



## The bass clarinet, the great unknown "It's not a black saxophone, it's a Bass Clarinet"

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Many times we have had to hear the bass clarinet performers, even within a musical, "What a rare saxophone" or "Do you play a black saxophone?" The bass clarinet is not a black saxophone as it has been thought of or still is thought by a lot of people, it is this large wooden, metal instrument that usually has heavy joints and limited tessitura.

Usually in our musical societies the directors feel that when someone has to play a bass clarinet, you have to be an "average", musician, no longer studying, or an elderly person without many ambitions, without thinking that the bass clarinet, in many occasions is and will be a solo instrument. Spanish composers until recently saw the bass clarinet as a large clarinet, ponderous but not for great virtuosity or for difficult passages, usable in its most serious juncture, preferring not to use it in the medium, sharp and very sharp registry because there is widespread belief that the sound is poor in those registries and is difficult to broadcast.

The bass clarinet is an instrument of the family of the woodwinds, invented in the mid-eighteenth century, particularly between 1730 and 1750 as a complement to the family of clarinets. Its' sound extension is almost five eighths although its optimal sound registry is around three and a half. The usual extension is from Mi b 2 to Sol 5, although almost all of the bass clarinets that are manufactured today are instruments that arrive to Do 2, and its sweet and rich sound, the more severe and powerful than the soprano clarinet in B flat, possessing a wide dynamic range, from the minimum pianissimo to fortissimo maximum.

The music for the bass clarinet is usually written in treble clef and sounds a ninth lower to the writing, this is known as "French notation", other composers have used "German notation", in bass clef music written with a tone higher than their real sounds. The bass clarinet has a length of 1.4 m, the double of a standard clarinet, and it would be unmanageable if the tube was not curved presenting a wooden body, usually ebony or granadilla wood and a bell and a metal shank. No one knows for sure who was the first to build one, but in Germany the oldest one found and known, with a single key, was in Belgium, one that already has a similar form to the current bass clarinet but with three keys and another instrument in Switzerland with some key more again leading us to think that it is already late XVIII. Between the late eighteenth and early nineteenth the bass clarinet took the form of a bassoon, with the bell of the instrument up and tuning more than acceptable in more than three octaves.

Desfontelles made the Bass Clarinet with the form of the saxophone in the early nineteenth century and Papalini created a Bass Clarinet, snakelike in order to reduce the tube length, although most of the manufacturers of this era still have the shape of a bassoon. By the mid-nineteenth century was Louis Auguste who developed the Buffet bass clarinet with its bell downward, in collaboration with clarinetist Isaac Dacosta, with Adolphe Sax, famed Belgian instrument builder, who introduced several technical improvements to the bass clarinet, having made a late nineteenth century bass clarinet in over 10 different countries. In the early twentieth century the bass clarinet had 17 keys, beginning himself to produce the first models leading down to the low C, adding keys for ease of execution until the current 30 more or less depending on the manufacturer and bass clarinet model, if dropping to low Do or just coming to Mi b. In the nineteenth century a bass clarinet was manufactured in La very much like being tuned in B flat, falling into disuse and being replaced by the latter, using it Richard Wagner as a soloist in the opera Lohengrin.

Originally its use was limited to the bands of military formations and wind bands, clusters used in bending the voices of other substituted winds or when instruments of low juncture were not available. Since 1834 the composer Saverio Mercadante introduced the Glicibarifono, the forerunner of the clarinet in the Low Symphony Orchestra with the premiere of his opera Emma di Antiochia, there have been many composers along music history which have included the bass clarinet in the symphonic orchestra with a role, highlighting Giacomo Meyerbeer, Richard Wagner, Franz Liszt, Giacomo Puccini, Richard Strauss, Maurice Ravel, Dimitri Shostakovich, Sergei Prokofiev and Igor Stravinsky.

In the mid-twentieth century, their use changed as an instrument "secondary" and affirmed as a soloist instrument. The emerge of new trends and musical styles, and the affirmation of technical and construction characteristics stably prompted numerous composers such as Karlheinz Stockhausen, Bruno Maderna, Franco Donatoni, Iannis Xenakis, or Isang Yun experienced new sound resources and contributed to making his low and rich sonority a key element in contemporary music. The virtuosity of outstanding performers and specialists have done the rest. The first full recital with a bass clarinet as a solo instrument was played on March 24 1955 for which he is considered the father of all great bass clarinetists today, namely Josef Horak.

Josef Horak (Czech Republic, 1931 to 2005) had to play the bass clarinet by accident in a recording of the Symphony Orchestra where he worked, falling in love at that very moment of that beautiful and ignored instrument. He began to specialize, investigating the possibilities of the upper register, hoping to achieve a range of about five octaves bass clarinet. One of the problems that he had to face at the beginning was the lack of original repertoire, he only had Othmar Schoeck Sonata, written in 1927-28, so he had to make transcripts and arrangements of works written for cello and clarinet. Throughout his career more than 500 pieces have been written exclusively for this intrepid Czech musician, who announced the bass clarinet to the world.

In 1959, Horák had just played for the German radio wind sextet Mládí made up by Leos Janacek, and while relaxing with his peers, showing some of the high notes he could get with a bass clarinet, a man, mature enough, interrupted asking: Can you play higher and stronger? Can you play pianissimo? What pieces are performed on the bass clarinet? Definitely, Horák had drawn the attention of this individual. "I just play transcripts because there are no original pieces" Josef replied at hearing immediately the visitor's advice: "Play the Sonata for the bassoon and the piano by Hindemith". - Is there any transcript? Josef asked innocently, "Oh, Hindemith will feel happy if you play it. I am Paul Hindemith".

Despite having formed various chamber groups found playing new pieces and winning several awards, Josef Horak will be remembered for the "Duo Bohemi di Prague" formed with pianist Emma Kovárnová and with whom he won the biggest hits, giving concerts and master classes worldwide, dedicating a large number of composers to Duo Bohemi di Prague, countless new pieces today form part of the mandatory repertoire for the bass clarinet. We all know the importance of the bass clarinet in formations known such as the symphony orchestra and band music, having an important role in chamber music, not only as the basis of a clarinet quartet, but as an equal member in conditions and importance with other components in different formations such as in the Sextet, "Sextet" Jean Françaix or "Mladi" by Leos Janacek, both original for bass clarinet and the wind quintet or septet of Paul Hindemith's original wind quintet, trumpet and bass clarinet, or for bass clarinet quintets and the string quartet "Fantasy Quintet" by York Bowen, "Zebus" by Johan Favoreel or "Da Uno a Cinque" by Frits Celis between other chamber works of curious combinations and unknown, endless repertoire original for the bass clarinet and piano. There are countless composers who have dedicated bass clarinet pieces worldwide, Theo Leovendie, Dietrich Erdmann, Todd Goodman write music written for the bass clarinet and orchestra, and Jonathan Russell composed a concerto for two bass clarinets and the orchestra. Also as a solo instrument accompanied by a band, outstanding composers include Kees Vlak with his "Concerto for Bass Clarinet and Harmony Band", Jan Hadermann "Spotlights on the Bass Clarinet", Jan van der Roost and his "Tre Sentimenti", or the Spanish Nino Diaz "Octubre", Francisco Bort "Carambola" or Jose Alamá with "Con Cierta Sentido". Among all the works composed in the late XX in which participates the bass clarinet, outstanding especially are those in which the instrument is combined with percussion. Among all the elements of this family, it seems that the marimba is in best league with the bass clarinet. This seems to be demonstrated in works such as the "Sonata for bass clarinet and the percussion" of Patrick Drazen (1979), "Duet, op. 220 Marimba and Bass Clarinet" composed by Tauno Marttinen (1983), "From Far and Near" for the marimba and bass clarinet by Wilfried Westerlinck (1990) or "Diàlegs Subtils" for the bass clarinet and percussion by Salvador Brotons (1990), among many others.

Today gradually bass clarinet is opening a gap as a solo instrument thanks to some composers and Associations of Composers are beginning to explore the possibilities offering this beautiful instrument that both times has been "the great unknown". Among everything the bet that COSICOVA has made should be noted that this year, the Valencian Composers Association, dedicating the bass clarinet through the composers associated several premieres in a recital for the bass clarinet and the piano to be performed in November this year at the Palau de la Música in Valencia and I am honored to be able to perform the bass clarinet solo.

I encourage all those musicians, conductors, composers, clarinetists or not, to consider the bass clarinet as the instrument that has personality and its own characteristics, so close and far away from what a conventional clarinet is, and to all those who want to know it thoroughly, with all its possibilities and peculiarities, they recommend you consult a specialist in bass clarinet and if they have or know about personally any, consult the book "The bass clarinet" from the great bass clarinetist Harry Sparnaay, to whom we appreciate his cooperation for this article I would also like to thank another person and it is my great bass clarinet teacher and friend for 20 years, the teacher Jan Guns, to whom I have to thank all you know about the bass clarinet, how to play, the conception of the instrument, the repertoire and especially the affection for this captivating instrument that is the bass clarinet.

Finally, just to remark that in Spain, as in most European countries and almost in practically the whole world, the bass clarinet can be studied officially in Conservatories or Universities as a secondary instrument or within the degree of the clarinet, and only can do Specific studies for their Master degree on bass clarinet only in countries like Belgium and Holland. A shame since for me like many fellow professionals, the bass clarinet really deserves a specialization of independent studies.