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Early Virtuosi of the Clarinet and their Contributions

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Two very important people in the history of the clarinet were Heinrich Baermann (1784-1847) and his son Carl (1811-1885). Heinrich's brother, also named Carl was an accomplished bassoonist of his time. The Baermanns were well known throughout Germany as a family of outstanding musicians.

Carl Maria von Weber was so impressed by Heinrich Baermann's musicianship that he dedicated all six of his clarinet compositions to him. The elder Baermann united the finest aspects of both the German and the French schools. In short, he combined the beautiful tone and fine musicianship of Tausch (the Berlin virtuoso) with the brilliant technique of Beer (founder of the French School). Weber found him to be "a truly great artist and a glorious man."¹ Both Meyerbeer and Mendelssohn were friends of the Baermann family and Mendelssohn wrote two concert works for them which were scored for clarinet, basset horn, and piano.

Carl Baermann, who was taught by his father, became well known both as a virtuoso clarinetist and as a composer. He wrote a number of concertos for the clarinet and a clarinet method in five parts. Bellison refers to this method as "the best book for the instrument."² Baermann, in conjunction with George Ottensteiner, devised the "Baermann system" clarinet. At least five keys were added by these men to the original thirteen-keyed Mueller clarinet. It was for this instrument that Baermann wrote his method between 1864 and 1873.

Another familiar name to all serious clarinetists is that of Ernesto Cavallini (1807-1874). He apparently was in concurrence with his contemporaries as well as his predecessors in the belief that many keys and holes on a clarinet were deleterious to both tone and intonation. Nevertheless he was always master of his instrument whether it was a very old type or the Mueller thirteen-keyed instrument of 1822. He concertized extensively in Italy, France, Belgium, and England. From 1852 to 1867, he was solo clarinetist and soloist of the Imperial Orchestra in St. Petersburg, Russia. Cavallini's amazing virtuosity was admired by both Rossini and Verdi. Many of the beautiful and idiomatically written clarinet passages pervasive in Verdi's operas were inspired by Cavallini's brilliant playing. A typical example of this is the famous clarinet solo in the prelude to the third act of *La Forza Del Destino*. In 1845 Cavallini appeared with the London Philharmonic in the performance of his own concerto. This work was never published but his appearances in England made a significant influence on the clarinetists of this nation. Although he composed numerous etudes, short pieces for clarinet and piano, and duets he is chiefly remembered for his brilliant "Thirty Caprices" and his popular solo, "Adagio and Tarantella." All of his compositions were written with the end result of expressing his own virtuosity in mind. Although his works were written in the spirit of his time (and are not particularly original) some are interesting and refreshing even today. Cerminara terms Cavallini's "Thirty Caprices" as "one of the greatest contributions to the clarinet literature."³

Another name well known to most clarinetists is Cavallini's English counterpart, Henry Lazarus (1815-1895). Unlike many of the other clarinet virtuosi of this period he did not have a great composer to write for him. From an inauspicious beginning as an unwanted orphan in a military school he rose to become a legendary figure in English musical circles. He was professor of Clarinet at the Royal Academy of Music from 1854 to 1895. In this role perhaps lies his greatest contribution. His reputation as a great teacher remains indisputable and the influence he has in this capacity was surely of major significance. Lazarus also made a notable reputation as a performer during his years as principal clarinetist of the Royal Italian Opera of Covent Garden. Although he wrote a "Method for the Clarinet" for the then new Boehm system he did not play this instrument. Rather, he

felt his age would militate against his changing systems and preferred to use a simpler instrument. Lazarus attempted to solve the mouthpiece problem by employing a variety of some fifty mouthpieces each having a reed of its own. Brymer states: "His personal influence has not waned in England after sixty years; and his achievement must be an inspiration to all who love the clarinet."⁴

A great virtuoso with a different approach to his artistry was Richard Mühlfeld, the man Brahms described as "absolutely the best wind-instrument player I know."⁵ His influence differed in that it stressed "the importance of musicianship and interpretation over brilliance of technique and flashy execution."⁶ Mühlfeld is also unique in that his contribution did not depend on either teaching or writing. Rather, he secured some of the most beautiful clarinet music for posterity by convincing Brahms to write his famous clarinet compositions. Brahms clarinet works are "the golden fruits of the composer's late maturity"⁷ and include the two Sonatas comprising Opus 120, the Trio in A Minor, Opus 114 (piano, cello, and clarinet) and the Clarinet Quintet, Opus 115. It is interesting to note that Mühlfeld joined the Meiningen Court Orchestra as a violinist in 1873 and became first clarinetist in 1876. It was in Meiningen that Brahms first heard Mühlfeld in recitals. Brahms was interested in composing a quintet for viola at the time but Mühlfeld convinced him to write it for clarinet instead. This opened a new period of compositions for the great composer and his four splendid chamber works for clarinet were subsequently composed. The Trio and Quintet were written during the summer of 1891 and both Sonatas were composed during the summer of 1894. It was the performance of these Brahms compositions as well as the Weber concerti that established Mühlfeld's reputation as a concert artist. After Mühlfeld the clarinet itself began to be firmly established in an expanded role "as an instrument capable of the highest range of expression in solo and chamber music."⁸

Notes

^{1.} Carl Maria von Weber, quoted in "*Weber's Variations*" by Simeon Bellison, *The Clarinet* 1:6, Spring 1952

^{2.} Bellison, *loc. cit.*

^{3.} Napoleon Cerminara, "*Ernesto Cavallini*," *The Clarinet*, 1:16, Spring 1950.

^{4.} Jack Brymer, "*Henry Lazarus*," *The Clarinet*, 24:20, Fall 1956.

^{5.} Walter Niemann, *Brahms*, tr. by Catherine Alison Phillips, New York, Alfred A. Knopf Co., 1929, p. 263.

^{6.} George Toenes, "*Richard Mühlfeld*," *The Clarinet*, 23:23, Summer, 1956.

^{7.} Niemann, *loc. cit.*

^{8.} Toenes, *loc. cit.*

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