

Are Clarinetists the Audience?

by Brian Martin

Are clarinetists performing for each other at the expense of the audience? In many occupational groups, from architects to zoologists, I've noticed that specialists become ever more oriented to impressing others in their field at the expense of outsiders.

As a social scientist myself, it is excruciating to observe the jargon that fills academic journals, when in many cases it would be quite possible to communicate to a wider audience. Yet many professionals look down on "popularisers."

Clarinetists may be subject to the same processes. Professionals attempt to impress each other, and students are taught to play in a way that pleases their teachers. Is the audience left out of the picture?

Actually, I think that performing artists are more immune to the corruptions of inward-looking professionalism than most other occupations. Furthermore, players need to strive for improvement rather than just satisfying the lowest expectation. Nevertheless, self-reflection on this issue is worthwhile. Here are a few comments based on decades of amateur playing, performance and observation:

- **Choice of music.** What pleases a performer or another clarinetist often doesn't interest less musically sophisticated members of an audience. Sonatas by Brahms or virtuoso extravaganzas by Lazarus may not impress audiences as much as easy, short and cute pieces, often based on popular melodies. I can remember playing for a performance evening at a primary school. I picked out some of the lightest pieces in my repertoire, but compared to popular songs and clown stunts, they were the most "seri-

ous" items on the program, and certainly didn't interest the many kids running around the hall!

- **Introducing pieces.** The formal concert style, in which the performers simply come on stage and play, does little to grip audiences. I've found that listeners invariably appreciate an informal introduction to the composer and piece. Yet how many performers spend even a few minutes preparing and practicing a verbal presentation compared to many hours on the clarinet?
- **Body language.** Having a relaxed and engaging way of walking on, getting ready and playing makes an enormous difference to audiences, yet there are some brilliant technicians who are so stiff and awkward that they make the audience tense. Then there are the contortionists who twist around so much that anyone watching is distracted. It is said that in everyday conversation, words convey only one-tenth of the meaning, with tone of voice and body language providing the rest. In live performance, the body helps get across the musical message.
- **Interpretation.** Musicians know that playing the notes is just the start — the key to musicality is interpretation. Yet, from the point of view of audiences, few performers make full use of interpretative possibilities. My impression is that most clarinetists could enormously exaggerate their pauses, rubatos and other effects, to an extent that would be seen as gross distortion by other clarinetists, yet only just begin to make an audience notice. Top singers can be highly musical in making extreme deviations from the literal score of arias.
- **Dynamics.** Compared to the vast dynamic range that clarinets can produce, most clarinetists stay in middle regions, preferring to avoid loss of tone in extremely soft passages or distortion in very loud ones. Yet, like other forms of interpretation, dynamics need to be greatly exaggerated in order for audiences to notice anything. Many years ago, I learned from an article in *Scientific American* (Blake Patterson, "Musical dynamics," November 1974) that few performers make full use of all of the dynamic possibilities.

- **Tone quality.** Many clarinetists spend endless hours seeking the perfect tone, searching for the best make and model of clarinet, the right mouthpiece and, of course, the ideal reed, not to mention continual practice. Yet my impression is that differences in tone quality that impress other clarinetists are of relatively little concern to most listeners. Some non-musicians tell me (apologetically) that they just don't like the sound of the clarinet, whereas others say they like it. They don't distinguish between different clarinet sounds. Even musicians who play other instruments seldom make comments about the tone quality of clarinets. I've concluded that there are various types of sound that are potentially pleasing to audiences.
- **Leaking air.** Audience members do notice when air leaks out of a clarinetist's embouchure. In fact, up close, they may be distracted by air coming through the instrument. I was embarrassed one time when, after playing in a woodwind quintet for some children, one young girl naively asked me, "What's that shhh sound?" I thought I wasn't leaking much at all! Yet I've heard a famous clarinetist in performance who produced a rush of wind audible at a great distance. My guess is that many audience members may prefer a thin, clear sound to a full, rich, airy one.

In making these comments, I don't claim to be a paragon of the performing platform. I started out as the stiffest of players and still struggle to avoid being locked into the dots on the page. Nor should my comments on audiences be taken as definitive. What's needed is a bit of practical research into what listeners really appreciate. We all have our ideas, but who has studied the issue systematically?

Finally, pleasing the audience isn't everything. We do have to please ourselves too!

ABOUT THE WRITER...

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