

Clarinet & Saxophone



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**HARRY
SPARNAAY**
1944-2017

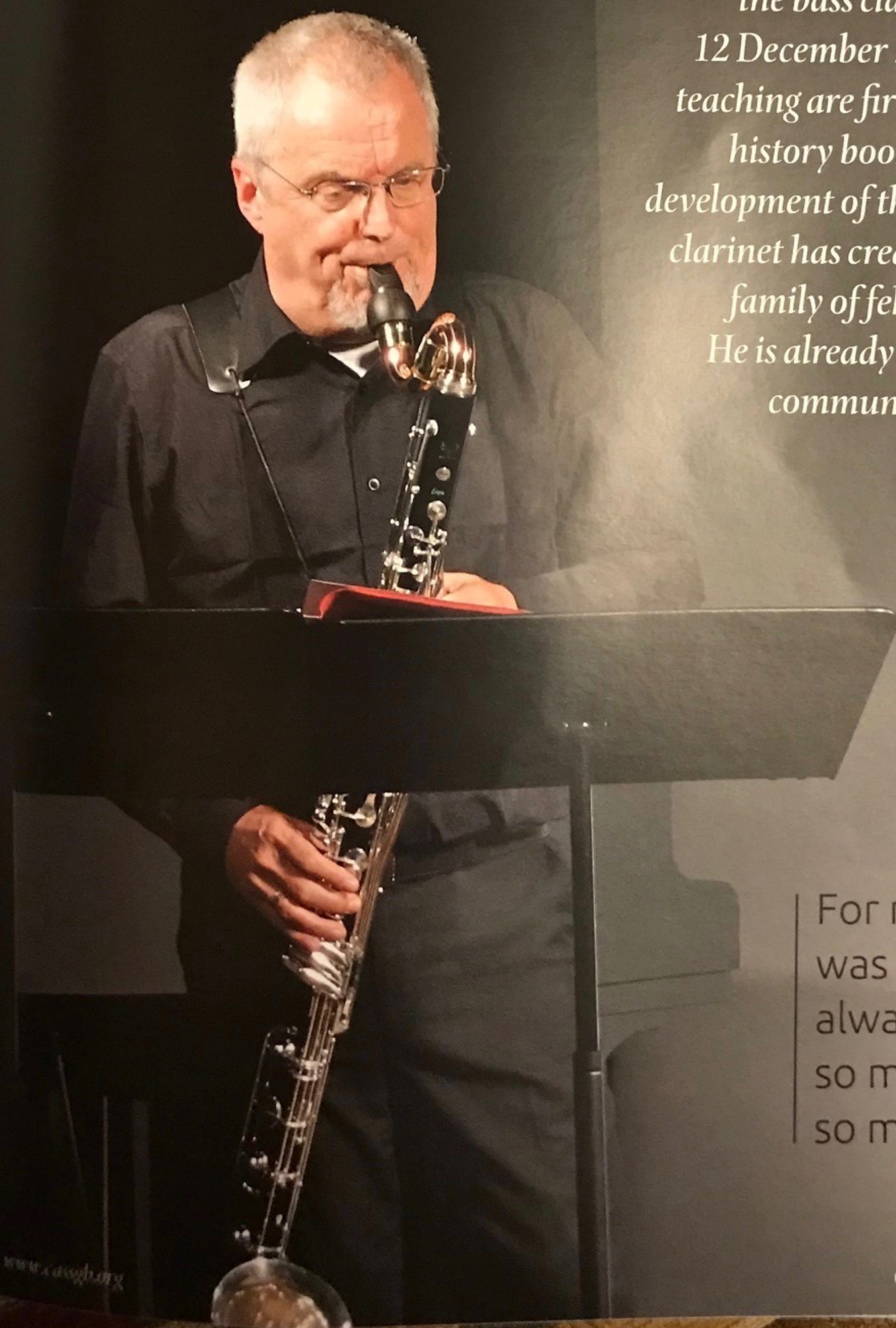


**Paying tribute to the
master bass clarinetist**

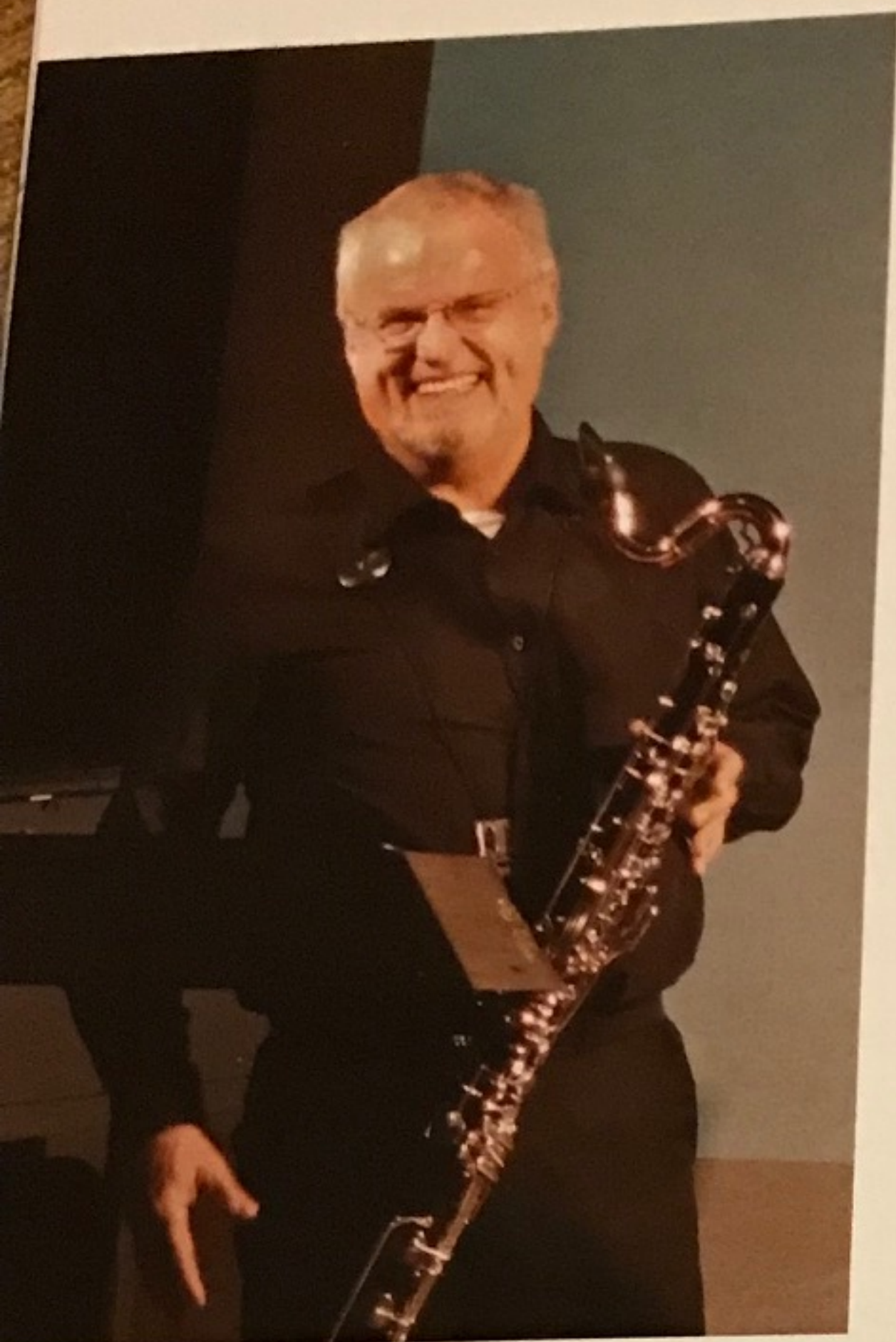
Harry Sparnaay

1944-2017

Harry Sparnaay, godfather of the bass clarinet, passed away on 12 December 2017. His playing and teaching are firmly established in the history books, and his pioneering development of the contemporary bass clarinet has created an international family of fellow bass clarinettists. He is already greatly missed by this community of artists, who pay tribute to him here



For many of us he was father-like and always helpful, with so many ideas and so much enthusiasm



Jason Alder (UK/USA)

Harry Sparnaay was one of the most influential people in my life. Without all he did for the bass clarinet world I wouldn't be where I am musically, or even personally. His legacy led directly to the path I've taken in my life, and making the decision to follow that legacy was perhaps the most important and best decision I've ever made. I'll always be grateful to him for that.

I was honoured when Harry contacted me because he wanted to include me in his book *The Bass Clarinet: A Personal History* because of my performance of Stockhausen's *Solo for melody instrument and feedback*, a piece he had played some 40 years earlier, although it has received few performances since then due to its technical specifications. And just earlier this year, he wrote to me to ask if I wanted to play in a sax trio with him and Sauro Berti. That he even thought to ask me to play was beyond words, and it's a pity that we'll never get the chance to do it. Harry, you'll be missed.

I think he said yes to everything, and assumed he'd figure out a way to do it, or a convincing way to fake it

Oğuz Büyükberber (Netherlands/Turkey)

I moved to a new country in the midst of my career at the age of 30, to study with Harry after hearing him play a solo recital in Ostend. The things I learned from him go way beyond just the bass clarinet. He keeps being a true inspiration and a reminder for me when I feel lost or disheartened.

At our first meeting, I asked Harry what he thought about my visual impairment in relation to the conservatory curriculum. He replied without skipping a beat: 'That's my problem to solve. I need to learn something with this as well, no?' Curiosity coupled with pure clarity – as in this incident – best summarises the many amazing qualities he had.

Among countless things, he taught me:

- Never to have only one repertoire prepared for a concert. What if the pianist doesn't show up, or the sound system doesn't work?
- To think deeply and very analytically about every aspect of performing: producing a sound, standing, being spontaneous and creative towards unexpected problems... And he also said: 'When a musician starts to think when performing, that's wrong.'
- To do what I believe is the right thing to do, and be patient. He said, 'Even if what you believe you need to be doing doesn't seem to exist yet, you have to make it. Then it will exist.'

I don't think I can really describe the deep sadness I feel at this great loss.

He said, 'Even if what you believe you need to be doing doesn't seem to exist yet, you have to make it. Then it will exist'

Laura Carmichael (Netherlands)

Our dear Harry Sparnaay is gone from this world. What an important person in my life. He was the reason I came to The Netherlands in 1999, and studying bass clarinet with him changed the course of my life in so many ways. His spirit, fortitude and knowledge will live on in me and so many other people he touched.

The people he loved were like his family, including colleagues with whom he collaborated for years and travelled the world, or his dear friend the composer Roderik de Man. He had little tolerance for people he found ingenuine. He loved to work hard for a solid burst of energy, then have a glass of wine, watch football or a Jean-Claude Van Damme movie. His biggest complaint about the Dutch football team was that they gave up before the game was over. That was really not his style.

Driven by curiosity and dissatisfaction with the status quo (plus needing to prove himself, dare I say), Harry saw beyond the standard method for everything, into what might be possible. It is not an overstatement to say that he revolutionised performance practice for the bass clarinet and brought it to the fore as a solo instrument. In the 70s and 80s, he was not even asking the same questions or putting himself in the same frame of reference as anyone else. I think he said yes to everything, and assumed he'd figure out a way to do it, or a convincing way to fake it.

One of my strongest memories was coming into his studio for my lessons during the period he was practising and memorising his part to Claude Vivier's *Marco Polo*. The room was full of energy! He was constantly touching on it in short bursts with full focus, then letting it go, then coming back to it again. He didn't take anything for granted, and remained doggedly determined, enthusiastic and full of energy. He was also this way as a teacher. I remember him waving his arms and shouting, 'He's in there!' as I struggled to pull out all the overtones in Kaija Saariaho's *Oi Kuu*. In music, no one ever asks where you studied — they ask who you studied with.



Petra Stump, Harry and Heinz-Peter Linshalm

Lori Freedman (Canada)

Harry was by far the most significant figure in my formative musical training because of who he was as a musician. I believe that the reason I came to have this 'singular' performance voice in both written and improvised music, so consistently mentioned by journalists and peers alike, is in part because of time shared with Harry.

Seemingly unintentionally and certainly unbeknownst to me at the time, Harry showed me ways to give myself permission. Aside from diligence – work and play became the same thing to me – and responsibility to the composer, without ever using these words he challenged me to explore all interpretive possibilities imaginable. Like this we worked together on new repertoire that had been written for him around that time – Xenakis, Berio, Donatoni, Ferneyhough, Yun, Ambrosini – all works that he himself was in the process of learning and rethinking. In terms of inspiration and courage to learn and to reinvent at every possible moment – a rather humbling existence – an artist such as Harry continues to give it 'in spades' for me!

Michael Lowenstern (USA)

Harry was the most open, transparent, honest mentor I have ever had. This cut both ways of course – I never needed to worry where I stood in his esteem, good, bad or indifferent. He never pandered. He never gave false praise. If he thought I could figure something out, he wouldn't give me the answer – he'd just look out the

window while I struggled. If he thought I needed a boost, he'd cut my lesson short and we'd go for a coffee and talk. So, while I carry his spirit of entrepreneurship inside me – of creating something that doesn't exist, and challenging the world to see and hear it – I believe that it's his honesty and realness that changed my life. Harry, thank you.

Paul Roe (Ireland)

The passing of Harry has left a void in the bass clarinet world and beyond. His was a life lived with passion, curiosity, exploration, love and joy. Harry had a huge and generous heart and was such a people person. Meeting him was always fun and uplifting, and he literally embodied 'joie de vivre'.

I had the good fortune to play with Harry on many occasions both in duos and also as part of Concorde ensemble. He was a kind and loyal friend who was so generous with his time. On many occasions he responded to arcane queries I made, queries that he alone could answer, relating to contemporary music and the bass clarinet. I continue to be inspired by him, feel his presence and indeed hear his voice and laughter as he shares yet another one of his favourite anecdotes which I never tired of hearing.

Quoting Harry himself from his book gives an idea of his wonderful spirit: 'I am thrilled to have such wonderful friends and I would like to hug them, kiss them on both cheeks and say: thanks ever so much, you mean so much to me.'

Thanks, Harry – you illuminated the world and it was a joy to know you.

Fie Schouten (Netherlands)

Harry was such an important coach for me. For many of us he was father-like and always helpful, with so many ideas and so much enthusiasm. And I felt a lot of freedom learning with him, as long as I took his lessons seriously by preparing (otherwise it was 'coffee!').

I know a lot of colleagues (non-bass clarinetists) who got 'infected' with the fascination for new and contemporary music after working with Harry. So many people enjoyed the projects at the Amsterdam Conservatory Ensemble Hedendaagse Muziek (ensemble for contemporary music). We even went to Cagliari, Italy with him and 15 students, and Harry was insistent that we did not check our sheet music into the hold. It was before the time that everybody had PDFs, and he absolutely did not want to arrive without the music.

And one of the lessons: 'If your triomate is playing funny notes, it could be that his page 6 stayed in the dressing room. Keep smiling and playing until everything gets back to normal.'

I studied for six years with him. For two years I did bass clarinet as a secondary subject and for four years as a main subject and with two great final concerts. What Harry was good at: he listened to his students and let everybody develop their own voice and choice in which direction they wanted to go. Of course, there was some basic stuff: I had to practise the two Uhl clarinet etude books on bass clarinet, and when I finally reached the last page, he said: now once more and then two etudes a week. He said it with a laugh, but it wasn't a joke!

From 2012 and on I played a few times with Harry as a colleague and with a lot of other former students. What a joy, and how proud he was of all of us! He had many fun stories and we laughed to the point of tears. His daughters Manon and Myrthe told me that they also experienced this with their father, making jokes and laughing into tears. The last time I saw Harry and his wife Silvia was in the summer of 2016, my children swimming with Harry and Silvia's three dogs.

Thank you Harry for your enthusiasm, knowledge and bringing together such a great crowd of people. In your class I found my husband and many great friends. ➡

One thing we can promise him is that the bass clarinet is established, and we all are continuing to research and develop it

Petra Stump (Austria)

After I finished my studies with Harry in 1999, we kept in touch. He gave me good advice, consolation when I lost hope to succeed as a musician, constructive criticism about my projects and recordings, and he was one of the people who encouraged me to go on composing. His good spirits always made me look towards the future with a smile and a kind of cheerfulness.

The last time we worked and played together was in 2013 when he visited Austria for a masterclass. He was already a little tired because of health problems but when he started teaching or playing his energy set a fire on everybody. Within a few minutes all the students fell in love with Harry, and soon the running gag 'We don't need Spohr' was established! Because of him we will keep working for the presence of the bass clarinet as a solo instrument with its own repertoire.

It hurts to lose you Harry, but it was an enrichment to have known you!

Stephan Vermeersch (Belgium)

The word 'impossible' did not exist for Harry: he always found solutions or ways to fake it as well as possible. His perseverance and stubbornness to reach the goal are legendary, and always with a smile. Many of the world's bass clarinet players today have had the same nice contacts with Harry: inspiring, a musical father and a magnificent friend. What you saw and heard was what you got: no nonsense or frills, and that is so refreshing in the music world of today.

For sure I was musically shaped and inspired in many ways by Harry. I remember very well when we met for the first time: I played some contemporary pieces including some of my own pieces at an international festival in Spain, and Harry was sitting at the front row. But he did not make me nervous at all – on the contrary, I relaxed. After my concert he stood up and gave me a big hug, and we became soulmates. For me it was one of the highlights of my life.



Sarah Watts with Harry

Sarah Watts (UK)

I didn't study with Harry, but he was always an inspiration. I really got to know him during my PhD research into multiphonics. Harry was always there to offer advice and support. His acceptance and positive comments for my book meant the world to me. The social times when Harry was at festivals with bass clarinet colleagues were joy and laughter. Harry was passionate about the bass clarinet, but also passionate about life. He was full of fun, jokes and always spoke his mind.

I've heard many colleagues who have established careers call him a mentor. It's true – we never stopped seeking his advice and he never stopped helping us. His passing has left a huge hole, and his fear was that the work he had done would not continue. But one thing we can promise him is that the bass clarinet is established, and we all are continuing to research and develop it. Many young students are still specialising in bass clarinet. Thank you Harry – we wouldn't be doing this without you. ■