

## CHAPTER 9

### THE BASS CLARINET

#### 9.1 Introduction

Shostakovich's use of the bass clarinet in the symphonies provides the player with a particularly attractive selection of ensemble playing and poignant lyrical solos.

Shostakovich uses the German notation method for the bass clarinet in B-flat. The bass clarinet parts in his symphonies are therefore written in the bass clef and is to be transposed a major second lower for sounding pitch.

Shostakovich scored the bass clarinet in six symphonies: Symphonies No. 4, 6, 7, 8, 11 and 13. The importance of the bass clarinet is evidenced in parts written exclusively for it in Symphonies No. 4, 6, 7 and 8. In Symphonies No. 11 and 13 the third clarinet player doubles as bass clarinet player. Shostakovich shows sensitivity to the exchange of instruments in Symphonies No. 11 and 13 by allowing ample time for the player to change and adjust from clarinet to bass clarinet, and vice versa, before playing.

#### 9.2 Register

Bass clarinet player Michael Harris (in Lawson 1995:73) writes the following: "Russian composers have always been attracted by the dark, oily sounds of the very low register of the bass clarinet, and were among the first to incorporate the extended downward range to C and D. Shostakovich, for example, expected considerable dexterity in this register, as the scherzo of his Violin Concerto well illustrates."

Harris chose the example of the Violin Concerto to illustrate Shostakovich's use of the bass clarinet's low register, which can create the misconception that Shostakovich does not use the bass clarinet in its low register in earlier works. It is therefore interesting that Shostakovich

already includes the bass clarinet in Symphony No. 4 composed in 1935, 12 years before the Violin Concerto which was composed in 1947. The lowest note C (sounding B-flat, two octaves below middle C) is repeatedly alluded to in this Symphony only. In all the other symphonies the bass clarinet descends to a lowest note of C-sharp (sounding B-natural, two octaves below middle C).

Shostakovich makes extensive use of the dark and mellow qualities of the low chalumeau register in *tutti* as well as solo parts. The clarino register is frequently used in *tutti* and solo writing, sometimes veering into the high register, although less seldom. The bass clarinet is, however, mostly used for its dark and lugubrious lower register.

The following example from Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7, second movement, also used by Piston (1994:179), illustrates the bass clarinet's expressive solo qualities and use of the low chalumeau register (Ex. 9-1). Piston writes that the bass clarinet is accompanied "very lightly by flutes" and the harp. The written C-sharp cannot be reached by most instruments. (This example has also been used in Chapter 5, see Ex. 5-1). Shostakovich created the perfect backdrop to exhibit the bass clarinet's agility in the low register and its ability to project at a *piano* dynamic level.

Example 9-1: Symphony No. 7, second movement, mm. 246-281

$\text{♩} = 96$

poco riten. I. III<sup>a</sup> tempo

Fl. Fl. alto Arpe V-ni I V-c. C-b.

246

Fl. Fl. alto Cl. b. Arpe

I. III<sup>a</sup> solo *pp* *espress.*

251

Fl. Fl. alto Cl. b. Arpe

I. III<sup>a</sup>

254

Fl. Fl. alto Cl. b. Arpe

I. III<sup>a</sup>

257

Fl. I  
Fl. alto  
Cl. b.  
Arpe

260

Detailed description: This system covers measures 260 and 261. The Flute I part features a complex rhythmic pattern with slurs and accents. The Flute Alto and Clarinet Bass parts have simpler, more melodic lines. The Arpeggiated Piano part provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and moving lines. The key signature is one sharp (F#).

Fl. I  
Fl. alto  
Cl. b.  
Arpe  
V-le

98

con sord. div. pizz.

262

Detailed description: This system covers measures 262 and 263. A rehearsal mark '98' is placed above the first measure. The Flute I part has a dense, rhythmic texture. The Flute Alto and Clarinet Bass parts continue their melodic lines. The Arpeggiated Piano part is consistent with the previous system. The Violin part enters in measure 262 with the instruction 'con sord. div. pizz.' and a dynamic marking of 'p'. The key signature is one sharp (F#).

Fl. I  
Fl. alto  
Cl. b.  
Arpe  
V-le

I

264

Detailed description: This system covers measures 264 and 265. The Flute I part has a complex rhythmic pattern. The Flute Alto and Clarinet Bass parts have melodic lines. The Arpeggiated Piano part provides harmonic support. The Violin part continues its melodic line. The key signature is one sharp (F#).

Fl. I  
Fl. alto  
Cl. b.  
V-le

I

267 [p]

Detailed description: This system covers measures 267 and 268. The Flute I part has a complex rhythmic pattern. The Flute Alto and Clarinet Bass parts have melodic lines. The Violin part continues its melodic line with a dynamic marking of '[p]'. The key signature is one sharp (F#).

Fl. I  
Fl. alto  
Cl. b.  
Arpe  
V-le

269

Fl. I  
Fl. alto  
Cl. b.  
Arpe

271

Fl. I  
Fl. alto  
Cl. b.  
Arpe  
V-le

99 I. III  
274 [p]

div. in 3

Fl. I  
Fl. alto  
Cl.  
Cl. b.  
Arpe  
V-le

I. III  
pp  
pp  
pp  
pp  
pp

Fl. III muta in Piccolo  
I solo  
mp  
mp

276 pp

*poco riten.* 100 *a tempo*

The musical score consists of eight staves: Flute (Fl.), Flute alto (Fl. alto), Clarinet (Cl.), Clarinet bass (Cl. b.), Violin I (V-n I), Violin II (V-n II), Viola (V-la), and Cello/Bass (C-b.).

- Flute (Fl.):** Starts with a first finger (I) fingering, playing a rapid sixteenth-note pattern. Dynamics include *p* and *pp*.
- Flute alto (Fl. alto):** Mirrors the flute part with a first finger (I) fingering. Dynamics include *[p]* and *pp*.
- Clarinet (Cl.):** Features a first finger (I) fingering and a *dim.* (diminuendo) marking. Dynamics include *pp*.
- Clarinet bass (Cl. b.):** Features a *dim.* marking and dynamics including *pp*.
- Violin I (V-n I):** Dynamics include *pp* and *con sord.* (con sordina).
- Violin II (V-n II):** Dynamics include *pp* and *con sord. arco*.
- Viola (V-la):** Starts with a *div. in 2* (divisi in 2) marking and *p* dynamic. Dynamics include *pp* and *arco unis.* (arco unisono).
- Viola (V-o):** Dynamics include *pp* and *con sord. arco*.
- Cello/Bass (C-b.):** Dynamics include *pp* and *con sord. arco*.

278

According to Piston (1994:178) the low range of the bass clarinets usually descend to C, sounding B-flat, the range given by Rimsky-Korsakov, although Russian composers give evidence in their scores of the bass clarinet descending to C, sounding B-flat. Shostakovich uses the bass clarinet in a solo beginning on the low written C (sounding B-flat), in true Russian tradition, in the first movement of Symphony No. 4 (Ex. 9-2). The versatility of the instrument is beautifully demonstrated with the sustained *piano* low (written) C as it blends almost invisibly with the low strings from mm. 812-826. The bass clarinet suddenly booms forth an assertive *legato forte* ascending melody in m. 831 beginning with the lowest note (written C) while the strings provide a scant accompaniment.

Example 9-2: Symphony No. 4, first movement, mm. 812-841

$\text{♩} = 184$

The musical score for Example 9-2, Symphony No. 4, first movement, measures 812-841, is presented in two systems. The first system covers measures 812-826, and the second system covers measures 827-841. The score includes parts for Bass Clarinet (Cl. b.), Violin (Vcl.), Viola (Vla.), Cello (Vcl.), and Double Bass (Cb.). The bass clarinet part features a sustained piano low note in measure 812, followed by an assertive legato forte ascending melody starting in measure 831. The strings provide a rhythmic accompaniment.





Shostakovich uses the striking combination of the bass clarinet and horns with a piccolo solo in in the third movement of Symphony No. 4 (Ex. 9-3). The bass clarinet's upper clarino register down to the chalumeau register is clearly exhibited in its cheeky sounding *ostinato* role as part of the accompaniment to the vivacious piccolo solo from mm. 397-405. The bass clarinet then shifts into the foreground in mm. 404-411. The horns provide an inconspicuous unbroken *piano* bass pedal point for the lively activity between the piccolo and bass clarinet. The dynamic layering thoughtfully facilitates the dominant motive: the piccolo has a *forte* dynamic indication, the bass clarinet is *mezzoforte* and the horns have a *piano* dynamic indication.

Example 9-3: Symphony No. 4, third movement, mm. 397-415

The musical score for Example 9-3, Symphony No. 4, third movement, mm. 397-415, is presented in three systems. The first system (mm. 397-403) features Piccolo (Picc.), Bass Clarinet (Cl. b.), and Horns (Cor.). The Piccolo part is marked "I solo" and "f". The Bass Clarinet part is marked "mf". The Horns part is marked "p" and "I, II a2". The second system (mm. 403-409) continues the Piccolo and Bass Clarinet parts, with the Piccolo marked "f" and the Bass Clarinet marked "mf". The Horns part is marked "p" and "I, II a2". The third system (mm. 409-415) introduces the Arpeggiated Bass (Arpe) part, which is marked "f" and "a2". The Piccolo part is marked "f" and "II", and the Bass Clarinet part is marked "mf" and "II".

### 9.3 Allocation of solo material to the bass clarinet

Shostakovich ensured the bass clarinet player a considerable solo in each of the six symphonies the instrument is used.

The trend is maximum exposure of the instrument's timbre with very little accompaniment. The nature of the accompaniment is surprisingly light. Shostakovich's trademark accompaniment of strings supports many of the solos, but the composer also uses more uncommon combinations, such as with the harp, that feature regularly in the accompaniment of bass clarinet solos. One of the more prominent examples includes a beautiful bass clarinet solo from the second movement of Symphony No. 7 (see Ex. 9-1) that shows off the instrument's warm dark chalumeau register at a *piano* dynamic level complemented by an accompaniment of two flutes, an alto flute and a harp. The addition of percussion as part of the accompaniment to bass clarinet solos is most prominently used in the fourth movement of Symphony No. 11. The accompaniment consists of the timpani, bass drum, tam-tam, harp, cellos and double basses.

Shostakovich introduces the bass clarinet to his symphonic repertoire with the following lyrical solo in the first movement of Symphony No. 4 (Ex. 9-4). Delicate in their simplicity, the two harps provide the accompaniment to the *piano espressivo* bass clarinet solo, which spills into a piccolo solo from m. 346. The celestial quality of the harps combined with the bass clarinet can result in an eerie and ominous atmosphere, which is the central theme of the whole symphony. Shostakovich had already suffered two major set-backs during the time he composed the Symphony No. 4 in 1936 with the literary attacks in *Pravda* on the opera *Lady Macbeth* and the ballet *The Limpid Stream*.

Example 9-4: Symphony No. 4, first movement, mm. 333-352

The musical score for Example 9-4 consists of two staves. The top staff is for the Bass Clarinet (Cl. b.) and the bottom staff is for the Harp (Arpe). The tempo is marked as quarter note = 108. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The bass clarinet part begins at measure 336, marked 'solo' and 'p espress.'. The harp part provides a delicate accompaniment with arpeggiated chords, starting at measure 333. The bass clarinet solo is a lyrical line in the chalumeau register, characterized by a warm, dark timbre. The harp accompaniment is light and ethereal, creating an atmospheric setting for the solo.

37

Picc.

Cl.b.

Arpel

Arpel II

oon sord.  
div.

pp

340

Picc.

Fl.

Ob.

Cl.b.

Arpel

Arpel II

I solo

p

I. II

III

p espress.

347

The bass clarinet is given a long solo in the final movement of Symphony No. 8 that displays its lyrical and atmospheric capabilities (Ex. 9-5). The solo spans the clarino and chalumeau registers in a chromatic melody filled with dynamic variation that is light and almost comical in nature. Shostakovich thoughtfully scored the *pizzicato* accompaniment for the upper strings, allowing the full warm timbre of the bass clarinet to resonate throughout the solo. The skimpy accompaniment played by the *pizzicato* strings from mm. 439-455 makes way for a first violin solo together with the bass clarinet from mm. 455-462. The first violin completely overpowers the bass clarinet at which point the bass clarinet retreats into the background into an *ostinato* accompaniment role (mm. 463-468) together with the French horns at a *forte* dynamic level in mm. 463-471 while the first violin completes its solo.

The image shows a page of musical notation, likely a score for the bass clarinet solo mentioned in the text. The notation is arranged in a grand staff format with multiple staves. The tempo marking 'Allegretto Vivo' is visible in the lower portion of the page. The score is mostly blank, with some faint markings and a few notes visible, particularly in the lower staves.

Example 9-5: Symphony No. 8, fifth movement, mm. 437-475

162 Allegretto  $\text{♩} = 96$

Ob. *fff* *p*

C.ingl. *fff* *p*

Cl. *fff* *p*

Cl.b. *fff* *p* solo

Fag. *fff* *p*

C.fag. *fff* *p* muta in Fagotto III

Tr.be *fff* *pp*

Cor. *fff* *pp*

Tr.ni e Tuba *fff* *pp*

Timp.

Arch. *fff* *p* *pizz.* *p* *pizz.* *p* *pizz.* *p*

437 *fff* *p*

Cl. b. 163

V-ni I

V-ni II

V-le

444

*ff* *p*

Detailed description: This system contains measures 163 and 164. The bassoon part (Cl. b.) features a melodic line with triplets and slurs, marked with *ff* and *p*. The violin I and II parts (V-ni I, V-ni II) and the viola part (V-le) provide harmonic support with sustained notes and rhythmic patterns.

Cl. b.

V-ni I

V-ni II

V-le

449

*ff* *p* *ff*

Detailed description: This system contains measures 165 and 166. The bassoon part (Cl. b.) continues with a melodic line, marked with *ff*, *p*, and *ff*. The violin and viola parts (V-ni I, V-ni II, V-le) continue their harmonic accompaniment.

Cl. b. 164

V-ni I

V-ni II

V-le

453

V-no solo arco

*ff*

Detailed description: This system contains measures 167, 168, 169, and 170. The bassoon part (Cl. b.) has a melodic line with triplets and slurs, marked with *ff*. The violin solo part (V-no solo) enters in measure 169 with an *arco* instruction and a *f* dynamic. The violin I and II parts (V-ni I, V-ni II) and the viola part (V-le) continue their accompaniment.

Cl. b.

V-no solo

457

*p* *cresc.*

Detailed description: This system contains measures 171, 172, 173, and 174. The bassoon part (Cl. b.) has a melodic line marked with *p*. The violin solo part (V-no solo) continues with a melodic line marked with *cresc.*

Cl. b. 165

Cor.

V-no solo

461

I. II con sord.

*ff*

Detailed description: This system contains measures 175, 176, 177, and 178. The bassoon part (Cl. b.) has a melodic line marked with *ff*. The cor part (Cor.) enters in measure 176 with the instruction *I. II con sord.* The violin solo part (V-no solo) continues with a melodic line marked with *ff*.

2.4 Combination of bass clarinet with other instruments

The bass clarinet blends perfectly with all brass instruments such as warm homogeneous timbre

The musical score consists of several staves for different instruments. The top staff is for the Bass Clarinet (Cl. b.), followed by the Cor Anglais (Cor.), and the Violoncello solo (V-no solo). The bottom section includes the Bass Clarinet (Cl. b.), Violoncello solo (V-no solo), Violini I and altri (V-ni I altri), Violini II (V-ni II), Violone (V-le), Violoncello solo (V-o solo), Violini I and altri (V-ni I altri), and Contrabasso (C-b.).

Key performance markings include:

- Cl. b. (top):** *dim.*, *p*, *ppp*, **166**
- V-no solo (middle):** *dim.*, *p*, *pizz.*
- V-ni I altri:** *p*, *pizz.*
- V-ni II:** *p*, *pizz.*
- V-le:** *p*
- V-o solo:** *arco*, *p*
- V-ni I altri:** *altri pizz.*, *p*
- C-b.:** *pizz.*, *mp*, *p*, **469**

Using the third register into the first without changing register at a very dynamic level

#### 9.4 Combination of bass clarinet with other instruments

The bass clarinet blends perfectly with all bass instruments with its warm inconspicuous timbre in the low register and its ability to play very softly. In *tutti* writing Shostakovich therefore uses the bass clarinet in a traditional role of doubling in unison or at the octave with the cellos and double basses, the bassoons and contrabassoons and occasionally the trombones and tubas. In more exposed settings he favours the combination of bass clarinet, bassoon and contrabassoon. The bass clarinet is sometimes the preferred bass instrument in a woodwind ensemble, instead of the bassoon or contrabassoon. This is probably due to the bass clarinet's ability to play very softly and with agility, combined with the fact that it has the same lowest note as the bassoon. Unlike in the earlier symphonies, Shostakovich combines the bass clarinet with trumpets, trombones and tubas in Symphonies No. 8 and 11.

Shostakovich uses the exotic combination of cor anglais and bass clarinet in a solo in the first movement of Symphony No. 4 (Ex. 9-6). Interestingly enough it is, according to Harris (Lawson 1995:70-71), Mahler's favourite woodwinds for which he wrote a chorale in unison in his Symphony No. 2 (1894), and the combination is once again chosen to end his Symphony No. 4 (1900) in a beautiful poignant solo to the accompaniment of the harp. Shostakovich gives the two instruments maximum exposure without any accompanying instrument in mm. 937-949, allowing the listener to savour the timbres of the two instruments. The bass clarinet's remarkable falling *legato* melodic line, over an octave and a sixth, exposes the qualities of the clarino and throat register into the very sonorous chalumeau register, at a *piano* dynamic level.

Another striking combination Shostakovich uses is clearly that of the bass clarinet and the flute in a lovely *adagio* in *re* major which in mm. 357-373 also takes place in the second movement of Symphony No. 6 (Ex. 9-7). The bass clarinet and flute solo is written at a *piano* dynamic level with a simple *forte* pizzicato accompaniment from the first violins.



## Example 9-6: Symphony No. 4, first movement, mm. 935-949

$\text{♩} = 92$

Ob. *f*

C. ingl. *pp*

C. I.II *pp*

Cl. b. *p*

Archi *f*

*p espress.*

*dim.*

935

944

Another striking combination Shostakovich uses is surely that of the bass clarinet and the flute in a lively *tête-à-tête* in contrary motion in mm. 357-373 that takes place in the second movement of Symphony No. 6 (Ex. 9-7). The bass clarinet and flute solo is written at a *piano* dynamic level with a simple *forte pizzicato* accompaniment from the first violins.

Example 9-7: Symphony No. 6, second movement, mm. 355-377

$\text{♩} = 88 - 96$

68

*I solo*

Fl. *p*

Cl. *a2* *ff dim.* *pp* *solo*

Cl. b. *p*

Timp. *pp*

Archi *prz.*

355

*I*

Fl.

Cl. b.

Archi

361

*I*

Fl.

Cl.

Cl. b.

Archi

*f dim.*

367

## CHAPTER 10

## THE BASSOON

69

The musical score shows measures 69 through 73. The instruments are Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Bass Clarinet (Cl. b.), Bassoon (Fag.), and Archi (Archi). The Flute, Clarinet, and Bassoon parts are active, with the Clarinet and Bassoon playing a melodic line. The Archi part is mostly silent, with some light accompaniment. The score is marked with a first ending bracket (I) and a piano (p) dynamic.

373

## 9.5 Conclusion

Shostakovich presents the bass clarinet player with a varied selection of exposed ensemble passages and lengthy solos. Used in five symphonies, Shostakovich treats the bass clarinet as a specialist, giving the instrument maximum exposure, often with very little or no accompaniment. The agility of the chalumeau and low register at a *piano* dynamic level has been reserved for exposed passages, and the clarino and high register for *tutti* sections. Shostakovich likes to combine the fragile texture of the harp as the accompaniment to bass clarinet solos. The bass clarinet's unassuming quality is used to provide the bass part to the woodwind ensemble, as well as to soften the harsh effect of the full brass section.