



OXFORD JOURNALS
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

Clarinet Reed Position

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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Early Music*, Vol. 12, No. 3, String Issue (Aug., 1984), pp. 429+431

Published by: [Oxford University Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3137796>

Accessed: 17/09/2012 23:47

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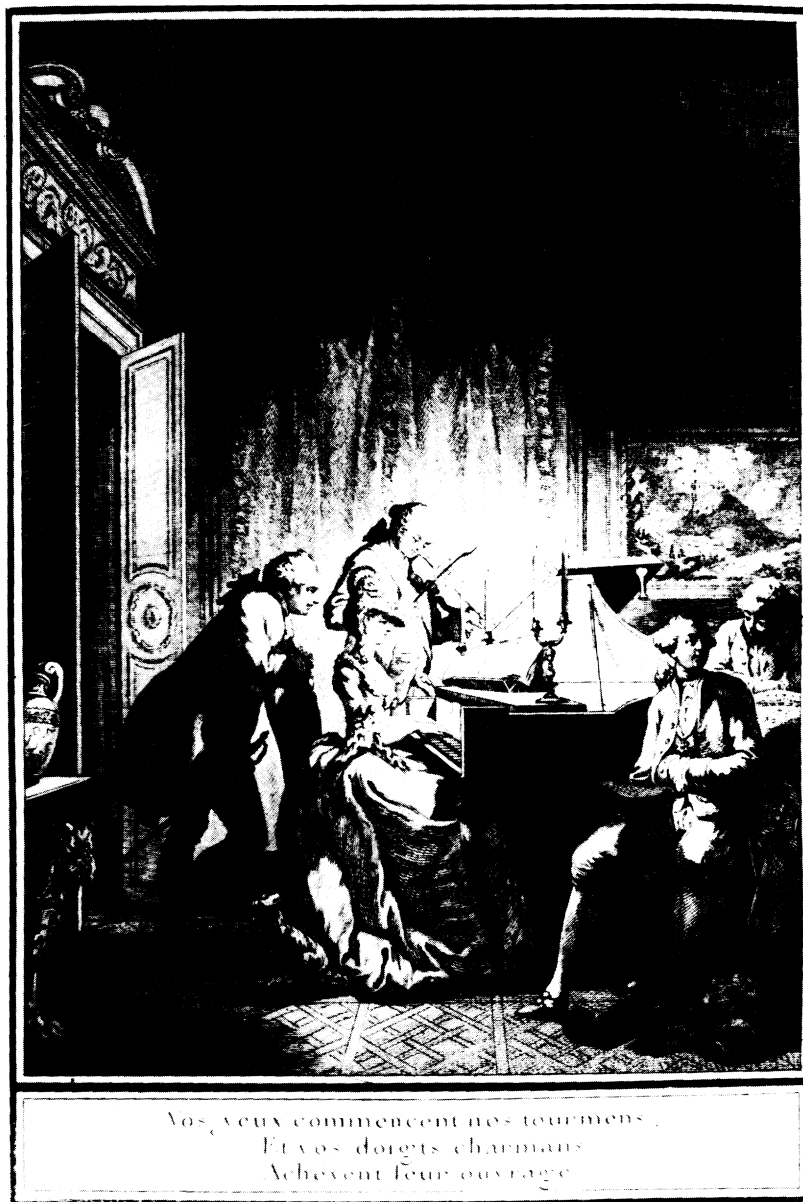
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CORRESPONDENCE



A concert: engraving from *La Borde, Choix de chansons*, ii, p.128

Clarinet reed position

I should like to offer a few comments in amplification of points raised in T. Eric Hoeprich's excellent article 'Clarinet reed position in the 18th century' (EM Feb 84 pp.48–55).

Perhaps when discussing the position of the reed on the upper or lower lip we should adopt the medical terms maxillary and mandibular respectively as advocated by Heinz Becker in his articles 'Chalumeau' and 'Klarinette' in *Das*

grosse Lexicon der Musik (1976). L. N. Berg, *Den første Prøve for Begyndere udi Instrumental-Kunsten* (Christiansand, 1782), seems to reflect the preference of German players in his recommendation of mandibular position (the earliest so far found) and in his choice of fingerings for a three-keyed clarinet. All his fingerings and those of many other tutors are the subject of my article 'Clarinet Fingering Charts, 1732–1816', *GSJ*, xxxvii (1984), pp.16–41.

It should be mentioned that Roeser's *Essai d'instruction* (Paris, 1764), though it does not contain an illustration of the clarinet, includes comments on articulation (p.12) that make it clear that the author played with the maxillary position; and his *Gamme de la clarinette* (Paris, 1769) illustrates the maxillary position. It is very likely that the use of this position by many French players in the 18th century influenced clarinetists in Sweden. This is clearly implied in a letter, dated 31 August 1772, from Johan Miklin, an organist at Linköping, to the Swedish historian A. A. Hülphers:

I don't believe clarinets were in use in Sweden until 1762 or 1763. The first time I heard them was in Malmö in 1766. The larger ones, which are used in concerts in Paris, sound infinitely better than the clarinets which are played by the military, as they don't screech so . . . The reed is not as on an oboe; rather over the oblong opening one puts and inserts a thin, flat, wide reed. It is always stationary, is lightly pressed by the lips, but never touched by the tongue. One must so to speak puff out the wind, but it is not heavy or hard to play. The best and most accurate information about this you may obtain in Stockholm. [See. T. Norlind, 'Abraham Abrahamsson Hülphers och frihetstidens musikliv', *Svensk tidskrift för musikforskning*, xiv (1937), pp.56–7.]

Finally, the earliest indication of an English preference for the mandibular position is found in the downward position of the mouthpiece in James Wood's patent specification (no.2381, 10 April 1800) for a seven-keyed clarinet (mentioned by Alan Hacker in the

sleeve notes of his record Decca L'Oiseau-Lyre DSLO 501). Furthermore, the first English method to recommend this position appears to be John Hopkinson's *A New and Complete Preceptor for the Clarinet* (London, [c1835]):

Opinions vary considerably on the proper manner of applying the reed; foreigners play with it downwards, the contrary is practised in England; for a Dilettante i.e. a non Professional Performer, I must acknowledge I give the Preference to the first method. (pp.4-5)

Mr Hoeprich is clearly right that all the evidence from written documents, instruments and iconography, though it often reflects regional practice, indicates that reed position was a matter of individual choice for the player.

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T. Eric Hoeprich writes:

I appreciate Mr Rice's interest in my article and the fact that he reaches conclusions similar to my own. I wonder, however, whether we can be so certain in associating descriptions of

articulation with particular reed positions, as he does in the case of the Swedish account above. This description does indeed sound like those in various method books that advocate placing the reed against the upper lip; yet it is vague enough to be read quite easily as evidence for the opposite reed position. Written descriptions of articulation simply are not consistent enough to warrant any conclusions on reed position.

Bach's chorus

Last February's issue of *Early Music* included a thoughtful and appreciative review by Peter Williams of Joshua Rifkin's one-to-a-part recording of Bach's B minor Mass (Nonesuch 79036-1 X), and also, on other pages, a number of pictures showing various 18th-century choirs rehearsing or performing. I was struck by the fact that, while Rifkin's theories about the constitution of Bach's choir at Leipzig rest partly on the assumption that, for reasons of 'simple practicality', 'earlier choirs kept the same ratio of singers to music as

we do' (*MT* Nov 1982 p.747), all the pictures you reproduce (including, incidentally, the one of the 1784 Handel commemoration, much reduced in size) show two, three or more singers reading from the same music. It would not be difficult to cite other, similar evidence for the sharing of copies in 18th- and 19th-century choirs (see, for example, the illustrations to the article 'Chorus' in *The New Grove*); indeed, a well-known drawing by Ludwig Richter shows boys from the Thomasschule itself singing out of doors with one copy between three (illus.). How much more simple and practical they would have found this at their desks in the Thomaskirche or the Nikolaikirche!

Mr Rifkin has produced a good deal of evidence from musical sources to support his theory. I hope that in his forthcoming book on the subject he will consider also the iconographical evidence, much of which seems to contradict it.

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Boys from the Thomasschule, Leipzig, singing out of doors: drawing by Ludwig Richter (1803-1884), from W. Hitzig, Johann Sebastian Bach 1685-1750: sein Leben in Bildern (Leipzig, 1935), pl.30