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The Clarinet Choir

RICHARD K. WEERTS

IN ITS most basic form the clarinet choir can consist of three Bb sopranos, one alto, and one bass. This combination can be expanded to a more fully balanced choir comprised of three first Bb sopranos (one player to double on the Eb soprano), three seconds, three thirds, three altos, three basses, one Bb contrabass, and one Eb contrabass. In the latter combination the clarinet choir can function in a manner not unlike the string section of a symphony orchestra. A prominent clarinet manufacturing company claims, "Every nuance of light and shade from the darkness and depth of the lowest tones of the contrabass clarinets to the sparkling brightness of the altissimo register of the soprano clarinets can be used with equal facility by an arranger or composer."¹

Importance of the Eb Soprano and Contrabass Voices.—Compositions and arrangements for the clarinet choir are to be found in widely differing combinations ranging from three Bb sopranos, one alto, and one bass clarinet to the full choir beginning with the octave Ab (sometimes referred to as piccolo clarinet) and extending through the contrabass. While the works which employ merely the Bb sopranos, alto and bass are probably practical at the secondary level, an effect is definitely lost without the use of at least the Eb soprano and the Bb or Eb contrabass clarinets. The modern Eb soprano

clarinet has been greatly improved over those of the past and should assume an important role in the balanced clarinet choir. It should be assigned to an excellent player.² The contrabass tone is equally vital to the full, organ-like sound of the balanced clarinet choir. Reed states, "It has been conclusively demonstrated that, all other conditions being equal, the two *outside* voices of any group of tones or lines will be the ones most readily perceived by the listening ear;"³ and further: "The strong overtones produced by the lowest instruments in the band and orchestra, actually reinforce the tones of the middle and higher instruments playing the upper notes of the chord."⁴

He concludes that "the result of all this is a powerful, rich, sonorous tone, serving as the absolute foundation of the music erected above it."⁵

Clarinet Choirs of the Past.—The interest in this particular type of woodwind ensemble appears to be growing. Major factors related to its growth would seem to include the availability and improvement of contrabass clarinets as well as the technical versatility and euphonic sound of the clarinet choir. It should be noted, however, that this is a revival of in-

¹ "The Complete Clarinet Family," *The Leblanc Bandsman*, (February, 1955), p. 6.

² Lucien Cailliet, *The Clarinet and Clarinet Choir* (Kenosha: G. Leblanc Corporation, 1955), p. 2.

³ Alfred Reed, *The Balanced Clarinet Choir* (Kenosha: G. Leblanc Corporation, 1955), p. 6.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁵ Reed, *loc. cit.*

terest in a group previously highly developed rather than an innovation on the American musical scene.

Probably the earliest work done with the clarinet choir in the United States was begun in 1927 by the late Simeon Bellison. Mr. Bellison, it will be remembered, held the distinction of being the first clarinetist of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra for twenty-eight years (1920-1948). He is also remembered for his numerous arrangements and revisions of music for the clarinet, and the few recordings he made have long been collector's items. Mr. Bellison's first clarinet choir consisted of four Bb clarinets, two basset-horns, and two bass clarinets. By 1929 this group had grown to include sixteen members.

The choir was greatly expanded in 1929 after the Committee on Ensemble Musical Training of the New York Philharmonic Symphony Society began to give scholarships to the most gifted musical children of the New York public schools. By 1948 Mr. Bellison's "clarinet ensemble," as he referred to it, had grown to seventy-five members including the following instrumentation:⁶ Ab piccolo clarinet, Eb soprano clarinet, Bb soprano clarinet, basset-horn in F, Eb alto clarinet, bass clarinet, and Bb contrabass clarinet. The Ab piccolo clarinet and the basset-horn in F are not common in most present day clarinet choirs. The only other instruments which Mr. Bellison added "for coloring" were a concertina, a harp, two trumpets (which played muted only), and tympani.

The repertoire of this rather gigantic clarinet ensemble combined orchestral works of symphonic dimensions with chamber music works arranged by Mr. Bellison. To these were added original

compositions written especially for this group. The public as well as the New York press gave enthusiastic support to this ensemble wherever it appeared.⁷

Repertoire for the Modern Clarinet Choir.—Fortunately, the literature being composed and arranged for the clarinet choir seems to be increasing both in quantity and quality. At present there is much fine material to choose from for choirs of all sizes and at all levels of development.⁸ Recent innovations include the addition of solo woodwind instruments, French horn, and voice with clarinet choir accompaniment. It is to be hoped that the repertoire will continue to grow. There is a definite need for more excellent original compositions and arrangements if the interest in this ensemble is to continue to develop and expand.

Publications for Clarinet Choir.—It is hoped that this graded list of available publications will be helpful to those interested in the clarinet choir. It should be noted that the grading is arbitrary and intended only to give a general idea regarding the technical difficulty of this literature. The grading ranges from grade I (very easy) to grade VI (very difficult).

Grade I

Brahms-DeJesu, *Cradle Song* (White-Smith).
Humperdinck-DeJesu, *Hansel and Gretel*, "Prayer" (Hal Leonard).
Organn, *The Brook* (Rebo). Bassoon solo with clarinet choir.
Palestrina-Conley, *Adoramus Te* (Kendor).

Grade II

Bach-Cailliet, *Awake, Awake, A Voice is Calling* (Leblanc). Chorale.
Bach-Howland, *O Sacred Head* (Interlocher Press). Chorale.
Boccherini-DeJesu, *Minuetto* (White-Smith).
Byrd-Howland, *Pavan-Galliard* (Rebo).

⁷ Bellison, *loc. cit.*

⁸ See *Clarinet Choir Literature* (Kenosha: G. Leblanc Corporation, 1962).

⁶ Simeon Bellison, *The Clarinet Ensemble* (New York: Simeon Bellison, 1945), p. 4.

- Franck-DeJesu, *Paris Angelicus* (Chas. Colin).
 Jarnefelt-Roach, *Berceuse* (Chas. Colin).
 McDowell-DeJesu, *To a Wild Rose* (Hal Leonard).
 Schumann-Lang, *Träumerei* (Chas. Colin).

Grade III

- Bach-Fote, *Praeludium XXII* (Kendor).
 Bach-Howland, *Three Baroque Dances* (Rebo).
 Barnes, C. P., *Robbins Collection of Classics for Balanced Clarinet Choir* (Big 3 Music Corporation). Grades III-VI. These arrangements are scored for Eb soprano, 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Bb clarinets, Eb alto, Bb bass and/or Bb contrabass, and Eb contrabass clarinets.
 Bizet-Cailliet, *L'Arlesienne*, "Adagietto" (Leblanc).
 Handel-Sacci, *Concerto Grosso*, "Larghetto" (Kendor).
 Haydn-DeJesu, *Serenade* (Hal Leonard).
 Jarnefelt-Roach, *Praeludium* (Chas. Colin).
 Mozart-Dominik, *Divertimento #8* (Rebo).
 Organn, *Divertimento* (Rebo).
 Organn, *Overture for Woodwinds* (Rebo).
 Organn, *Suite Petite* (Rebo).
 Voxman, *Clarinet Choir Repertoire* (Rubank). Grades III-V. These arrangements are scored for 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th or alto, and bass clarinets.

Grade IV

- Beethoven-DeJesu, *Largo Appassionata* (Hal Leonard).
 Betton-McCathren, *Deep River* (Summy-Birchard).
 Cable, *Red Rosey Bush* (Chappell and Co., Inc.).
 Cable, *Wind Song* (Chappell and Co., Inc.).
 Clerisse-Roach, *Vieille Chanson* (Leblanc).
 DeJesu, (arr.) *Turkey in the Straw* (Hal Leonard).
 Haydn-R. Hindsley, *Divertimento #1* (Southern Music).
 Klauss, *Song for Twilight* (Pro Art).
 Klauss-McCathren, *Lullaby for an Eb Clarinet* (Kendor).
 Kuhlau-Organn, *Sonatina #1*, "Rondo" (Rebo).
 Kuhlau-Organn, *Sonatina*, "Allegro" (Rebo).
 Massenet-Cailliet, *Angelus* (Leblanc).
 Mendelssohn-DeJesu, *Song Without Words* (White-Smith).
 Mendelssohn-Logan, *Italian Symphony*, "Andante" (Hal Leonard).
 Mozart-Sacci, *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik*, "Menuetto" (Kendor).

- Mozart-Sacci, *Quintet in G Minor* (Kendor).
 Organn, *Maulawiyah* (Rebo).
 Osterling, *Study in Lavender* (Southern Music).
 Reed-McCathren, *Clarinet Valsante* (Kendor).
 Rodgers and Hart-Cable, *Pal Joey*, "Bewitched" (Chappell and Co., Inc.).
 Saint-Saens-Cailliet, *Romance in F* (Leblanc). French horn or alto sax and clarinet choir.
 Schwarz, *Capriccio* (Rubank).
 Tchaikovsky-Conley, *Humoreske* (Kendor).
 Tchaikovsky-Sacci, *String Quartet*, "Andante Cantabile" (Kendor).

Grade V

- Bach-Yoder, *Bach Suite* (Leblanc).
 Barat-Roach, *Piece en Sol Mineur* (Leblanc). Solo clarinet and clarinet choir.
 Betton-McCathren, *Kerry Dance* (Summy-Birchard).
 Boellmann-Casteel, *Suite Gothique* (Leblanc).
 Bolzoni-Pardee, *Minuetto in Bb* (Kendor).
 Cailliet, *Caprice Sentimental* (Leblanc). Solo Bb clarinet and clarinet choir.
 Evans-Jarcho, *Lady of Spain* (Sam Fox).
 Martini-Maganini, *Plaisir d'Amour* (Edition Musicus).
 Mozart-Cailliet, *Marriage of Figaro*, "Overture" (Leblanc).
 Mozart-Howland, *Adagio*, K. 411 (Rebo).
 Ravel-Hite, *Pavane* (Southern Music).
 Rimsky-Korsakov-Cailliet, *Flight of the Bumble Bee* (Leblanc). Alto saxophone solo with clarinet choir.
 Rimsky-Korsakov-Roach, *Danse Des Bouffons* (Leblanc).
 Schubert-Sacci, *String Octet*, Opus 166 "Scherzo" (Kendor).
 Tchaikovsky-Cailliet, *Violin Concerto*, "Canzonetta" (Leblanc). Alto saxophone and clarinet choir.
 Verdi-DeJesu, "Prelude to Traviata" (Hal Leonard).

Grade VI

- Bach-Howland, *Christmas Oratorio*, "Sinfonia" (Interlochen Press).
 Beethoven-Wilson, *String Quartet*, Opus 18, #1 "Allegro Con Brio" (Carl Fischer).
 Cailliet, *Carnaval* (Leblanc). With percussion.
 Cailliet, *Clarinet Poem* (Leblanc).
 Cailliet, *Fantaisie* (Leblanc).
 Debussy-Howland, *Petite Suite*, "Minuet," "Cortege," "En Bateau," "Ballet" (Interlochen Press).

- Mendelssohn-Howland, *Symphony #4, "Saltarello"* (Interlochen Press).
 Mozart-Howland, *Impresario Overture* (Interlochen Press).
 Presser, *Choral Fantasy* (Leblanc).
 Tchaikovsky-Cailliet, *Violin Concerto, "Finale"* (Leblanc). Solo clarinet and clarinet choir.

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