

Alan Fletcher
Clarinet Concerto

Alan Fletcher was born in 1956 in Riverside, New Jersey. He composed this concerto in 2005 and 2007 for clarinetist Michael Rusinek on a commission from the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. The score calls for solo clarinet, two flutes, two oboes, clarinet, bass clarinet, two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, two trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion, harp, and strings.

The first thing I did on receiving a commission to write a concerto for Michael Rusinek and the Pittsburgh Symphony was to ask Michael for recordings of his performances of the standard repertoire—to learn what was most particular to his style and virtuosity—and to ask for his thoughts about the eventual piece. I already knew his playing very well, so I was not surprised to hear in his recordings a brilliant, uncannily accurate and yet exciting flexibility, paired with a gorgeous range of lyrical color.

I felt challenged to learn that he wished for “the clarinet concerto Samuel Barber never wrote.” I love the Barber concertos for violin, cello, and piano as much as the next fellow, but it seemed a difficult task to combine my own personality with that of a mid-twentieth-century tonal master. Nevertheless, I headed to my writing retreat on an island in New Hampshire with the Barber concertos in tow. A wise musical friend advised me also to listen to the Barber Piano Sonata for the way it combines long melodic lines with contrapuntal textures to achieve clarity—something essential in a concerto for a wind instrument.

To my great surprise, the piece came quickly and, to my mind, is based on formal ideas about the “long line” and tonal procedures reminiscent of Barber. I wrote almost the whole piece in a short time, but then accepted a new position as President of the Aspen Music Festival and School. Suddenly I had no time to complete the piece, and more than a year intervened before I could concentrate on its conclusion.

The first movement is in standard “sonata-allegro” form and opens *in medias res*—in the middle of things. Barber was a strong believer in the standard forms and also in controlled experiments with them (his “Essays for Orchestra,” for instance). The melodies are made up of cells of intervals repeated, inverted, reversed—procedures common to Palestrina, Beethoven, Schoenberg, and much folk music. On a larger scale, the melodies are built up on long sequences: repetitions arranged by shifting positions on a deep, underlying scale. This is another technique common to melodic structures of many styles. My teacher Roger Sessions used to say that the two most perfect melodies were the alto ario “Erbarm’ dich” from Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, and the “Prize Song” from Wagner’s *Die Meistersinger*. Both are built up in this way.

The opening tune has a quality of seeking and then subsiding. The dramatic issue, for the listener to decide, is whether the seeking has found an answer or whether the subsiding is more a gathering of new energy than a relaxation of tension. In a sonata form, the music is impelled to change key, and often a new tune marks the arrival at the new place. This should *seem* to happen in my first movement, but the apparent second theme, and then the apparent “closing” theme, are actually variants of the first. Then the “real” second theme appears, as the clarinet supplies another searching, restless texture over which the violins sing a melody. This leads to the “real”

closing theme, a landscape of eerily repeated tones on the clarinet, with rising orchestra chords marked *misterioso*.

The middle part of the form is a region of experimentation and exploration. It opens with a melody for the solo violin and passages in which all parts of the orchestra respond with elements of the underlying melodic cells. When the solo violin returns, the orchestra moves back to the opening, a quiet—or disquieting—rather than triumphal return. The melodies are distributed among different colors, and the solo clarinet often accompanies. As is typical of the form, the true second theme comes back in a new place. The *misterioso* chords connect to a solo cadenza and a tense return of the opening marked by a duo of the soloist and timpani.

The second movement is marked *Andante teneramente*—“walking tenderly,” a favorite designation of Brahms. It begins with a sequence of quiet chords in the winds. Then the clarinet introduces a big tune in which the searching quality of the first movement’s themes flows with a slower pulse. A series of solos follows: oboe, flute, trumpet, other brass, and then the opening chords transposed to a brass coloration.

Whereas the first movement was an essentially dramatic form, this is a purely lyrical one. Thus the second section is contrasting in texture rather than continuously developing. The clarinet and harp lay down a wash of accompanying color for solos by trombone, horn, and trumpet. A rapt moment is provided by strings with a murmuring orchestral clarinet, and the “B” tune is heard in the oboe and flutes. The opening chords lead to a return of the “A” section. Here, the solo bassoon finally makes an appearance. It is as if all the other solo colors had been trying to join in the solo clarinet’s mood, but it is the bassoon who succeeds. Clarinet and bassoon trade ideas in a long duet marked *intimissimo*.

The third movement, continuing the classical formal ideas, is a rondo-finale. It is based on juxtapositions of minor, major, and modal scales (scales being the bases for, and the completion of the intervallic cells that have supported all the melodies so far). An introduction marked *In sospeso*—“in suspense”—leads to a fleet, quicksilver, playful *Presto*. The second part of the rondo form begins with repeated chords marked *affretto*—nervous. Then there’s a bouncy, confident brass motif with a “high, wide, and handsome” melody. The winds are now marked *urgente*, and the rondo theme returns in a new key. This proceeds to a recollection of the “rapt” music from the second movement. Another return completing the rondo structure brings us to the music that opened the whole concerto, and a brilliant conclusion.

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