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LUCA SARACCA INTERVIEWS MICHELE MANGANI



Notable Women Clarinetists

Clarinet Compositions of
Nicolas Bacri

ClarinetFest® 2019 Report

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The Clarinet Compositions of Nicolas Bacri

by Kristine Dizon

French composer Nicolas Bacri (b. 1961) is considered one of the most influential and prominent composers of his time, and with more than 30 clarinet works in his catalog, he is becoming more well-known among clarinetists worldwide. He began his musical studies with piano lessons at the age of 7. He continued to study harmony, counterpoint, analysis and composition as a teenager with Françoise Levechin-Gangloff and Christian Manen. After 1979, he continued his studies with Louis Saguer. In the same year, Bacri entered the Conservatoire de Paris where he studied with Claude Ballif, Marius Constant, Serge Nigg and Michel Philippot.

Bacri was professor of orchestration at the Haute École de Musique in Geneva, Switzerland, from 2005 to 2011. Since October 2017, Bacri has served as professor of composition at the Conservatoire à Rayonnement Régional de Paris and La Schola Cantorum. He has written two books discussing his ideas and views about the development of music: *Notes Étrangères (Foreign Notes)* in 2004 and *Crise, Notes Étrangères II (Crisis, Foreign Notes II)* in 2016. In 2017, he received the “Officier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres” from the French government.

Bacri’s catalogue is vast, including seven symphonies, two one-act operas, ten string quartets, six piano trios, four violin concertos and numerous



Nicolas Bacri

other concertante works. He has also written extensively for the clarinet, having produced 30 works throughout his career. His most recent works include *Notturmo ed Allegro* (Trio No. 6, Op. 151); *Concerto da camera* No. 2, commissioned by the Jacques Lancelot International Clarinet Competition; and *Trio Lirico*, No. 5, Op. 143 commissioned by Texas Christian University, Fort Worth. *Ophelia's Mad Scene* for soprano and clarinet, Op. 146a was commissioned by soprano Noriko Yakushji and performed by Belgian clarinetist Cedric de Bruycker. A version for solo clarinet or bass clarinet (*Ophelia's Solo*, Op. 146b) was dedicated to American clarinetist Kristine Dizon – who premiered the work in Nicosia, Cyprus – and J. Lawrie Bloom of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Bloom will also premiere a related work for bass clarinet and orchestra, *Ophelia's Tears*, with the CSO conducted by Riccardo Muti in February 20, 2020.

The following interview took place in Paris, France on June 8, 2018.

KRISTINE DIZON: *Can you tell us about your first clarinet concerto?*

NICOLAS BACRI: My first clarinet concerto, *Capriccio Notturmo*, was right at the end of my “orthodox modernism” period. This was the last piece of this kind that I wrote. I met so many performers when I was at Radio France [the French public radio broadcast service]. I was very keen on asking them to program contemporary music in their concerts, but I had terrible answers from them. I realized very abruptly that contemporary music for them in general was something quite unimportant. They had to play it, but it was like a chore. It was a blow to me to realize that most performers did not like the path most of the contemporary music was on. Progressively, my music returned to what for me was tradition; melody was more and more important for me and also tonality. That was a very important step professionally and at the same time musically.

KD: *When you think about the clarinet as this instrument of expression, can you tell me your thoughts about its expressive*

qualities? How do you think about it when you write music for it?

NB: Well, maybe I can answer this by telling you the first clarinet piece that I really loved. That was Copland's *Clarinet Concerto*. I was something like 14 and I was listening to [the radio station] France Musique and then I heard this wonderful music begin. I didn't know who the composer was. I listened to it until the end and then I heard, “This was the Copland *Clarinet Concerto* played by Benny Goodman.” I asked for this record for Christmas. For a few months after, I could listen to it like mad, you know? Then, at about age 15, I discovered the Brahms sonatas. These were the first three works for clarinet that I really loved. I'm not sure if I would have been so fond of this instrument if I first heard Rossini and Weber. You know for me, the instrument is less important than the music. I like clarinet because there is good music for clarinet. If there was not good music for clarinet, I could not like the clarinet. I don't like instruments. I like music.

KD: *I found that you have composed 31 works that involve the clarinet in a soloistic manner – a combination of solo clarinet, clarinet duo and chamber music. Out of your catalog, something that interested me was your Op. 35, American Letters for clarinet, viola (or cello) and piano. Could you tell me more about this work?*

NB: The first piece written in this little cycle was *Elegy for A.C.*, A.C. being Aaron Copland. It was written to pay homage to him, just one year after his death. I had in mind the *Piano Variations* composed by him, which I think is a great masterpiece. In my *Elegy for A.C.* I wanted to pay homage to this particular piece, not to the concerto. *Adams Dances* was written for an event at Radio France when John Adams was invited for a very large direct broadcast Saturday afternoon for a three-hour interview. As a surprise, four or five pieces were especially written based on the letters of his name that would be premiered in the broadcast. This was

a big surprise for John Adams! I didn't anticipate writing a cycle of works that related to American composers, but when I completed the piece about Adams, I told myself that I had to pay homage to Elliott Carter because I was acquainted with him personally. Also using the letters from his name, I called it *Night Mysteries*, referencing his *Night Fantasies* for piano.

KD: *What would you consider to be your most important clarinet work?*

NB: Without hesitating, *Concerto da Camera*.

KD: *Could you tell me more about this concerto?*

NB: Well, it's simply my best and most ambitious piece for clarinet. Of course, there was another concerto before, *Capriccio Notturmo*, but I don't consider it as important as the *Concerto da Camera*. For me, it's just the clarinet as I like to hear it. My *Concerto da Camera* is music as I like to compose it. It is not only the sound of the clarinet, but it is also the organization and the form, which for me is very important. I consider myself a lyricist, but also a symphonist. The form is the way of thinking about time. In the *Concerto da Camera*, you have sonata form, thematic relationships, and you have all that is important to me as if I was writing a symphony.

KD: *Can you tell me more about how this piece was written or what inspired you?*

NB: I was at a time of my life where symphonic thinking became clearer in my mind. That's the conjunction between this state of mind, symphonic thought, and the desire to write something for the clarinet that inspired me. Vandoren agreed to commission a work for Philippe Cuper, and he suggested me as the composer. I am very grateful to Philippe for this generous idea.

KD: *So, going from Concerto da Camera to your Op. 67, which is your Sonata da Camera, I also see that you transcribed this for viola. Was this originally written for viola or clarinet?*

NB: I'm very happy that you ask about this piece after the *Concerto da Camera* because it is the second most important piece that I wrote for the clarinet. *Sonata da Camera* was first written for the viola. You know, Brahms wrote first for the clarinet and then he transcribed for the viola. I did the opposite. I wrote it for the viola and then I transcribed it for the clarinet, but also for flute, violin, cello, and saxophone. Choosing *Sonata da Camera* as a title was to signify that the thought of the piece was not for one particular instrument. This is an important piece for the clarinet for the same reason as the *Concerto da Camera*. It coincides with my maturity with symphonic thinking and more lucid ideas of what I wanted to do for the construction of the piece.

KD: What else would you say you feel are your most important works for the clarinet that you have written?

NB: The *Deux Sonatines Opposées (Two Opposite Sonatinas, Op. 108)* is an important work too. Why did I choose this title for this little cycle? I was asked by my pianist friend Eliane Reyes – who was to be my second wife – to write a piece for her and clarinetist Ronald von Spaendonck for a CD of sonatinas they recorded. So, there was the Martinu *Sonatina*...

KD: The Horowitz *Sonatina*...

NB: So, you know this CD! Malcom Arnold, Raymond Chevreuille, Marcel Poot, so two Belgian composers. When I was asked this, Eliane told me the same thing a lot of performers think about but generally don't dare say: She said, "Please write something for me, which is lyrical and that I would like to play, and play again... I like Brahms. I like Ravel. I like Debussy." So, I composed the *Sonatina Lirica* with these three composers in mind. But at the end of the process I was so scared by what I wrote! I never wrote such a simple, melodious and tonal piece of music. Then I told her, "You know, I must absolutely write another sonatina for clarinet and piano showing all the opposite things I can write." This is

Sonatina Lapadaria, which is three times shorter than the *Sonatina Lirica* and pungent... stringent... harmonic material. I published it with the same opus number with a collective title *Deux Sonatines Opposées* and then I could show at this moment of my composing career my two faces of Janus. The two extremes of my language.

KD: So, with a piece like this, is it something that is played in one program?

NB: I like it when it is played one after the other. Florent Heau did this because he is the dedicatee or the *Sonatina Lapadaria*. He first played it with Eliane Reyes in a concert.

KD: So, I noticed recently you have written a piece for clarinet and soprano.

NB: This is a commission by Noriko Yakushiji, who currently lives in Brussels, but is from Tokyo. She recorded the piece for a CD. She asked me for a vocalise for voice and clarinet. I told her that I am not interested in a vocalise because the voice for me is not an instrument like other instruments. The voice is not only an instrument, but a product of the human mind. What I wanted to write for a long time was *Ophelia's Mad Scene*. I was very impressed in my first aesthetic period by the vocal experiences of Cathy Berberian and *Accroche Note* (a Strasbourg Ensemble) with the voice of Françoise Kubler. When I wrote this piece, I did not want to imitate this, but I had this idea of the voice as a dramatic persona involved with some of the techniques that were developed by those singers. I suggested to Noriko that I write *Ophelia's Mad Scene* with some kind of very dramatic voice and the clarinet was conceived not as a type of accompaniment, but like the synthesis of all the musical content. So, it is as much of a piece for clarinet as it is for voice. It was recorded with Noriko and young Belgian clarinetist Cedric de Bruycker. ❖

NICOLAS BACRI – WORKS FOR CLARINET

Bagatelles for clarinet and piano, Op. 12 No. 2, 1985 (Edi Pan, Roma)

Capriccio Notturmo (concerto for clarinet and orchestra), Op. 20, 1986-87 (Durand/Universal Classical Music Publishing)

Deux petites rapsodies for clarinet solo, Op. 21b, 1979 (Durand/Universal Classical Music Publishing)

American Letters, for piano, clarinet and viola (or cello), Op. 35, 1991-94 (Durand/Universal Classical Music Publishing)

Night Mysteries for piano, clarinet and viola (or cello), Op. 35, No. 1, 1994 (Durand/Universal Classical Music Publishing)

Elegy for A. C. for piano, clarinet and viola (or cello), Op. 35 No. 2, 1991-92 (Durand/Universal Classical Music Publishing)

Adams Dances for piano, clarinet and viola (or cello), Op. 35 No. 3, 1993 (Durand/Universal Classical Music Publishing)

Divertimento for clarinet, violin, viola and cello, Op. 37, 1991-92 (Durand/Universal Classical Music Publishing)

Im Volkston (Divertimento No. 2) for clarinet, violin and cello, Op. 43, 1994 (Durand/Universal Classical Music Publishing)

Symphonie No. 4 (Symphonie classique "Sturm und Drang"), version for piano, clarinet, horn, violin, viola and cello, Op. 49b, 1995/2004 (Durand/Universal Classical Music Publishing)

Mondorf Sonatina No. 1 for oboe and clarinet (or various other combinations of woodwinds), Op. 58 No. 1, 1997 (Durand/Universal Classical Music Publishing)

Mondorf Sonatina No. 2 for clarinet solo, Op. 58, No. 2, 1997 (Durand/Universal Classical Music Publishing)

Concerto da camera for clarinet and string orchestra (or string quartet), Op. 61, 1998 (Salabert/Universal Classical Music Publishing)

Sonata da camera for viola (or violin cello, flute, clarinet or saxophone) and piano, Op. 67, 1977/rev. 1997-2000 (Peer Music classical, New-York-Hamburg)

Night Music for clarinet and cello, Op. 73, 2001 (Gérard Billaudot éditeur)

Partita concertante for flute (or oboe, clarinet or bassoon) and orchestra (or

string quartet), Op. 88c, 2004 (Le Chant du Monde)

A Smiling Suite (d'après Diletto classico) for piano, violin and clarinet, Op. 100b, 2006-07 (Durand/Universal Classical Music Publishing)

Sonatina lirica for clarinet (or viola or saxophone) and piano, Op. 108 No. 1, 2008 (Alphonse Leduc)

Sonatina lapidaria for clarinet (or viola or saxophone) and piano, Op. 108 No. 2, 2009 (Alphonse Leduc)

Sonatina lirica for clarinet (or saxophone or viola) and string quartet, Op. 108 No. 1b 2008 (Alphonse Leduc)

Lyric Interlude (A Study in Pastoral Style) for English horn (or flute or clarinet), violin and cello, Op. 110, 2008 (Alphonse Leduc)

Lyric Interlude (A Study in Pastoral Style) for English horn (or flute, clarinet or viola) and piano, Op. 110b, 2008 (Alphonse Leduc)

Petite musique de nuit for alto saxophone (or flute, clarinet or viola) and piano, Op. 111, 2008 (Gérard Billaudot éditeur)

Sonatine and Capriccio, for clarinet (or saxophone) solo, Op. 131, 2013 (Jean-Louis Delage, France)

Cinq moments retrouvés: Prélude (1979); Barcarolle nocturne (1979, rev. 2001); Am Grabe Richard Wagner (1979, rev. 2014); Hommage à Messiaen (1979); Carillon et Toccata (1979/rev. 2014), for clarinet (or violin) and piano, Op. 136 (Le Chant du Monde, Music Sales Group, London/Paris)

Trois moments retrouvés: Prélude (1979); Hommage à Messiaen (1979); Carillon et Toccata (1979/rev. 2014), for clarinet, violin and piano, Op. 136c (Le Chant du Monde, Music Sales Group, London/Paris)

Sonata a quattro (Quasi variazioni) for four clarinets, Op. 142a, 2016 (Klarthe)

Trio lirico for clarinet, viola and piano, Op. 143, 2016-17 (Alphonse Leduc)

Ophelia's Mad Scene for soprano and clarinet, Op. 146a (d'après Shakespeare, Hamlet), 2018

Ophelia Solo for clarinet, Op. 146b, 2018

Ophelia's Tears for bass clarinet and orchestra, Op. 150, 2019 (Alphonse Leduc, Paris)

Concerto da camara, No. 2, 2019 (IMD)

Notturmo ed Allegro Trio No. 6, Op. 151, 2019

ABOUT THE WRITER



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