

DEEP DIVE

Mozart and the clarinet

When Mozart left the service the Archbishop of Salzburg in 1781, an exciting new world opened before him. Mozart's decision to be, in effect, a freelance artist, of course meant less financial security than that afforded a musician in the service of a court, and his father was furious with him for taking this rash step. Mozart tried to convince his father his move was a wise choice, writing on 4 April 1781: "I can assure you that [Vienna] is a Magnificent place – and for my Métier the best place in the world." Mozart was absolutely in his element in this intensely musical city, and we have his impetuous decision to thank for so much wonderful music.

Mozart's father and others had warned him of the fickleness of Viennese taste and the insecurity this would represent, but his sense of what was possible in Vienna was correct – the city was a hotbed of musical activity, teeming with high-calibre professional musicians as well as countless talented instrument builders.

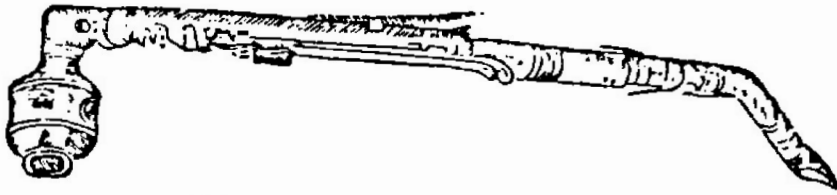
In particular, Mozart's friendship with the great Bohemian clarinet virtuoso Anton Stadler (1753–1812), and their connection with fellow Freemason and clarinet builder extraordinaire Theodor Lotz (1748–92) resulted in some of the most gorgeous works in the repertoire. His Clarinet Quintet in A major, K.581, written for his close friend to perform on a newly invented instrument, represents the fascinating way in which these relationships came together.

The majority of Mozart's works for the clarinet were written for Anton Stadler, whom Mozart befriended soon after moving to Vienna. It is clear, however, that Mozart loved the clarinet long before meeting Stadler. As a boy prodigy touring Europe, he had transcribed a symphony featuring clarinets by London composer Carl Friedrich Abel, and his first composition with clarinets was a divertimento, K.113, composed when he was still a teenager. But the divertimento was written for a patron in Milan. There were no clarinets in the orchestra in his hometown of Salzburg, and his travels revealed tantalising possibilities.

In Munich in 1777 he admired a *Harmonie* (wind band) with clarinets, and in Mannheim, where he then spent the best part of a year, he heard one of the most acclaimed orchestras in Europe. All the while, he became increasingly frustrated by the musical situation at home, and wrote numerous letters to his father extolling the virtues of Mannheim's music scene while deploring the mediocrity of Salzburg's. In one such letter he suddenly exclaims:

**If only we had clarinets in the orchestra! You wouldn't believe what marvellous effects flutes, oboes and clarinets produce in a symphony...
(3 December 1778)**

Mozart wasn't the only one to admire the clarinet. The instrument was praised for its dulcet tone and its liquid, almost vocal quality. Writing in his treatise *Ideen zu einer Ästhetik der Tonkunst* (1784–85), the composer and music theoretician



Concert-Anzeige.

Morgen Dienstag den 21^{ten} März, wird Herr Stadler, kays. Königl. Kammermusikus, mit hoher Obrigkeitlicher Bewilligung im hiesigen Schauspielhause, mit gütiger Benhülfe der musikalischen Gesellschaft, sein drittes, und letztes Concert geben, worinn er sich zur Veränderung auf dem Bassett-Horn hören lassen wird.

Dies Instrument ist von eben der Beschaffenheit wie seine Inventions Clarinette, hat einen Umfang von Vier Oktaven, und drey halb Töne mehr in der Tiefe, als das sonst gewöhnliche Bassett-Horn.

Stücke sind folgende:

Erster Theil.

Große Sinfonie von Haydn.

Concert für das Bassett-Horn, gespielt von Herrn Stadler.

Aria gesungen von Madame Lange.

Zweyter Theil.

Ein Sinfonie Satz von Pleyel.

Sieben Variationen für das Bassett-Horn, gespielt von Hr. Stadler.

Rondo aus La Clemenza di Tito von Mozart, gesungen von Herrn Arnold, und mit zwey Bassett-Hörnern begleitet von Hrn. Stadler, und seinem Schüler Plaste.

Dritter Theil.

Ein kurzer Sinfoniesatz.

Einige Stücke von Mozart für Drey Bassett-Hörner gespielt von den Hrn. Stadler, Plaste, und Bahl; dann verschiedene Arien, Duetten, Terzetten aus den bekanntesten, und beliebtesten Operetten, Cosa Raca, l'albore di Dianna Tigaco, Don Giovanni &c. &c. ebenfalls mit Drey Bassett-Hörnern.

Ein Sinfonie Satz.

Der Anfang ist präcise um halb Sechß Uhr.

Entree-Billets sind zu den gewöhnlichen Opernpreisen bey dem Theaterkassirer Herrn Kettich, und nachher am Eingange zu haben.

Advertisement for a concert given by Anton Stadler in Riga on 21 March 1794. Stadler included an illustration of his signature instrument, the basset clarinet, on his concert flyers, even when, as in this program, he was planning to play the basset horn "to change things up".

Daniel Schubart (1739–91) described the sound of the clarinet as “the sound of great sentiment – the tone of a passionate heart melting with love”. And Anton Stadler’s artistry, combined with the natural characteristics of the instrument, proved irresistible. As one admirer noted of Stadler’s playing:

Never should I have thought that a clarinet could be capable of imitating a human voice so deceptively as it was imitated by you. Truly, your instrument has so soft and lovely a tone that nobody who has a heart can resist it...’
(Johann Friedrich Schink, *Litterarische Fragmente*, 1784)

Mozart’s masterful writing for the clarinet captures exactly these qualities. In Stadler, he found a player who had not only a beautiful sound, but a sparkling technique to boot, and theirs became one of the great partnerships in the history of the clarinet repertoire. Indeed, it can be safely said that his works helped raise the clarinet from its customary place in orchestras and wind bands to become a star in its own right.

While he was not the first to write chamber music for the clarinet – forerunners included C.P.E. Bach, Wagenseil and, of particular significance, Johann Stamitz and his son Karl – Mozart clearly showed the instrument in a new light. Equally significant, he played a key part in the development of a new kind of clarinet.

The Basset Clarinet

Both the Clarinet Quintet and Mozart’s Concerto in A major, K.622, were originally written for an instrument called the basset clarinet, which adds four more chromatic notes to the bottom of the range of an ordinary clarinet. (Not to be confused with the larger basset horn, for which Mozart also wrote.)

Stadler had worked together with the Lotz to craft this instrument, and it was quite a novelty, evidenced by the fact that many of Stadler’s concert programs announced that he would perform on this unusual instrument. Several surviving announcements for concerts featuring Stadler even went so far as to include an illustration of the instrument.

When the publisher Johann André in Offenbach am Main published the Quintet in 1802, the clarinet part was edited so as to omit the lower basset notes; the basset clarinet had never really taken off and most players would not have had access to an instrument. Unfortunately, the manuscripts to both the Quintet and the Concerto have been lost – according to a letter from Mozart’s widow Constanze, Stadler claimed to have lost the manuscript of the Quintet when his briefcase was stolen, but others told her he had pawned both case and contents for the sum of 73 ducats. As a result, clarinetists must make educated guesses about the passages that may have included these notes.

The interpretation in this concert is based on a contemporary arrangement of the Quintet published by Artaria in 1809 which includes the basset notes, making it an important source for those wishing to restore the piece to its original form.

Adapted from an essay by Sylvia Berry and Nicole van Bruggen

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