

# MASTERWORKS FOR BASS CLARINET – *A Personal Experience*

by Rocco Parisi

**W**hen the composer Saverio Mercadante first met Catterino Catterini who played the *glicibarifono* (the forefather of the modern bass clarinet) in “La Fenice” Theater Orchestra in Venice, he immediately became fascinated by this instrument and recognized its great potential. Mercadante was so moved by Catterini’s virtuosity that he wrote a solo for him in the opera *Emma di Antiochia*, commissioned for the 1834 carnival season and played in March of the same year. This is the first solo ever written for bass clarinet.

*Emma di Antiochia* was considered a masterpiece. This solo impressed and interested critics of the day who referred to the bass clarinet sound as “*voce del clarinetto e insieme del fagotto vale a dire che ha le note dell’uno e dell’altro*” (like the sound of a clarinet and a bassoon at the same time). The solo is in the Italian aria style with a brief cadenza at the beginning, a main theme and a coloratura section.

A similar situation happened when Luciano Berio first listened to me playing my bass clarinet

version of Paganini’s *Capriccio 24* for violin. I remember his gaze ranging between astonishment and surprise, as if he was listening and seeing something extraordinary. Some days later he phoned me, asking if I was available to work with him on a bass clarinet version of his *Sequenza IXa* for clarinet.

The main theme of every Berio *Sequenza* for solo instrument is the required virtuosity both in conceptual and technical aspects. These were the elements that really amazed Berio in my version of Paganini’s *Capriccio 24*. I worked with him for four days in his house in Florence in 1997. He was fascinated by the versatility of my bass clarinet playing and loved the low sounds and high sounds at the same time. These are the parameters that inspired the new version, *Sequenza IXc* for bass clarinet.

Compared with the previous version for clarinet, everything has been shifted down by a 10<sup>th</sup> and distributed across a great range of four-and-a-half octaves in the *Sequenza IXc* for bass clarinet.

The first long note is a low C, a sound particularly loved by Berio. The entire piece was developed taking into account the skill of the bass clarinet player to change from the low notes to the highest notes with great ease. For example, at letter M, the score reaches a high F – one of the highest notes of the instrument – and is immediately followed by a low C, thereby including the entire sound range in which *Sequenza IXc* is written.

An interesting situation occurred when I asked Berio about the multiphonics between letter J and L. I was concerned about whether I could play them, especially in a context of a *piano* sonority. I

*Donatoni loved the bass clarinet sonority and compared it with velvet: soft on one side but rough and scratchy on the other!*



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Luciano Berio

remember that Berio looked me straight in the eyes and told me to find a solution that I could manage. A few days later, I found some easier and accessible fingerings based on natural harmonics: the Maestro had already guessed I would!

Berio told me that he preferred this new version to the clarinet version, because it was much more varied and interesting. This has become a masterpiece of our small literature!

Another bass clarinet masterpiece is *Soft* by Franco Donatoni. I contributed to this piece, commissioned and written for Harry Sparnaay, a great pioneer of the bass clarinet who collaborated with great musicians like Berio, Donatoni, Ferneyhough and Yun. (Learn more about the fantastic musician Harry Sparnaay in Sparnaay's book *The Bass Clarinet*.)

Donatoni loved the bass clarinet sonority and compared it with velvet: soft on one side but rough and scratchy on the other! In fact, *Soft* is played two times, starting with a low-sound-based section

at a *ppp* dynamic, which slowly grows up to a long C-sharp in the high register, followed by a gradual decrease to the deep register accentuated by the use of a slap tongue, resulting in a complete extinction of the motif. On a different line is the second time: scratchy as velvet's back, and aggressive, characterized by the use of fast staccato, flutter tongue and slap tongue. When Donatoni died, I was invited to play *Soft* during his funeral in Milan.

Another jewel of our musical literature is *Come un'onda* by Ennio Morricone. Morricone listened to me play and was immediately impressed by my bass clarinet and its sounds. He was so fascinated that he dedicated the bass clarinet version of *Come un'onda*, which was originally for cello, to me. It is a short but very intense piece! Morricone used every single instrumental peculiarity of my bass clarinet, writing for a four-octave range, using a variety of timbres and articulations, creating a remarkable work with great sound effects. *Come un'onda*

starts with a strong sonority – like a tsunami, Morricone said – characterized by *forte* tremolos in the low register, followed by a short series of slap tongues, a virtuoso section, and implied polyphony at the end. ❖

#### ABOUT THE WRITER



*Bass clarinetist Rocco Parisi, born in San Pietro a Maida (CZ) Italy, is recognized as a talented interpreter of contemporary music and an innovator of new techniques for the bass clarinet. He gave*

*the world premiere of Sequenza IXc for bass clarinet and the Italian premiere of Chemins IIc for bass clarinet and orchestra, both by Luciano Berio, as well as the world premiere of Come un'onda by Ennio Morricone. He has performed at ClarinetFest® conferences in New Orleans, Stockholm, Salt Lake City, Austin, Assisi, Baton Rouge and Madrid.*