

# The Rise of the Industrial Clarinetist

By Michael Drapkin

When I was a high school clarinetist, we all looked up to the great orchestra clarinetists of our time. Our role models were people like Harold Wright and Robert Marcellus, and every “serious” clarinetist’s goal was to someday get a job as principal clarinetist in a major orchestra.

We idolized these clarinetists for good reason – they were beautifully expressive players with distinctive styles whose playing influenced an entire generation.

Recently, however, I went to hear a performance of a Brahms sonata performed by a principal clarinetist from one of the top orchestras. When the performance was over, a colleague asked me what my take was on the performance. I thought about it for a few seconds and replied, “now there is a good 2<sup>nd</sup> clarinetist.” Beautiful tone and flawless technique, but – disappointingly - nothing musical to say.

Unfortunately, this doesn’t seem to be the exception. I’ve noticed a trend over a number of years that by and large (and in my humble opinion) the individuals attaining these exceptional positions in major orchestras have more often than not been bland, uninteresting players. Again, nice tone, excellent technique, but musically bankrupt. Given our tradition of phenomenal principal clarinetists, how can this have happened?

To fully answer this question, one needs to take a look at the career pathways available to those with professional aspirations as clarinetists today, and the process by which they are winnowed down to that elusive principal clarinet position, and the way that orchestras have evolved over the last 50 years.

Those wishing to pursue a career as professional clarinetists today are really faced with two career pathways: either teaching clarinet, or getting a job playing the clarinet. I have many fine colleagues that teach privately, either in a studio setting and/or teaching clarinet in public school. In order to teach college, you either need a terminal degree (such as a Ph.D. or D.M.A) or professional stature, such as being a member of some noteworthy professional performing group.

As a player, one can either freelance and eke out a modest living, or read the International Musician (the newspaper of the American Federation of Musicians) backwards, and join the long line of folks auditioning for a job in an orchestra<sup>1</sup>. However, given the relatively small number of full-time 52 week season orchestras in this country, even if you win an orchestra job it more than likely will not pay you enough to make a living, and certainly not enough to enjoy the American dream: owning a home, buying a new car, sending your kids to college. Instead, you will probably take a hybrid approach: some combination of performing and teaching.

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<sup>1</sup> Another noteworthy major employer is the US Military and their numerous services bands.

The fact that Harold Wright and Robert Marcellus played in major orchestras is no surprise: that happens to be one of the few kinds of jobs available where you can earn a living playing the clarinet full time. Yet many of us who idolized players like the late Harold Wright really appreciated them for their chamber music and solo performances, even though they were great orchestra players. I know for myself, when I wanted to hear a Wright recording and experience his lovely individualistic expressive style, more often than not I would put on his recording of the Brahms sonatas, not a recording of the Boston Symphony. As I commented to a colleague of mine recently, “Harold Wright moved us through his recordings, chamber music and solo pieces, not from him being in the Boston Symphony. Remember attending Tanglewood? It wasn't hearing him in the orchestra, it was hearing him do chamber music.”

But it is very difficult to earn a living as a chamber musician, and indeed I can't recall ever seeing a full-time job advertised in the *International Musician* for chamber music clarinetist. Harold Wright played chamber music at Marlboro and with the Boston Symphony Chamber Players as an adjunct to his livelihood-providing job with the Boston Symphony. The other model, of course, is earning a living teaching the clarinet and playing chamber music or soloing on the side. That, more likely than not, will probably be performed under the auspices of a college or university, as the Major University Presenters (MUPs) are now one of the largest presenters of fine arts programming in America today.

To me, I find it very ironic that the job many idolize and aspire to is playing in a symphony orchestra, especially given the lack of job satisfaction and the dearth of available positions. Let's examine these two issues.

We all know about the lack of orchestra jobs in America, but let's actually run the numbers: Each year, our colleges and conservatories of music graduate 12-14,000 music performance majors into the marketplace, and last time I checked, there were only 22 full-time full year orchestras in this country<sup>2</sup>. We have an extreme imbalance in supply and demand, and one can't help wonder how these schools and professorial music faculty can in good conscience graduate these aspiring students into a market that virtually does not exist.

Let's also examine the symphony orchestra as a fulfilling workplace. I can say anecdotally that when I last played in a major US orchestra, it was a generally unhappy group of people, and a large portion of the orchestra were in psychotherapy, on antidepressants, or seeing other mental health professionals. Many were divorced. But don't rely on my subjective observations. A study of professional major symphony players in 2000<sup>3</sup> found the environment grueling, where you perform the same pieces over and over with the same musicians, and the same conductors, some of which can be “famously domineering.” Even further, the article observes that you are “one of 100

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<sup>2</sup> According to the League of American Orchestras. I last checked this number several years ago, but I don't expect this has changed significantly.

<sup>3</sup> *Grumbling Among the Woodwinds*, Harvard Magazine, January-February 2000.

orchestral musicians, you're an anonymous cog who must usually forgo recognition for individual talent.”

Even more telling was the study<sup>4</sup> conducted by Harvard psychology professor Richard Hackman. In the early 1990s, Hackman looked at job satisfaction among symphony musicians in 78 orchestras in four countries and found widespread discontent. In this study, symphony members' job satisfaction ranked with that of prison guards. As with aspiring clarinetists, have you ever heard of a student with stars in their eyes express their dream to one day become a prison guard?

It doesn't take much to understand why playing in an orchestra can be unsatisfying: limited repertoire,<sup>5</sup> lack of job mobility or job availability, lack of artistic fulfillment and lack of career path. Furthermore, working with conductors can truly be observed as the ultimate micromanagement model, where a single individual in a single-level organizational structure tells every member of the organization how to do the minutia of their job. Even worse is the pathological relationship between musicians and management, where management sees musicians as savants that are only capable of operating their instruments. The musicians are just as bad, who generally see the only role of management as raising more funds so that they can be paid a bigger salary. Is it any surprise that orchestras are in trouble today? These are non-profit inherently money-losing organizations<sup>6</sup> that cannot seem to work together in a market that conductor Leonard Slatkin said does not “anticipate much more than 4% of the population as regular concertgoers?”<sup>7</sup>

Orchestras, to their credit, have been working hard to broaden their appeal. This is a difficult task given their history of being the elite plaything of the upper class society, having historically existed mainly due to the patronage of the rich. In the early days of orchestras in America, there was no such thing as tenure – musicians were retained at the favor of the conductor, and could be summarily fired on a whim. Over time, the orchestras organized and began collective bargaining contracts in an effort to improve their condition. But it is this very improvement that has led to the blandness we hear today.

One of the areas of improvement was in the selection process. Today, most major orchestras hire new players through a screening process run by the musicians themselves. On the surface, that seems like a good idea, introducing a sense of fairness into the hiring process. But as the old joke goes, “a camel is a horse designed by a committee.” In order to proceed through the orchestra selection process, you need to appeal to a majority of the committee, which means if you stand out of the crowd, invariably there will be committee members that won't like you. When I was auditioning for orchestras back in

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<sup>4</sup> See: Hackman, J. Richard, ed. 1990. *Groups That Work (And Those That Don't)*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; Judy, Paul R. 1996. *Life and Work in Symphony Orchestras: An Interview with J. Richard Hackman*. *Harmony*, Number 2, April, pages 1-13

<sup>5</sup> Euphemistically referred to by many as the music of “dead white European men.”

<sup>6</sup> The ticket you buy to hear an orchestra concert only represents a fraction of the cost of putting on the concert. The rest is made up through fundraising, grants and endowment income.

<sup>7</sup> *Virtual Discussion Panel: Engaging the Community*, Polyphonic.org, August 21-31, 2006

the spring of 1982, I did six auditions that spring, and made finals in five of them. Did that make me a great clarinetist? Maybe, maybe not. But what I can say is that I wasn't getting picked because I was different; instead, I was getting picked because I was better than most people auditioning at being *the same* – the same as the other working orchestra clarinetists and members. Being different or individual would have lost me votes. Even so, in one of the auditions for a bass clarinet job for which I was runner up, one of the committee told me that I “sounded more like a solo clarinetist and the winner sounded more like a bass clarinetist.” Similarly, in a recent audition for principal clarinet for a major orchestra, one of the finalists was rejected because he sounded “too individual.” I wonder if Harold Wright could pass such a committee today.

I believe that this selection process, and the “anonymous cog” nature of the job mentioned in the Harvard article represent a selection process that results in the appointment of clarinetists to spectacular jobs as bland industrial-grade players, since the days where the Maestro hears a beautiful individual sounding player and arbitrarily appoints them to a principal position in their orchestra is over. Maybe that is better for orchestra music committee autonomy and audition process fairness, but we now seem to have a process that results in mediocrity rather than greatness, for a job that makes artists unhappy.

Perhaps going forward we need to find our “clarinet heroes” elsewhere and stop glorifying the symphony orchestra as nirvana. I personally know a number of outstanding clarinetists with beautiful individual styles that choose not to play in orchestras *because they don't like playing in orchestras*<sup>8</sup>. Given the corrosive nature of the quality of life apparent in many of today's orchestra members' lives, I think clarinetists should look for other options than just teaching or getting a job working for someone else's organization and stop holding up the job of principal clarinet in a major orchestra as the epitome of achievement. Instead, I look forward to the day where a clarinetist causes a packed concert hall to leap to their feet cheering and shouting, like tenor Paul Potts<sup>9</sup> was able to do.

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<sup>8</sup> To be perfectly fair, nothing is ever black and white, and I can certainly cite a number of beautiful *individual-sounding* orchestra clarinetists, but that seems to be the exception.

<sup>9</sup> Paul Potts won “Britain's Got Talent” singing Puccini's *Nessun Dorma*. See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1k08yxu57NA&>