

The Bass Clarinet is an instrument of extremes: You can either buy a mediocre student-level instrument, or you can buy an (increasingly-expensive) professional horn. In an orchestral environment, you are either in the background, or you're playing almost entirely by yourself. And, unfortunately, its solo repertoire is either fairly simple — or it's blindingly hard.

Not any more. Fie Schouten has curated and assembled a terrific collection of intermediate- to advanced-level solo works in her her "Miniatures for Bass Clarinet" published just a few months ago by Dutch publisher Donemus (www.donemus.nl). Fie herself is a world-renown bass clarinetist, who teaches at the Prince Claus Conservatory in Groningen in the North of Holland, and she had a vision to create a compendium of these short works that would serve the dual purpose of introducing students to contemporary solo bass clarinet repertoire, while simultaneously providing fodder to spruce up recital programs.

I think she's executed that vision well. The short works span from soft, calm, very simple solo etudes, like Mathilde Wantenaar's beautiful "*Dwalende Melodie*," where the range never climbs above an Eb in the staff, to Klaas Torstensson's "*Interlude for Fie*," which is the kind of piece that would make any bass clarinetist sweat with its microtonal chromatic runs and registral extremes. There are works that explore non-standard notation, such as American ex-pat David Dramm, called "*Late Nite Radio*," (which might also be a student's first introduction to playing with prerecorded soundtrack!), and those that explore guided improvisation, such as Albert van Veenendaal's "*to dance or not to dance...*". There's even a duo at the end for two bass clarinetists wearing ankle bells. Take that Baermann!

But as a collection, what I love most about this set of works is the variety of types of playing, and the types of extended techniques required to execute them well. I can easily imagine spending a year (or two) working through these pieces with a student.

If I have but one criticism, it is that I found myself wishing for more variety in musical *styles*. Playing through these works myself, I noted that, on the whole, they won't serve every taste in programming. While there are melodic works — some deeply affecting — the pieces in this collection stylistically skew to the very modern, which might not be great to pull out at an impromptu recital at Grandma Frauke's house (unless Grandma in into that sort of thing). For example, I would have liked to see works that explored more popular idioms, world music, or rhythmically-driven themes, all of which are absent in this collection. But that, one can only hope, will be part of Fie's next project!

On the whole, that minor personal issue aside, this collection is an absolute gem. I applaud Fie's determination to commission these works, assemble, record and release them for all of the bass clarinet world to learn from and enjoy. I only wish something like this existed when I was a student!

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