, curved/basset horn, bassoon, serpent, straight, ophicleide and straight with butt joint.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Rice, *From the Clarinet d’Amour to the Contra Bass*, 249

<sup>5</sup> Rice, *From the Clarinet d’Amour to the Contra Bass*, 325.

<sup>6</sup> Rice, *From the Clarinet d’Amour to the Contra Bass*, 260.

<sup>7</sup> Rice, *From the Clarinet d’Amour to the Contra Bass*, 5.

Prototypes were made in the 1750's, and this shape groups together the first attempts at the bass clarinet. Three prototypes exist today and from what experts can tell, they did not actually function or play as they were intended. The curved shape was created by the Mayhrofers, a family that made basset horns. This shape is unique in that it consists of one particular bass clarinet. The instrument looks just like other Mayhrofer basset horns in that they are all curved. But after analysis years later, the length and bore of the instrument are greater than other basset horns. Therefore, the intended basset horn would actually be a bass clarinet by definition.

The first shape to gain popularity among makers was the bassoon shape, first invented by the Heinrich Grenser of Dresden in 1793. Because the shape of the bass clarinet resembled the bassoon, an anonymous writer in 1791 stated that the bassoon-shaped bass clarinet would be an effective replacement for the bassoon.<sup>8</sup> The bassoon and bass clarinet have the same range. However, the bass clarinet could play a wider variety of dynamics with more presence, and some say with a more sonorous sound. The downfall of the bassoon-shape was that there were mechanical issues that could not be resolved and the player was unable to dry out the bore after every use.<sup>9</sup> On the plus side, the bassoon shape was very compact, a plus for marching bands. And that shape was able to play down to a low C, other later shapes could only reach low E.

Nicola Papalini is the sole maker of the serpent shape in the 1820's with his 6 bass clarinets. His design differs from the others in that they look more like works of art than

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<sup>8</sup> Rice, *From the Clarinet d'Amour to the Contra Bass*, 257.

<sup>9</sup> F. Geoffrey Rendall, *The Clarinet*, 3rd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1971), 140-143.

instruments. The ophicleide shape is comparable to the bassoon-shape and was created between the 1840's and 60's to try and solve the latter's mechanical problems.

Adolphe Sax's contributions to the bass clarinet were the turning point in the instrument's history. In 1838 he redesigned the straight model bass clarinet, which is similar to the instrument used today. The straight model was invented in 1807 by Desfontenelles, but Sax added a second register key and made other improvements to the key system that drastically improved the sound. Even with the improvements in Sax's model, his bass clarinet did not win over all the players of other shapes. To start, each bass clarinet design had a different fingering system, so to switch bass clarinets meant learning a new instrument. Along with that set back, many players were good friends with their instrument makers and were jealous of Sax's fame.<sup>10</sup>

The final shape was the straight with butt joint. It was invented in the 1850's to gain the compactness of the bassoon-shape yet keep the successful mechanics of the straight shape. However, to gain the compactness, the lower portion of the instrument was bent upwards. Consequently, the sound was restricted and that bass clarinet was unable to play with as much presence as the other shapes of the time.

As is natural with new inventions, different designs came and went but the straight model was able to stand the test of time. In the 1850's, L.A. Buffet applied the Boehm fingering system to his straight bass clarinet, which created one uniform fingering amongst the designs. And in the 1860's Austrian and German makers were able to create a straight-shaped bass clarinet that played down to low C. This model soon became the industry standard, though some players were not willing to give up the model they used. Bassoon shapes were compact

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<sup>10</sup> Rice, *From the Clarinet d'Amour to the Contra Bass*, 300.

and worked well in military and marching bands. However, they disappeared from the market after the 1840's.

Despite the lack of a consistent design, composers were writing for the early instrument. The earliest orchestral use of the bass clarinet is in Meyerbeer's opera *Los Huguenots* (1836). Meyerbeer wrote a virtuosic solo, even by today's standards. The solo was played by Dacosta on an instrument made by L.A. Buffet that was straight-shaped.<sup>11</sup> In 1839, after Sax had completed his new straight model, he played the same solo to Dacosta and Dacosta's wife said, "My friend, I am sorry to have to say but that when Sax plays [his new bass clarinet], your instrument sounds to me like a kazoo!"<sup>12</sup> While the bass clarinet may have been capable of playing these early compositions, Sax's model sounded better because it was more technically advanced.

From then on, bass clarinet design and abilities of performers continued to improve as well as composers' knowledge of the instrument. Some composers viewed the bass clarinet as an extension of the soprano clarinet and wrote parts that that were high and technically challenging, while others merely added its voice to the bass line. As a result, bass clarinetists today have an orchestral repertoire with some extremely difficult parts and some simpler parts. However, when playing in a professional orchestra, the bass clarinetist needs to be prepared for either of its roles. When bass clarinetists know more about how the instrument originated, they will have more insight into what the composer intended. Oftentimes, when performers

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<sup>11</sup> Rice, *From the Clarinet d'Amour to the Contra Bass*, 287.

<sup>12</sup> Rice, *From the Clarinet d'Amour to the Contra Bass*, 299.

have this information, they can give a performance which has more meaning than those who do not which would give them the edge in an audition.

## Chapter Two

### Presentation of Audition Results

When a professional orchestra has an instrument vacancy, they hold auditions to choose their next member. At the audition, the audition committee asks each person auditioning to do a number of things: play a solo work, sight read, and play a variety of orchestral excerpts, which are important solos for their instrument from the orchestral repertoire. Orchestral excerpts are an important part of the audition because it gives the auditioning committee a chance to hear the musician play the famous solos for their instrument in pieces they would be expected to play in the future.

To best prepare for an audition, it is critical to know the excerpts the orchestra wants to hear in advance. There is a recognized body of orchestral excerpts for each instrument that all performers must know. However the exact audition material for each orchestra varies from audition to audition. To better know what will be asked at a particular audition, there are studies that have been done to find the most popular excerpts during a given period.

In 1990 and 2000, articles in *The Clarinet* provided this resource to professional clarinetists. In this study, information was collected in 2010 to constitute a 10-year addition. In the 1990 article, *A Survey of Clarinet Orchestral Audition Lists* by Charles Walthall, “. . .the primary objective of this survey was to determine, more specifically, how often individual excerpts occur. An extensive sample of more than 100 American orchestral audition lists issued

from 1969 to 1989 are here tabulated."<sup>13</sup> In the 2000 article, *A Survey of Orchestral Clarinet Audition Repertoire* by Cheryl Kulikowski, "... the objective of this survey is to show changing trends in clarinet audition repertoire over the past 10 years."<sup>14</sup>

In August 2010, I contacted librarians and orchestra personnel managers of major orchestras in the United States and asked for their bass clarinet audition lists. The orchestras contacted were the major orchestras of each state and training orchestras. Approximately 20 out of 80 orchestras e-mailed back an official audition list. Some did not respond or their e-mail was returned, and the remaining orchestras said no list was available because the bass clarinet was not a contracted position in the orchestra or because they had not auditioned bass clarinets in many years.

The following chart shows the most popular works selected by orchestra committees in 1990, 2000, and 2010.

Audition Studies				
Audition Lists Consulted:		Walthall	Kulikowski	MacBride
		Pre-1990	2000	2010
		>100	42	18
Rank	1	<i>Grand Canyon Suite</i> Grofe	<i>Grand Canyon Suite</i> Grofe	<i>Grand Canyon Suite</i> Grofe
	2	<i>Till Eulenspiegel</i> Strauss	<i>Daphnis et Chloe, Suite 2</i> Ravel	<i>Daphnis et Chloe, Suite 2</i> Ravel
	3	<i>Daphnis et Chloe, Suite 2</i> Ravel	<i>Till Eulenspiegel</i> Strauss	<i>Rite of Spring</i> Stravinsky
	4	<i>La Valse</i> Ravel	<i>Symphony No. 3</i> Schuman	<i>Symphony No. 3</i> Schuman
	5	<i>Don Quixote</i> Strauss	<i>Don Quixote</i> , Strauss	<i>Don Quixote</i> Strauss
	6	<i>Rite of Spring</i> Stravinsky	<i>Piano Concerto in F</i> Gershwin	<i>Piano Concerto</i> Khachaturian
	7	<i>Tristan and Isolde</i> Wagner	<i>Piano Concerto</i> Khachaturian	<i>Nutcracker Suite</i> Tchaikovsky

<sup>13</sup> Charles Walthall, "A Survey of Clarinet Orchestral Audition Lists," *The Clarinet* 17, no. 3 (May/June 1990): 35-37.

<sup>14</sup> Cheryl Kulikowski, "A Survey of Orchestral Clarinet Audition Repertoire," *The Clarinet* 28, no. 3 (June 2001): 72-77.

When comparing these lists, it is clear that most auditions will include the third movement solo of Grofe's *Grand Canyon Suite*. However, the other excerpts vary: Schuman's *Symphony No. 3* has recently become more popular while the popularity of Wagner's *Tristan and Isolde* has declined.

After looking at the 2010 research, bass clarinetists will prepare for an orchestral audition differently than an audition in 2000. A good musician will continue to have all significant excerpts under his or her fingers. However, a bass clarinetist looking to audition for a professional orchestra would spend more time looking at specific excerpts over other excerpts. For example, one would still practice *Tristan and Isolde* by Wagner and *La Valse* by Ravel, because there is a small chance they might be asked. However, the likelihood of being asked to play those are not as strong as the others. More focus should be spent on the more popular excerpts like *The Nutcracker Suite* by Tchaikovsky, Schuman's *Symphony No. 3*, and Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. The orchestral audition world is different than what it was ten years ago and so one cannot rely entirely on information gathered in 2000. Having the updated list for 2010 is crucial to being prepared for an audition.

## Chapter Three

### Analysis of the most selected excerpts

Once the musicians know the excerpts they need to learn, then it is time to practice.

However, practicing the excerpts is not the only thing bass clarinetists need to do to prepare for auditions. This next section takes an in-depth look at each of the frequently selected excerpts and analyzes different aspects that will give the musicians the necessary advantage.

To start, a brief biography of the piece and composer is provided to give the musician a full background to the piece they might one day perform. Knowing why the composer wrote it and what they envisioned helps the musician convey emotion to the audience, which is an important part of getting noticed in an audition. This section also analyzes the actual bass clarinet part to show what is expected of the bass clarinet in each particular piece so one might compare how a handful of composers took advantage of the different abilities of the bass clarinet. Also included are the performance numbers, how often a piece is performed in a given year. With this information one can see if there is any correlation between the frequently selected excerpts and what professional orchestras actually play in a given year. This can be important information for the bass clarinetist in an orchestra: they have certain excerpts prepared, but what is the actual likelihood of performing them in their orchestral career? A chart is located in the appendix that lists the actual performance numbers from the 2000-2001 orchestra season to 2008-2009.

1. Ferde Grofe (1892-1972): *The Grand Canyon Suite* (1931)

Ferde Grofe was one of three twentieth-century American composers that promoted America and the beauty of its land through music. Grofe wrote more than twenty pieces that were descriptions of natural landscapes. His most popular works include: *Mississippi Suite*, *Grand Canyon Suite*, *Hudson River Suite* and *Niagara Falls Suite*. During Grofe's life, America became more modernized, developed an urban lifestyle, and, with World Wars I and II, began to play an international role. Nationalist composers such as Ferde Grofe, William Grant Still, and Roy Harris meant to share the culture and beauty of their homeland basically to ". . . promote a national identity anchored in the land . . ." <sup>15</sup>

While his works were played often during his lifetime, Grofe's works are played infrequently today. The purpose of his nationalist works were to generate patriotism during World Wars I and II. However, when the wars ended, his music was no longer needed and it started being performed less. Grofe's music was "often criticized for its lack of depth, its too-immediate appeal, its reliance on numerous effects, its style. . ." In essence, "its appeal was its undoing." <sup>16</sup>

However, in the past ten years, *The Grand Canyon Suite* has made a return to concert halls. It was Grofe's most successful piece then, and continues to be now. It is being performed more and more each year. In 2000, no orchestra in the League of American

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<sup>15</sup> Denise Von Glahn, *The Sounds of Place: Music and the American Cultural Landscape* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2003), 161.

<sup>16</sup> Von Glahn, *The Sounds of Place: Music and the American Cultural Landscape*, 199.

Orchestras was performing the suite, but in the last ten years, almost half a dozen orchestras around the country have performed it.

For the *Grand Canyon Suite* to be Grofe's most famous piece, it is ironic that he never actually went there: he wrote the piece in a Chicago hotel. And it was popular because the third movement, "On the Trail," was the theme song of Philip Morris' radio show for over twenty years. Radio announcers of the fifties and sixties introduced him simply as "one of America's greatest composers."<sup>17</sup>

The excerpt most asked occurs in the famous third movement, "On the Trail." It is not necessarily a technically demanding part. It is, however, very exposed, as in no other instruments are playing, and the solo needs to be played in a certain stylistic manner. The movement is supposed to depict a mule ride on the Grand Canyon trail; going up and down, winding along the path amongst all the tourists. Grofe even includes the hooves in the background. The line that is asked at auditions is a fast descending triplet line that follows an oboe doing the same thing. The bass clarinet needs to be very loud and intense at the fast tempo, yet blend in so the transition between oboe and bass clarinet is seamless, and then relax the tempo and slowly transition into the next section. This moment is truly a solo passage for the bass clarinet, a rare occurrence for the instrument.

## 2. Maurice Ravel (1875-1937): *Daphnis et Chloé, Suite 2* (1912)

This work is the second half of a suite of dances from Ravel's ballet *Daphnis et Chloé*. The ballet was premiered by Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, a touring Russian dance troupe.

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<sup>17</sup> Von Glahn, *The Sounds of Place: Music and the American Cultural Landscape*, 198.

Diaghilev commissioned Ravel to write *Daphnis et Chloé* because he sought “. . . to improve the quality of the music in the repertoire. . .” with music from French composers.<sup>18</sup> *Daphnis et Chloé* is a Greek pastoral romance from the second-century AD about a shepherd Daphnis and Chloé, his love. The first suite of the ballet starts with Daphnis dancing in a contest to win a kiss from Chloé. He wins and their romance begins. Shortly after pirates attack, abduct Chloé, and Daphnis falls unconscious at the thought of losing her. Chloé tries to escape on her own, but is unable to and is eventually saved by the god Pan. Suite two, the section most asked at auditions, begins at the break of dawn after Chloé’s abduction. Chloé has returned and wakes Daphnis. They are reunited and dance.

Ravel knew precisely what he wanted in this music: “My intention in writing it was to compose a vast musical fresco in which I was less concerned with archaism than with reproducing faithfully the Greece of my dreams, which is very similar to that imagined and painted by French artists at the end of the eighteenth century.”<sup>19</sup> This contrasted with his Russian choreographer, Fokine, who wanted “. . . to recapture, and dynamically express, the form and image of the ancient dancing depicted in red and black on Attic vases.”<sup>20</sup> There were multiple misunderstandings between the French composer and Russian troupe as well. For example, Diaghilev threatened to cancel the commission because Ravel was taking too long with the music, and the dancers found the last section in 5/4 time too difficult to perform.

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<sup>18</sup> Gerald Lerner, *Maurice Ravel* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 1996), 115.

<sup>19</sup> Rollo H. Meyers, *Ravel: Life & Works* (New York: Thomas Yoseloff, 1960), 196.

<sup>20</sup> Roger Nichols, *Ravel* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd, 1977), 80.

This is a very technically demanding piece, both from the dancer's and instrumentalist's perspective. However, it is important to know this piece, as it is performed quite often every year. The League of the American Orchestras reports that it is frequently performed by over sixteen professional orchestras in one performance year.

When an orchestra asks to hear this piece at an audition, the audition committee wants to know how skilled the bass clarinetist is. The daybreak section is really a technical nightmare for the bass clarinet, requiring the player to be soft, be fast, make multiple jumps, be even and very still to mimic the sun rising. To get this part ready for performance involves a lot of slow practice, thinking of the 12-note sections as groups of four to make sure they are even and then practicing playing the intervals over and over so there are no breaks at the faster tempo. The other tricky section is the 5/4 dance in the second half of the piece. It is very fast, and has a lot of accidentals and varying rhythms. The most discouraging thing about the piece is the bass clarinet doubles other instruments in most every line it plays, whether it is other clarinets, bassoons, the entire woodwind line, or even low strings: none of the difficult passages are solos. But in order to be considered for a professional orchestral job, a serious bass clarinetist must perfect the difficult sections of the work, even if the hard work is not noticeable by the audience. Because it is very obvious to hear if any of the musicians are lagging behind.

### 3. Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971): *The Rite of Spring* (1913)

Stravinsky's inspiration for *The Rite of Spring* came while composing *The Firebird* for Diaghliev's Ballet Russes. Although there are multiple recounts explaining the inspiration, the clearest is stated from Stravinsky's autobiography: "I saw in imagination a solemn pagan rite:

sage elders, seated in a circle, watched a young girl dance herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring.”<sup>21</sup> Along with *The Firebird* (1910) Stravinsky also wrote two other pieces for the Ballet Russes, *Petrushka* (1911) and *The Rite of Spring*. Stravinsky was excited for his new ballet, which he originally wanted to call *The Great Sacrifice*, but he ran into major difficulties along the way. The costumes for the ballet took longer to be designed, which meant a delay in dancing rehearsals. The ballet orchestra that had been contracted was not adequate. Stravinsky described them as “. . . full of conceit and as a result couldn’t play a thing.”<sup>22</sup> Stravinsky was appalled at the rehearsals and he showed it by “. . . yell[ing] and bang[ing] his fists on the piano cover. . .”<sup>23</sup> Things did not improve later at the open dress rehearsal, “. . . there remained a sense of unease, due partly to the sheer complexity of the score, and partly because . . . his dancers were not wholly at one with the music or each other or perhaps to Diaghilev’s own instinct that trouble was in the air.”<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately, it was a precursor to the premier the following night.

On opening night, the audience was shocked to hear the brash and forward-minded music and to see the dancers in primordial costumes dancing in a way the audience was not accustomed to. Many in the audience yelled in anger at the stage while Stravinsky stood upset behind the curtain because his work was being rejected without really being heard. Despite its initial reception, this work has come to be an important twentieth-century composition and

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Hill, *Stravinsky: The Rite of Spring* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Walsh, *Stravinsky: A Creative Spring* (New York: Random House, Inc 1999), 193.

<sup>23</sup> Walsh, *Stravinsky: A Creative Spring*, 197.

<sup>24</sup> Walsh, *Stravinsky: A Creative Spring*, 203.

continues to be played frequently by orchestras throughout the United States. In a given year, it is performed by an average of 12 orchestras.

This work is unusual in that there are two separate bass clarinet parts. The first bass clarinet only plays that instrument. However, the second bass clarinet part also plays the third clarinet part. Another difficult aspect of this piece is that it is written for bass clarinet in A and Bb. The A bass clarinet was popular around the 1840's but it is no longer made today, so the player has to transpose it on the Bb instrument. Plus, the part is read in both treble and bass clefs. Usually bass clarinets are only written in treble. So that means the bass clarinetist must be skilled at transposing or rewrite the transposed parts so he or she reads everything in Bb and treble. It is crucial to listen to his piece to know when Stravinsky wants a "rough and edgy" sound, or when a section needs to be played ". . . as smoothly and legato as possible."<sup>25</sup> Stravinsky was interested in the different colors that he could achieve out of the orchestra. That is why there are two bass clarinet parts and why he wrote a bass clarinet and Eb clarinet duet. The duet is difficult because if not played in tune, it will cause intonation problems within the entire orchestra.

#### 4. William Schuman (1910-1992): *Symphony No. 3* (1941)

Schuman is the second American composer in this list and grew up in New York City. Growing up, music played a minor role for him because baseball was his real passion. In high school, he formed and composed for his own jazz band and played a variety of instruments.

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<sup>25</sup> Edward Palanker, "Bass Clarinet Orchestral Repertoire Master Class No. 5," *The Clarinet* 21 no. 3 (May/June 1994): 34.

But he still decided to go to a business college. However, he dropped out shortly after hearing a performance of Wagner's music at Carnegie Hall and immediately started taking private harmony and counterpoint lessons. Years later, he showed his works to a composer he admired, Roy Harris, one of Grofe's fellow nationalist composers. Harris was impressed and decided to teach Schuman himself. Schuman became famous as a composer, but was also considered a great music educator and administrator, his most prestigious post being president of the Julliard School of Music for seventeen years.

*Symphony No. 3* premiered in 1941 and music critics called it, "the best work by an American composer of the rising generation."<sup>26</sup> A former student of Schuman's, Jacob Druckman, stated: ". . . it was the incredible level of energy with which the music plunged forward that was and is shocking . . . it seemed a music without guile, with all its nerve ends exposed, singing and shouting without stopping to breathe, knowing exactly where it had to go and charging there relentlessly and shamelessly."<sup>27</sup> After hearing *Symphony No. 3*, the president of G. Schirmer said he would be happy to publish all of Schuman's works and provide him a monthly salary. One of his later works, *String Quartet No. 4* prompted Aaron Copland to say: "[This composition] makes one understand why Schuman is generally ranked among the top men of American music. . . music written with true urgency; compact in form, ingenious in its instrument technique, quite experimental as to harmony."<sup>28</sup> Although Schuman received

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<sup>26</sup> Christopher Rouse, *William Schuman: Documentary* (USA: Theodore Presser Co., 1980), 10.

<sup>27</sup> Rouse, *William Schuman: Documentary*, viii.

<sup>28</sup> Rouse, *William Schuman: Documentary*, 16.

many compliments for his compositions, they are rarely played in the orchestral world.

*Symphony No. 3* is played once every three years by one orchestra in the United States

Edward Palanker is the bass clarinetist with the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra and has written numerous articles in *The Clarinet* about bass clarinet orchestral repertoire. He has three recommendations for Schuman's *Symphony No. 3*. First is rhythm. There are many different rhythmic patterns on the page and it is crucial that the player make each one sound unique. In the toccata, after measure 190, Schuman writes triplets next to dotted-eighth sixteenth notes, which requires precise counting to make sure that one beat sounds like it is divided in three and the next beat to sound like it is divided in four. Another example, in the fugue portion, the bass clarinet enters with flute playing eighth notes, then the player takes up triplets with the clarinets and bassoons, and then into sixteenth. Finger technique is the second consideration because there are some technically challenging passages to master. The fugue section just mentioned has a tempo of quarter note equals 152-160. Therefore, at that tempo, the triplet and sixteenth note passages need to be firmly etched in the muscle memory. Finally, he mentions tone quality, ". . . this solo goes through all the registers. . . playing everything perfectly is not very impressive if your tone gets distorted."<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the key is consistency.

##### 5. Richard Strauss (1864-1949): *Don Quixote* (1897)

This composition is a tone poem, a one movement programmatic orchestral piece.

Strauss wrote many other tone poems, some including: *Don Juan*, *Macbeth*, *Also Spake*

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<sup>29</sup> Edward Palanker, "Bass Clarinet Audition Repertoire Master Class No. 4," *The Clarinet* 21 no. 2 (February/March 1994): 23.

*Zarathustra* and *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks*. Strauss designed his tone poems as narratives, so the music essentially tells the story. The full title of the piece is *Don Quixote: Fantastic Variations on a Theme of a Knightly Character*. So Strauss presents Don Quixote's theme, and then uses the following variations to illustrate Don Quixote's adventures as a knight. The story begins when Don Quixote wakes up one morning and decides that he would like to be a knight, just like the ones from his beloved books. So, "with a helmet made of pasteboard, and a knacker named Rosinante to ride on, the knight sets out with his squire [Sancho Panza]." <sup>30</sup>

Listed next are some of his battles, or variations, within Strauss's work:

Variation 1: Adventure with the windmills

Variation 2: Victorious battle with the Host of the great Emperor Alifanfaron  
(actually a heard of sheep)

Variation 4: Unfortunate adventure with a procession of penitents

Variation 8: Unfortunate adventure on the enchanted boat (barcarole)

Variation 9: Fight with the supposed magicians, two monks on their donkeys

Variation 10: Duel with the Knight of the White Moon

Finale: Having recovered his reason, he ends his days in contemplation

One of the more important bass clarinet passages in this piece is when it combines with the tenor tuba to present the Sancho Panza theme, those instruments create a sound ". . . characteristic of that coarse and clumsy but wily peasant's character." <sup>31</sup> Since this piece tells the story of Don Quixote, it is helpful to figure out which sections correspond with what scene of the story. That knowledge will aid the musician in deciding what emotion to portray in a given passage.

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<sup>30</sup> Henry T. Finck, *Richard Strauss: The Man and His Works* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1917), 193.

<sup>31</sup> Finck, *Richard Strauss: The Man and His Works*, 193.

All of Strauss's works have notably difficult woodwind passages, which explains why this piece is consistently asked at auditions. The other special part about this piece is that the auditioning committee could ask to hear the whole piece at an audition, there is no one difficult section. And it would not be unusual for them to keep asking to hear passages. When the auditioning committee asks to hear multiple sections of this piece, and maybe to hear them multiple times, they are listening for the musician's technical skill and how reliable his or her technical skill is. Did the player play it perfectly once, or did he play it perfectly every time it was asked? Strauss' use of the bass clarinet is similar Ravel's use in that the bass clarinet serves as a technical background, not a solo lead.

#### 6. Aram Khachaturian (1903-1978): *Piano Concerto* (1936)

Born in Armenia in 1904, Aram Khachaturian did not decide to pursue music until age nineteen. At school he used the folk music of his home town to be the basis of his works. Knowing that, one understands his use of minor seconds and the unusual scale and chordal structure.

Khachaturian's *Piano Concerto* is viewed as the first of a grand cycle of concerti. The others in the cycle are *Violin Concerto* (1940) and *Cello Concerto* (1946). The cycle is seen as the progression of a sunny day outside: "morning freshness" felt in the piano, "heat of the midday sun" from the violin, and in the cello, "hues of a silvery sunset."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Viktor Iuzefovich, *Aram Khachaturyan*, Trans. Nicholas Kournokoff and Vladimir Bobrov (New York: Sphinx Press, 1985), 94.

The concerto was written in about six months and had its orchestral premiere in July 1937. The performance took place in the Sokolniki Park of Moscow and it was not up to Khachaturian's expectations, ". . .the musicians had come from different orchestras; the conductor . . . could only manage one rehearsal; the [piano] . . . was an old upright; [and] the audience consisted predominantly of whoever happened to be in the vicinity."<sup>33</sup> However, its initially poor premiere turned around immediately after a successfully publicized performance in a better venue, and it has since become a popular work. Although the time it was played most was during WWII (1939-1945), when the United States wanted the public to support the military alliance with Russia.

A huge bass clarinet solo begins and ends the second movement. The bass clarinet is the only wind instrument playing while accompanied by static quarter notes in the strings, and the same is true of the end. Palanker states that the biggest problem with this solo is finding a place to breathe, and taking them so they do not interrupt the musical line. Once the bass clarinetist figures out the breathing patterns, Palanker also advocates playing the solo line with ". . . a full, rich and warm sound," and, ". . . a lot of expression."<sup>34</sup> It is a very lyrical line that needs to be presented in a certain way, because the solo piano expands on the same theme in the middle of the piece. The work is unusual in that it is read in bass clef. However, it was written like that to keep the majority of the notes on the staff. Khachaturian really only wrote

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<sup>33</sup> Iuzefovich, *Aram Khachaturyan*, 100.

<sup>34</sup> Edward Palanker, "Orchestral Audition Master Class for Bass Clarinet," *The Clarinet* 21, no. 3 (November/December): 5

for the lower register of the bass clarinet, and if he wrote the part in treble clef, most of the notes would be one to four ledger lines below the staff.

7. Pytor Illych Tchaikovsky (1840-1893): *The Nutcracker Suite* (1892)

Tchaikovsky wrote three ballets: *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty*, and *The Nutcracker Suite*. *Swan Lake* did not impress the audience at its premier, but *The Sleeping Beauty* was a huge success. And it was the success of that ballet that earned Tchaikovsky a commission to compose *The Nutcracker Suite*. Tchaikovsky was not thrilled to write *The Nutcracker*, he was nearing the end of his life and he did not care for the story. And it was not well-received by the initial audience either: “the audience did not take kindly to the German story, so different from the type to which it was accustomed, nor did it welcome the appearance of children in ballet on such a scale.”<sup>35</sup> Even with the negativity, “it was really the music that saved [*The*] *Nutcracker* and laid the foundation of its subsequent popularity.”<sup>36</sup> After eleven initial performances it disappeared until after the composer’s death. It is only in recent history that *The Nutcracker* was performed again.

When one looks at the bass clarinet line, it has no major technical difficulties besides a few passages in the *Russian Dance Trepak*. These lines are asked by audition committees to see how light the bass clarinetist can play the melody. The other section always asked for from *The Nutcracker Suite* is the *Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy*. It is perhaps the most recognizable bass

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<sup>35</sup> Gerald Abraham, *The Music of Tchaikovsky* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1946), 192.

<sup>36</sup> Abraham, *The Music of Tchaikovsky*, 192.

clarinet solo. The solo is only four descending 16th notes and four quarter notes, all from a C major scale. However, because of the exposure, when an orchestra asks to hear this work they are looking for a rich, deep tone. After that they will analyze the use of dynamics and rhythm. This excerpt is asked at an audition to hear the richness and quality of the player's sound.

## Conclusion

This thesis is a crucial resource to bass clarinetists auditioning for a spot in a professional orchestra in the upcoming years. Information has been presented to show the history of the instrument, how audition selections have changed over the past 30 years, and an in-depth analysis of each excerpt to better prepare the auditioning bass clarinetist. If a bass clarinet player comes into an audition knowing those aspects about his or her instrument, the player will be able to convey more emotion and show a greater expertise of their parts to the auditioning committee.

After looking at the excerpt parts, one clearly sees that the bass clarinet plays an important solo and technical role in the orchestra. The soloistic role might not be realized by other musicians in the orchestra since many pieces that feature the bass clarinet, like Grofe's *Grand Canyon Suite* and Schuman's *Piano Concerto*, are rarely played in an orchestral season. And musicians might not realize its technical role because the pieces with a very technical bass clarinet part, Strauss's *Don Quixote* and Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*, the instrument is overpowered by other woodwinds playing the same line. While other musicians might not realize the bass clarinet's importance, the instrument's role is well known by an auditioning committee, and they are looking to hire the best bass clarinetist to fill the solo and technical roles in their orchestra. Therefore, when the committee is in search of their next bass clarinetist, they will choose the player that best exemplifies the two roles. So although the compositions with predominant bass clarinet parts are not played often, audition committees

want to choose the most talented bass clarinetist, who can be a soloist and a technical genius when the composition requires it.

Appendix

Composer Pieces		Cedar Rapids Symphony	Champaign-Urbana Symphony	Delaware Symphony	Detroit Symphony	Lincoln Symphony	Louisville Symphony	Nashville Orchestra	New Mexico Symphony	Orlando Philharmonic	Philadelphia Orchestra	Phoenix Symphony	San Francisco Symphony	South Dakota Symphony	Waterloo-Cedar Falls Symphony	The World Orchestra	Aspen Music Festival	Civic Orchestra of Chicago	Tanglewood Music Camp	Totals
Barber, Samuel	Second Essay				1															1
Bartok, Bela	Second Suite				1															1
Berg, Alban	Violin Concerto											1								1
Dukas, Paul	Sorcerer's Apprentice					1						1	1							3
Franck, Franz	Symphony in D Minor			1																1
Gershwin, George	Rhapsody in Blue	1			1															2
	Concerto in F											1								1
Gould, Morton	American Salute		1																	1
	Latin-American Symphonette	1											1							2
Grofe, Ferde	Grand Canyon Suite	1		1	1	1		1	1	1	1	1	1	1				1	1	14
Hindimith, Paul	Symphonic Metamorphosis	1						1				1								3
Khachaturian, Aram	Piano Concerto			1				1	1		1	1							1	6
Mahler, Gustav	Symphony No. 1											1								1
	Symphony No. 4												1							1
	Symphony No. 6							1				1					1			3
	Symphony No. 9											1								1
Mussorgsky, Modest	Pictures at an Exhibition							1												1
Prokofiev, Sergei	Symphony No. 5	1												1						2
Ravel, Maurice	Daphnis et Chloe, suite No. 2			1	1	1		1		1	1	1	1				1		1	9
	La Valse							1				1								2
Respighi	Pines of Rome											1								1
Schuman, William	Symphony No. 3	1			1			1	1		1	1							1	7
Shostakovich, Dmitri	Violin Concerto No. 1				1				1		1	1								4
	Symphony No. 6				1					1										2
	Symphony No. 7				1				1		1									3
	Symphony No. 8				1			1									1			3
Strauss, Richard	Don Quixote				1			1	1		1	1		1					1	7
	Sinfonia Domestica	1																		1
	Till Eulenspiegel				1							1	1	1						4
Stravinsky, Igor	Rite of Spring				1			1	1		1	1			1				1	7
Tchaikovsky, Peter Ilyich	Manfred Symphony										1									1
	Nutcracker Suite	1			1				1	1	1									6
Wagner, Richard	Die Walkure										1	1								2
	Gotterdammerung											1								1
	Siegfried's Rhine Journey				1						1									2
	Tristan and Isolde										1	1	1							3

		Composers and Works							Participating Orchestras (sample size)
		Grand Canyon Suite Grofe	Daphnis et Chloe Suite 2, Ravel	Rite of Spring Stravinsky	Symphony No. 3 Schuman	Don Quixote Strauss	Piano Concerto Khachaturian	Nutcracker Suite Tchaikovsky	
Orchestra Seasons	2008-2009	4	5	7	1	3	1	11	283
	2007-2008	7	29	18	0	6	2	17	333
	2006-2007	2	17	15	0	7	1	15	237
	2005-2006	4	11	9	0	11	2	15	322
	2004-2005	2	17	11	1	5	2	4	103
	2003-2004	1	12	11	0	6	1	2	104
	2002-2003	2	11	6	0	5	5	7	104
	2001-2002	2	11	16	0	4	3	2	111
	2000-2001	0	8	12	1	2	1	4	none provided

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