

ASPEN FESTIVAL ORCHESTRA

STUDENT SPOTLIGHT



Today, Zachary Gassenheimer is playing E-flat clarinet.

ZACHARY GASSENHEIMER *Clarinet*

For as long as he can remember, Aspen Music Festival and School (AMFS) student Zachary Gassenheimer has committed himself completely to things, putting his entire effort into even casual interests. “Everything I do, I’m really serious about,” he says. Trying to fully pursue both clarinet and lacrosse at a high level in high school, he describes how he would switch between the two when their respective seasons came up. “I would practice all summer to make it into All-State [band and orchestra] in the fall, then do lacrosse in the fall, then I would switch back to clarinet in January, then put it away again until May.” As he reached the end of high school, Gassenheimer found himself facing a tough decision. “I tried to balance the two, but it got to a point that one thing was more important to me than the other.” Clarinet took precedence, and Gassenheimer honed in on preparing for college auditions. “If I find something that I really want to commit to, I’m going to commit to it 100%,” says Gassenheimer. “I would wake up at 5 am every day and practice, because I felt like I was behind,” he says.

His first summer at the AMFS in 2019 had a significant impact on him. “I came here, and it kind of just changed everything. It set up a very different path than I was expecting. It was the first time I was immersed in what classical music could be, and how exciting playing in a professional orchestra was. I also learned how hard it was to do as a career. It was a double edged sword—‘I love this, but do I really want to do this?’” he wondered. He decided he did, and hasn’t looked back, earning a bachelor’s degree from Vanderbilt University and an artist diploma from the Glenn Gould School. He is starting a fellowship position with Bard College’s The Orchestra Now (TÖN) this fall and has his sights set on landing a position as an E-flat clarinetist in a professional orchestra.

An Aspen Conducting Academy Orchestra clarinet fellow during the 2022 season, Gassenheimer recently decided to turn his attention to E-flat clarinet and is one of the AMFS E-flat clarinet fellows this summer. “I like playing E-flat clarinet even more than [B-flat] clarinet. And I love [B-flat] clarinet,” he emphasizes. A lesson with the E-flat clarinetist of the Berlin Philharmonic kickstarted Gassenheimer’s interest for the auxiliary instrument. “That was my first experience on the E-flat clarinet,” he says. “It was one of the most surreal experiences.” The E-flat clarinet, which is smaller, higher-pitched, with a stronger tone than a typical clarinet, is “a completely different instrument,” he explains. “It’s such a unique sounding instrument and voice. There are solos that are loud and in your face, but also solos that are intimate. There’s this huge range of things you can do with it.”

Summer highlights for Gassenheimer include *The Rite of Spring*, Ravel’s Piano Concerto in G, and *Till Eulenspiegel’s Merry Pranks*, all of which have prominent E-flat clarinet solos. In today’s concert, Gassenheimer recommends listening to the color that the E-flat clarinet brings to the full sound of the orchestra in *Das Lied von der Erde*, especially in the large ensemble sections.

Reflecting on his three summers in Aspen, Gassenheimer emphasizes how his teacher, artist-faculty member Joaquín Valdepeñas has been a driving force in his musical career. “Meeting him—having a teacher that was supportive and committed—that changed my life. He teaches not only how to play clarinet, but how to be ridiculously musical. And he’s such a committed musician. He’s the perfect teacher for me.”

Gassenheimer is one of the 480 young talents studying at the AMFS this summer.

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—ZACHARY GASSENHEIMER