AUDIO NOTES

by William Nichols

To say the least, it isn't everyday that a CD of bass clarinet duets appears in my office. It is the first of its kind in my collection and I suspect the first of its genre — period. In light of the emerging repertoire and higher profile of the instrument in the last several decades, (to paraphrase old movie previews) this disc "had to be made," and we listeners and clarinetists are the better for it.

This 2007 production bears the ensemble's name as its title, **Sqwonk.** The duo is comprised of very talented San Francisco-based artists Jeff Anderle and Jon Russell. Sqwonk formed in 2005 and has already commissioned more than a dozen original works and has performed extensively in the Bay area. They just completed an east coast tour which featured Jon Russell's *Duo Bass Clarinet Concerto* with the Great Noise Ensemble in Washington, D.C. Many readers heard these two clarinetists perform as members of the bass clarinet quartet Edmund Welles on a featured evening concert at the 2008 ClarinetFest® in Kansas City.

Jeff Anderle is an active performer of contemporary music. He is the clarinetist with the ADORNO Ensemble and Redshift, and has appeared with the Del Sol String Quartet and the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players. He was the clarinetist for the Bang on a Can Summer Festival in 2007. He serves on the faculty of the San Francisco Conservatory, from which he holds a master's degree. He completed a bachelor's degree at UCLA.

Composer/clarinetist Jon Russell is a Harvard and San Francisco Conservatory graduate who has received commissions from the San Francisco Symphony, the Empyrean Ensemble, the Harvard-Radcliffe Orchestra, and the Woodstock Chamber Orchestra, with performances from other ensembles such as the Berkley Symphony and the San Francisco Composers Chamber Orchestra. He has composed an impressive body of works for diverse media. Jon Russell is active as the clarinetist with the Balkan/klezmer/experimental band Zoyres. He also serves on the composition faculty of the Adult Extension and Prep Divisions of the San Francisco Conservatory.

Four of the five recorded pieces are original bass clarinet works by young Americans: two by Jon Russell (*... and the Beast...*, and *KlezDuo*); *Profiteering* by Ian Dicke; and *Valediction* by Damon Waitkus. Also programmed is none other than J. S. Bach's *Toccata and Fugue in D Minor* arranged by (the no doubt destined-to-be distinguished) Prof. Sqwonkie McKonkie. The briefest of tongue-in-cheek program notes state that: "At long last, scholars have uncovered the original manuscript of this beloved work, finally restoring this masterpiece to Bach's intended instrumentation." Frivolity notwithstanding, the transcription, complete in structure, works quite well, especially the fugue, although the toccata (as is almost always the case in the many transcriptions of this piece) does not have the speed, the improvisatory effect, and flare of a solo keyboard performance. If ever having made any arrangement of this piece myself, I too, like Prof. McKonkie, would search for a *nom de plume.*

The largest work on the disc is Jon Russell's *... and the Beast...,* which is cast in five movements, and is described in the form of a pithy comment, "A day in the life of the common beast." (Although there are only the briefest of comments accompanying this CD about each piece, more program information for most of the pieces can be found on the ensemble's Web site.) Depicted by the five movements, the beast (mine is named Buffet) awakens, creeps, dances, attacks, sleeps. This music takes the listener through a range of musical effects from the hypnotic purity of the opening material based on perfectly tuned fourths/fifths, to darkness, and to the raucous and aggressive sounds of heavy metal. (We don't have to have guitars, amplifiers and drums to espouse the aesthetic.) It has sections of strong rhythmic ostinato and moments of poignant lyricism such as found in the last movement's middle section — a haunting altissimo solo. Some fascinating colors are achieved in this work and some difference tones seem to be present at times, which should be even more evident to younger ears than to this writer's. The piece is given an enthusiastically committed performance, and passes by in what seems to be a shorter span than its indicated 18-minute timing.

Russell's *KlezDuo* is "The most-performed bass clarinet duet in the history of time EVER, finally available to you on CD!" — to quote those brief comments accompanying each title. The composer states that *KlezDuo* "is a boisterous and energetic romp," and that it is, but only after a slow and soulful introduction complete with growls and pitch bends. In the subsequent lively dance the players get loose, to say the least, with tones and slap tonguing to satisfy the most hardcore klezmerite. It is great fun.

Profiteering by a then 24-year-old Ian Dicke dates from 2006 and is a continuous work in a three-part structure. It was commissioned by Sqwonk and bears the comment: "Warlords enjoy a Caribbean jaunt with your tax dollars." *Profiteering* is a protest piece against Iraq war profiteering by companies such as Halliburton, Lockheed Martin, and Bechtel. Sqwonk's Web site contains the composer's notes. The piece certainly stands alone without programmatic references. The opening *allegro* section is in a steady rhythmically punctuated light Latin style, peppered occasionally with heavy repeated dissonances. It moves into a very beautiful chorale middle section which exhibits some effectively expressive counterpoint, interrupted rudely by the dissonant material from the previous section. The closing fast section presents intricate interlocking scale patterns which are again interrupted by the dissonant patterns of the opening. This is an interesting and well-crafted new work.

Damon Waitkus' *Valediction* bears the rather cryptic by-line: "Smart, funny, indubitably our better, but also one of the gang." Any other program information escapes my search. The piece is an eight-minute duet in three sections played without pause and entitled: "101 Punch Lines," "Blues," and "Best Wishes." The opening section utilizes a heavily articulated ostinato idea (punch lines?) which is interrupted occasionally by short contrasting, sometimes chaotic material. The "Blues" is fast and not overtly bluesy. It demands some intricate rhythmic precision from the performers, and morphs into a calmer "Best wishes," a brief closing coda.

There is demanding music throughout this disc and Sqwonk's committed performance conveys the musical ideas vividly. The instruments are also vividly recorded, in-your-face close-up, and with plenty of rhythmic punch. There occurs some very effective stereo imaging in some intricate passages. Some key noise, reed fuzz and breathing is present here and there, but it seems perfectly natural in this context. This disc is not about pristine perfection and compositional complexity, but about musical excitement, collaboration and sense of spontaneity. It offers accessible music which appeals to a wide ranging audience. It succeeds on these counts — it rocks!

With the bass clarinet's workable four-octave (+) range, its ability to produce varying timbres, a wide dynamic range, and improving instruments, there are still fertile fields for composers to explore. Jeff Anderle and Jon Russell are to be commended for committing their talents and efforts in this concertizing and commissioning activity.

Sqwonk is copyrighted by (who else, but) Sqwonkie McKonkie Productions, and bears no catalog number. The CD is available from: <www.sqwonk.org> and <www.cdbaby.com>, and also by downloads from <www.itunes.com>, as well as from the Sqwonk Web site.

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Another bass clarinet disc came my way at the Kansas City meeting last summer. This, a DVD entitled **In a Nutshell,** documents two concerts of a two-day festival celebrating Henri Bok's 25th year as professor of bass clarinet at the Rotterdam Conservatory and a career of promoting the instrument and its repertoire. This event took place in the Lantaren/Venster Theatre in Rotterdam in November of 2006.

The 117-minute live-concert DVD consists almost entirely of excerpts from 31 works played by Prof. Bok as a soloist and with various duo colleagues. All of this music was written (or arranged in several instances) for Henri Bok. The production is in essence a large sampler, mostly of contemporary music. It is organized into six parts which are defined by medium, the first consisting of unaccompanied pieces by Anthony Gilbert, Fabien Tehericsen, Francis Schwartz, Jacques Bank and Paul Seitz. Bok is joined by bass trombonist Ben van Dijk in works by Ilja Reijngoud, Ulrich Schultheiss (with pianist Rainer Klaas), and Rob and Sebastiaan Bavel (with pianist Rob Bavel). In part three, bandoneonist Victor Villena partners with Bok in works by Konrad Boehmer and Gustavo Beytelmann. The fourth part consists of works for bass clarinet and piano played by Bok and Rainer Klaas, and composed by Gustavo Beytelmann, Burkhardt Söll, Leo Samama, Stefan Heucke, Andrew Schultz, Peter Sculthorpe, John McDonald and Jacques Castérède. Duo "Hevans" with tenor saxophonist Ann Evans performs pieces by Rob van Bavel, Dick de Graaf, Paul Seitz, and Henri Bok. The concluding section presents Duo "Hero" with pianist Bavel performing J. Lawrence/A. Altman, Wagner Tiso, Mozart, Bok, Bavel, Poulenc and Romberg/Hammerstein.

As one would expect with this much music, styles range from contemporary music of a lyrical and melodic nature to more abstract and edgier material, to improvisation, and to pop and jazz. Bok includes American classic songs "All or Nothing at All," and "Softly, As a Morning Sunrise." The playing by all involved is committed and impressive, with special kudos going to pianists Klaas and Bavel for double duty executed so brilliantly.

The video content is effective and presents plenty of tight close-ups. The disc has only the six aforementioned sections with no internal tracking within those sections. Navigation around this nearly two-hour DVD can be somewhat awkward. The sonic qualities of this disc are stunningly good. All the instruments produce very resonant natural sounds which are beautifully captured by the engineers. The Lantaren/Vernster Theatre is an excellent recording venue (or some very slick post production is going here).

Henri Bok is known to our readers by way of his many recordings and appear-

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