

## Episode 2: Writing for Clarinet

### Intro

Hello and welcome to Tonal Diversions. I'm your host, Lori Archer Sutherland, and this is my journey as a multifaceted musician. I'm a composer, clarinetist and more who is navigating the world of is classical music, and I'd love to share my adventures with you.

### Episode proper

#### Writing for clarinet

Hello, and welcome to the show today. I'd like to talk about tips and tricks for writing for clarinet. As a composer and clarinetist, this topic is very dear to my heart. And I want to focus also on writing for non-professional clarinet players: beginner, Intermediate, community band, adult amateur, et cetera. There's a lot you can get away with when you're writing for a pro. They will make anything sound good, even if it's not ideal for the instrument. And I'm also going to focus on the Boehm system of clarinet, which is the standard fingering system here in the US. There are other fingering systems for those who don't know, but they seem to be limited to certain pockets of the world. And since I'm a US-based musician, I'm going to focus on the US system.

#### Key Signatures

So first of all, be aware of the key signature. Yes, clarinets can play in any key signature. We have full chromatic capabilities, and we do practice our scales-- well, we should practice our scales-- so we can play a lot of different things. That being said, some key signatures just sound better than others, and they're easier to play. And that's due to the complexities of our fingering system. And this is especially true for younger players. Don't add too many sharps or flats for them yet because they just don't have the flexibility, and the muscle memory, and the fingering capabilities yet of getting too complex. Keeping the clarinet's written key in C, F, G, also like B-flat and D, keeping it there is going to make your music much more accessible and just more friendly to play. So basically, try to not go past three sharps or three flats, even though yes, it's completely doable. For younger players, it's not nearly as easy, and it goes beyond just remembering that there are these flats/sharps.

#### *Blips*

When you add in more sharps or flats, you add in more chances for blips between notes, because we're trying to coordinate movement between several fingers at once, and the more you're trying to coordinate these different fingerings, the easier it is for some fingers to hit at slightly different times. And that's what happens, that's why you get the blips, and we do practice to get rid of those blips. That's another thing where, yes, we do practice and we can do these things. But if you're writing for a non-pro, and especially a really young student, be aware of this stuff. So while we can play effectively and basically any key, your performers might not love you all that much if you throw a bunch of awkward fingerings at us, especially if they last the entire piece. And quite frankly, there's a chance that they may pass on your piece and go play something else instead

### *Side note*

And kind of as a side note. You can get away with some key signature issues by writing for clarinet in A instead of clarinet in B-flat because it's a different transposition. But keep in mind that younger players and those who aren't professionals or college students, they aren't going to own an A clarinet unless they do a lot of orchestral playing, they won't have a reason to own one unless they just want one. So keeping to a standard B flat clarinet really is the way to go, especially for young players.

### *The infamous break*

So some of you have no doubt heard about the break, and it's often couched in terms that inspire fear and dread. And honestly, I remember as a kid being excited to conquer the break when I first was starting out, and it was a proud moment for me that I got over the break. And so there's a reason for this. And again, it goes to our complex fingering system. Written A4, which is the A above middle C, uses just the left index finger. To move from there up a step to B4, you then have to put all your fingers down plus hit two keys with the left thumb and use a pinkie. It is a big difference between those two notes when it comes to playing them in a scale-wise fashion.

### *Awkwardness*

There are ways to smooth out this transition, and all clarinetists do learn to deal with it over time, but the younger the player, the harder it's going to be to move back and forth quickly over the break. So if you're going from A to B, or B-flat to C, or A to C-sharp or something like that right in that range of notes, it's just going to be harder for them because they don't have the motor skills yet. And even for more advanced players, at least speaking for myself, it just gets tiring. If you're continually noodling around in there and ask any clarinetist who's played Granger's "Molly on the Shore," and there's a good chance they'll agree. It's doable, but it's also nice to get a break from the break.

### *Large Leaps*

Next up are large leaps. Clarinets have a great deal of agility. There's a lot we can do. We can do a lot of big leaps. We can do fast leaps. Our instrument is very agile. But if you're writing for non-pros, avoid a lot of fast and large leaps, especially as you get into our altissimo range, which starts at our written C6 and goes upward. Jumping up into the altissimo range is generally more challenging for us. And again, it's doable. But be mindful of who's playing your music.

### *Side notes*

And so a side note-- don't force the altissimo range on your younger players. Save that for at least high school, because the younger players, they're learning to control so much other stuff on the clarinet that to send them too far up in that altissimo range before they're ready isn't going to do anyone any favors. And then a side note to the side note-- for beginner and intermediate bass clarinet players, avoid written G5 and above because yes, again, the bass clarinet can play in that range, and a lot of people are just fine up there. However, student instruments pose an additional challenge because of the difference in mechanism between beginner and pro instruments. And if you have kids using a bunch of school instruments and

school mouthpieces, then they're just going to be at a disadvantage trying to play in that range to begin with, and so don't make them cry.

### Trills and Tremolos

And last is trills and tremolos. Yeah, we can do a lot, but some are really vexing, and they just don't sound great. While I have misplaced my copy of Samuel Adler's orchestration book, I seem to recall his claim that all trills and tremolos are possible on clarinet. Well, I think he should have put an asterisk by that because they're not all created equal on clarinet, and some just will sound clunky and they won't be blazing fast. And that goes back to our weird fingering system and trying to coordinate a lot of finger motion between two hands. And most of us don't have the super pro-level horns that might have a couple of extra keys to make things easier. So it's not that we can't do things, but there are going to be some trills and tremolos that it might be handy to, like if you're writing a band piece, let the flutes also cover it to help even out some of our wobbles that we have.

### Conclusion

So if you're writing a feature for clarinet, or really any instrument, it can be so helpful to talk to someone who actually plays that instrument and find out if what you write works and works well for the instrument. Please don't rely solely on computer playback because the computer can do absolutely anything you want it to and humans, not so much. Because we're human and we have limitations. Please also just be very cognizant of who you're writing for and their abilities. If you're writing for middle school band and you add a clarinet line that is better suited to high school, you're not going to really win any friends that way. I mean, if you write something that's uncomfortable and awkward to play, people aren't going to be eager to play it. So while no, you shouldn't necessarily pander to people, at the same time there's nothing wrong with writing a clarinet piece that feels good on clarinet. I hope this gives you some guidelines on writing for clarinet and the idiosyncrasies that we face, and please feel free to reach out with any questions. I'd love to hear from you at [podcast@tonaldiversions.com](mailto:podcast@tonaldiversions.com) or find me on Facebook at Tonal Diversions. See you next time. Bye!

### Outro

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