

RECORDINGS
IN REVIEW



M A T T H E W S P E L L B E R G

In its three hundred years of existence, the sound of the clarinet has been likened to the human voice, a squawking duck, a howl, Benjamin Franklin's ethereal glass armonica (rumored to drive its players to madness), a screeching goose, the scent of a carnation, a lithesome cat, and someone speaking words just a hair's breadth from discernibility. Hector Berlioz had a great deal, much of it contradictory, to say about the instrument. It has a "melancholy, noble character," he wrote; no other wind instrument "can produce a tone or let it die away as beautifully as the clarinet. Hence its invaluable ability to render distant sounds, an echo, or the charm of twilight." But he also wrote elsewhere, "The clarinet, though appropriate to the expression of the most poetic ideas and sentiments, is really an epic instrument – the voice of heroic love." And the confusion only increases if we add practice to theory, for when, in the *Symphonie fantastique*, Berlioz wanted to depict the beloved *idée fixe* transformed into a hideous witch, he made her cackle through an E-flat clarinet.

All these descriptions – not just from Berlioz, but from newspaper reports, Mikhail Glinka, E. T. A. Hoffmann, Sergey Prokofiev, and others – speak only for the classical clarinet. When

playing klezmer the clarinet can be a lamentation or a whirligig. In the marching band it conveys cheerful innocence before battle. In jazz it makes a fine mellow huskiness, a coo in a cloud of smoke (except in Barney Bigard's version of "Sweet Marijuana Brown," where it *is* the cloud of smoke, dancing stoner rings round the vocal line).

Mozart solved the problem of description with a simple exclamation: "If only we had clarinets!" he wrote to his father. "You cannot imagine the glorious effect of a symphony with flutes, oboes and clarinets." That's the problem: no one can imagine the glorious effect of the clarinet. This curious instrument with its ancient mechanism – a single reed vibrates within a cylindrical bore generating standing waves of air – touches something like the abstract heart of sound, its callous disregard for referents, its slippery and defiant existence in itself. The medium by which we produce words resists them fiercely. *Loud* and *quiet* fit sound naturally, but they are the exception. Most of the other descriptive terms used to qualify the vibration of air in the ears – *big, small, bright, dark, husky, smooth, scratchy, soft, liquid* – are naturally at home in either sight or touch, and steal into sound only as metaphors.

The difficulty of describing sound is of course not unique to descriptions of the clarinet, but with the clarinet it reaches a special intensity. This may have to do with what is frequently called the instrument's purity of tone. In music as in religion, purity is a difficult, mostly apophatic word. By pure tone is meant, it seems, that the clarinet can produce sound without discernible vibrato (although it can be played with vibrato), that it is capable of producing sound that appears to materialize from nowhere, without attack (yet it can be played with a dramatic, punchy attack), and that it is capable of a remarkable evenness and loudness over the full length of its range (yet it can be squawked and squeaked with the best of them). The clarinet sound is often credited with a roundness, but what exactly is roundness, especially when compared to more evocative, if mildly pejorative, woodwind words like *shrill* (for the flute), *nasal* (for the oboe), or *clownish* (for the bassoon)?

Descriptions of the clarinet vacillate mostly between raw nature (the birdcall, the human voice, a shaking in the bones) and

Platonic abstraction (the sphere, clarity, a smooth surface). Which is to say, there are perhaps two ways of being a shape-shifter. One is to wear many masks; the other is to have a face so abstracted that every mask seems to fit, as with certain clouds or the visible side of the moon.

The career of the great Swedish clarinetist Martin Fröst tends to the abstract side of elusive. The sound he makes with the standard concert repertoire – say, for example, in his recording of the famous Weber clarinet concertos (Bis BoooJVSWAU) – is so beautiful it is almost self-erasing. That mysterious roundness is everywhere in evidence and holds consistently across all three of the clarinet's registers. The immense dynamic range is executed with precision and incredible continuity. It feels as if the entire CD were produced by a single continuously exhaled breath (Fröst has pioneered the use of circular breathing in clarinet playing, which allows him to perform otherwise impossible Bach obbligatos – but in this case I'm only being metaphorical).

Circular breathing aside, the playing is superhuman and super-individual – not a person but an angelic ideal seems to be producing these sounds, and doing so with a coolness that paradoxically augments the difficulty on display. The clarinet's entrance in Weber's Concerto no. 2 in E-flat is a dramatic three-octave leap down followed by a jump back up, then a spry arpeggio running between the two poles. Fröst plays the passage with precisely measured abandon, like a falcon that intentionally drops a thousand feet knowing he'll break his fall on an updraft, and then, having traveled half the troposphere on gravity and air alone, flashes his wings a few times to skirt a stray cloud and land gently upon a canyon ledge. The execution sounds effortless, but it doesn't sound easy or casual: it has the natural seriousness of purpose that distinguishes grace from mere elegance.

Fröst's playing wins plenty of praise. When the critics are not soaring the heights in comparison they are tracking the depths: Corinna da Fonseca-Wolheim once wondered in *The New York Times* whether someone could play the clarinet this well without having made a deal with the devil. But the perfection is maybe not, so to speak, perfect. At least, it lacks some of the things that appeal in other great clarinetists. For instance, the American players, their

work inflected to varying degrees by jazz, play the standard repertoire with a distinctiveness, a queerness, that can border on whimsy – and the clarinet, after all, can be a whimsical instrument. In his recording of Weber’s Second Concerto, Richard Stoltzman pinches the top of the opening three-octave leap with a nasal, almost goofy sound, and drops with an almost awkward thud. The whole thing is still splendid, but it has a kind of oh-did-I-just-do-that wink to it, maybe pointed at the pompousness of the virtuoso cult (his sneaky *Star Wars* cadenza with the Boston Pops, now on YouTube, surely has similar intentions). Stoltzman’s playing – and I hope he would take this as a compliment – sometimes brings to mind Chico Marx on the piano or Harpo on the harp, the goofiness enhancing, never diminishing, the technical brilliance on display.

Consider Benny Goodman as another counterexample to Fröst. Although he made his name and his money as a jazzman, Goodman nevertheless recorded a great deal of the classical clarinet repertoire, and created quite a bit of it, too (concertos were written for him by Aaron Copland, Paul Hindemith, and Béla Bartók). He plays Weber and even Mozart with a rollicking vibrato and loose tempo, and above all with an expressive harshness, a punctuating tone that seems to jabber and threaten and cajole like an actor delivering a long, many-faceted monologue.

This kind of personality is missing from Fröst’s playing, perhaps because he is apparently untouched by the shadow of jazz (he is, on the other hand, a formidable klezmer clarinetist). But it’s unfair to say his work is not distinctive; it’s just not idiosyncratic. His calling card is rather the isolation of his brilliance, and it is powerful enough that he merits comparison only with the likes of Stoltzman or Goodman (a comparison that Fröst invites in a CD called *Clarinet Concertos Dedicated to Benny Goodman*).

Fröst produces an ethereal sound whose distinction is its transcendence of the normal parameters of distinctiveness. This makes him an emblem for the clarinet’s essential enigma – for that queer, clear, penetrating sound that comes from nowhere and returns nowhere and provokes such confusion and delight. The clarinet, as Berlioz reminds us, produces the sound both of dying away and of coming close. It embodies the spectrum of our physical reaction to sound, from the flirtation of half-heard sweetness to the pain of a shriek beside the ear. In the past weeks I have heard Martin Fröst’s

clarinet in my dreams; but I've also had savage headaches, and I suspect the two are related.

This almost metaphysical generation of sound makes Fröst a powerful interpreter of twentieth-century repertoire. When he plays Krzysztof Penderecki's clarinet quintet (Bis B000025UTJ), you truly feel the interplanetary loneliness of classical music in the postwar period, the way its exile from tonality and tradition is like traveling through outer space. But Fröst's capacity for alienation can best be grasped in his recording of Kalevi Aho's clarinet concerto (Bis B000NJLXC2), a work he commissioned (it is paired on a CD with Carl Nielsen's concerto). Although Aho's is in many moments a traditionally lyrical work, in others the clarinet hoots, shrieks, slides over micro-tones, runs huge glissandi, and, perhaps most interesting, rapidly vibrates over one tone in a highly controlled, almost electrical manner. Everywhere Fröst pushes the instrument's technical limits (in other pieces he goes even farther: he's devised a way to sing and play the clarinet simultaneously, producing two notes at once). But everywhere Fröst is still Fröst, incredible polish, not a sound out of place, even when the sounds are by their very nature placeless.

The burden of this perfection, the need to break its surface, may be what has impelled Fröst into a parallel career as a kind of conceptual performer, so that he now does shows combining choreographed theatrical effects with music making. His most elaborate effort in this direction is a concert program called *Doll's House*, premiered in 2013 with the Royal Stockholm Philharmonic Orchestra (and still viewable on their Web site). Here he is soloist, emcee, director, conductor, mime, and tap-dancer for a loose sequence of thematically related works: *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* and Stravinsky's *Pulcinella*, along with original works written for Fröst bearing names like *The Dolls of Venice*. The finale is Anders Hillborg's *Peacock Tales Clarinet Concerto*, also written for Fröst, in which the soloist performs a spectacular mime while wearing a bird mask. The concert, like Heinrich von Kleist's famous essay on marionettes, seems to be about puppets who yearn to move by themselves and yet fear losing the unself-conscious grace a set of strings provides. This dilemma pertains to life itself, to be sure, but it's especially relevant to the plight of classical musicians, whose immense talent and energy are mostly locked

into interpreting a repertoire that solidified a half-century ago. The show is most compelling, perhaps, as a comment on (a polemic against?) the mixed blessings of an art form whose refinement at once exalts and stifles its players.

I applaud any effort to restore life to live classical music. The concert hall, with its sterile lighting and enforced silence and preposterous on-and-off-the-stage bowing protocol, has become moribund. That almost no one seems willing to admit this is a case of the Emperor's New Clothes. Whatever the flaws in Fröst's approach (and there seem to be a few with the lighting, for example, at least so far as I can tell from a video recording), he deserves applause for confronting the problem head-on.

But what's most surprising about *Doll's House* is how little, in a way, his playing changes. The music making still has an uncanny sheen of perfection and grace about it, and I mean this partly, but not mainly, as a criticism. Instead of being changed, Fröst's playing changes everything around it. His gift (and maybe curse) is to make even fiery passion and theatrical melodrama feel cucumber-cool. All the concreteness a theatrical performance brings to music is remade as abstraction through his musicianship. Every time the clarinet is meant to evoke something else — a peacock, a puppet, a lover, a dancer, a Jewish mystic — Fröst does something strange and almost alchemical: he switches the direction of the analogy, so that after listening to him you no longer think the clarinet sounds like a peacock; instead, you think that a peacock (or a lover, or a mystic) is just a poor, earthly imitation of the clarinet.

Although its ancestors are ancient, the modern clarinet evolved recently and quickly, from about 1730 to 1850, almost entirely in the elite centers of European music making. In the early nineteenth century it was the object of a minor arms race to produce ever more sophisticated and expansive instruments: first with two keys, then five, then seven, then thirteen, fifteen, sixteen, and finally the modern standard Boehm system with seventeen keys and ring holes borrowed from the transverse flute. (The Boehm clarinet and its simpler cousin, the Albert, are used almost everywhere except Germany and Austria, where a competing model, the Oehler, is played.)

The history of the repertoire is likewise an upward spiral of

sophistication, or rather a double helix, pairing composers and players two by two. Mozart got to know Anton Stadler, the best clarinetist in Vienna, and wrote several masterpieces for him. The music flaunts the two extra whole steps below the standard range Stadler could play on his custom-built clarinet – and this despite the fact that the man was a scoundrel who still owed Mozart money when the composer died in penury. Anton Weber saw what new heights the clarinet could reach after meeting the brilliant Heinrich Baermann; his concertos in turn set a new standard for Baermann’s pupils and encouraged the instrument makers to redouble their efforts. Brahms had mostly retired from composing when he met Richard Mühlfeld, for whom he then wrote his swansong series of clarinet chamber pieces; “No one can play the clarinet more beautifully than Herr Mühlfeld,” he told Clara Schumann, and even convinced her to re-tune her piano to match Mühlfeld’s slightly lower A for a parlor concert. In the twentieth century Suzanne Stephens became a muse to Karl-Heinz Stockhausen; knowing her training in dramatic theater, he wrote a performance piece where she plays a frantic harlequin dancing onstage. Thus the great works of the clarinet repertoire began life as private gifts, gloves to fit distinct and special hands. (In this tradition Fröst is the new belle of the ball: many contemporary composers have written specifically for him.)

A curious fact of the clarinet’s history is that although it evolved in such a narrow world – in the parlor and palace, between composer and virtuoso – it quickly conquered a wider one. By the end of the nineteenth century it had been appropriated by military marching bands, British amateur clubs, Gypsies, Hasidim, Greeks, Turks, and Arabs. It was on hand for the birth of jazz in New Orleans and was its lead solo instrument for thirty years, though losing out to the sax in the long run. Throughout this time the classical connection was never severed; great clarinetists crossed regularly between the two worlds. Eric Hoeprich writes in his wonderful history of the clarinet that the legendary Creole players in the New Orleans warehouses – the Tios, Papa, Lorenzo, and Lorenzo Jr.; their students Achille Baquet, Sidney Bechet, and Barney Bigard – played clarinets manufactured in Paris by Buffet Crampon, then and now the gold standard. And although they developed their own innovations in vibrato, syncopation, and the

subtle flattening of blue notes, they studied fingering from Hyacinth Klosé's classic playing manual, developed when he was professor for clarinet at the Conservatoire de Paris.

If it's a general rule that the rarefied spheres of culture borrow – even unjustly steal – the vigor of traditional forms, then the clarinet might be considered a small form of restitution, a gift from the insular guild of classical music to its siblings the world over.

Martin Fröst's career might be said to parallel the generosity of the clarinet. Like the instrument he plays, he represents the height of the classical tradition: incredible technical skill, total command of the aesthetics of tone, a willingness to make the self the servant of sound. But in Fröst none of this comes off as patronizing. His classical purity steps gamely into almost every conceivable style and period (except, to say it again because it's such a surprising omission, jazz). His style can refract many warm and varied colors across its crystal face.

Yet he is most sublime when he stands in the sublime center of the tradition. The classical clarinet repertoire is so small that it has just one undisputed crown jewel: Mozart's Concerto in A Major, K. 622. A beloved work, it's also a pressingly late one, as the Köchel number sadly indicates. The *Requiem* is K. 626, only four pieces away.

Fröst has recorded the concerto twice, once with Peter Oundjian leading the Amsterdam Sinfonietta (Bis BooooCEOLQ) and once conducting himself with the German Chamber Philharmonic (Bis BooE4ZNLGC). His playing in both recordings is perfect, joyous but still serious, mindful that Mozart's worldly charm is continuous with his otherworldly beauty and that the pauper's grave was close when these sweet sounds passed onto the page.

Still, perfect doesn't mean predictable. There are some intriguing differences between the two recordings, most evident in the second movement. In this famous Adagio, the clarinet suspends a gentle series of sound arcs over a continuous pulsation of strings. The musicologist Scott Burnham chooses it as the opening example of his book *Mozart's Grace*, as if to suggest that here is where you see the stuff at its purest.

In the earlier, Amsterdam recording, Fröst is as suave as can be.

Exquisite pianissimos, a legato for the textbooks, an attack that makes the notes appear brilliantly from nowhere, like new stars in the night sky. With the German Chamber Philharmonic, in contrast, there is a slight brashness to the sound, or maybe an increased urgency. The tempo is slightly faster, the playing more forceful. The dynamic variation is less extreme, but it's more articulated: you feel each change sharply. There is a suggestion in this later recording that beauty might benefit from just a touch of the harsh – the goose singing from deep within the crystal sphere – to protect it from preciousness. Surely another worthy motto for Martin Fröst and the instrument he so uncannily mirrors.