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T. Eric Hoeprich

Clarinet reed position in the 18th century

Anyone interested in playing 18th-century clarinet music on period instruments is immediately presented with the choice of playing with the reed against the upper lip or against the lower lip. cursory examination of late 18th-century methods written by clarinetists, such as Valentin Roeser's *Essai d'instruction à l'usage de ceux qui composent pour la clarinette et le cor* (Paris, 1764/R Geneva, 1972) and Amand van der Hagen's *Méthode nouvelle et raisonnée pour la clarinette* (Paris, c1798/R Geneva, 1972; illus.3) or any of the anonymous English tutors yields clear instructions to play with the reed on top. Of the early 18th-century method books, the well-known fingering chart for the two-keyed clarinet in Majer's *Museum musicum theoretico practicum* (Swäbisch Hall, 1732) shows that the late 18th-century methods continue a tradition established in the early part of the century, since Majer's depiction is also of a clarinet arranged to be played with the reed against the upper lip. In addition to the methods of Roeser and Van der Hagen, the other methods for the five-keyed clarinet have been published in facsimile. These are by the Parisian clarinetist and composer Xavier Le Fevre (Paris, 1802/R Geneva, 1974) and by Frédéric Blasius (Paris, c1800/R Geneva, 1972). All four are French and all show the mouthpiece turned so the reed is placed against the upper lip. The conclusion then seems to be that if one is to play 18th-century clarinet music on instruments of the period, one should play with the reed on top. There is, however, some evidence to the contrary.

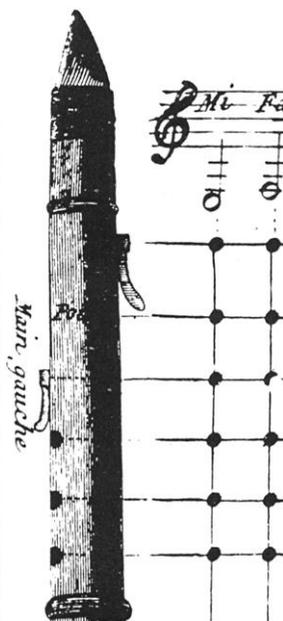
In dealing with this subject, there are three areas to explore: the methods, the instruments and the pertinent iconography. Continuing to examine the methods for clarinet in the 18th century, one notices that a large majority are either English or French. In fact, of the 65 methods dealing with the clarinet listed by Thomas E. Warner,¹ all but eight are either English or French. Although it has not been possible to examine all the French and English methods written before 1800, it would not be foolish to wager that all show a preference for playing with the reed against the upper lip. In any case, most French and English clarinetists advocated this reed position.

But what of the clarinetists in Germany, Austria and Bohemia? Since this area was the source of the origin of

the instrument, and produced players like Tausch and Stadler, and composers like Mozart and Beethoven, it seems sensible to look thoroughly at methods that originated there. Unfortunately, apart from the early 18th-century methods for the Baroque two-keyed clarinet, there seems to be nothing until the 19th century, when Johann Georg Heinrich Backofen's *Anweisung zur Klarinette nebst einer kurzer Abhandlung über das Bassethorn* (Leipzig, c1802) appeared.² Here the clarinet is illustrated with the reed to be placed against the upper lip. Thus one might tentatively group late 18th-century clarinet playing in Germany with the English and French schools. Neat and enticing as this conclusion may be, it is not correct, for on p.4 of his method, Backofen writes:

Ob es übrigens besser sey, das Blättchen beym Blasen an die obere oder untere Lippe zu halten—was die Klarinetisten ober sich oder unter sich blasen nennen—will ich nicht entscheiden. Ich habe schon von beyden Methoden tüchtige Leute gehört. Gewohnheit macht hier alles.

2 Mezzotint of a clarinetist by Ridinger: detail of mouth-piece



3 Detail from a fingering chart, showing the clarinet to be played with the reed on top: A. van der Hagen, *Méthode... pour la clarinette* (Paris, c1798/R Geneva: Minkoff Reprint, 1972), p.2



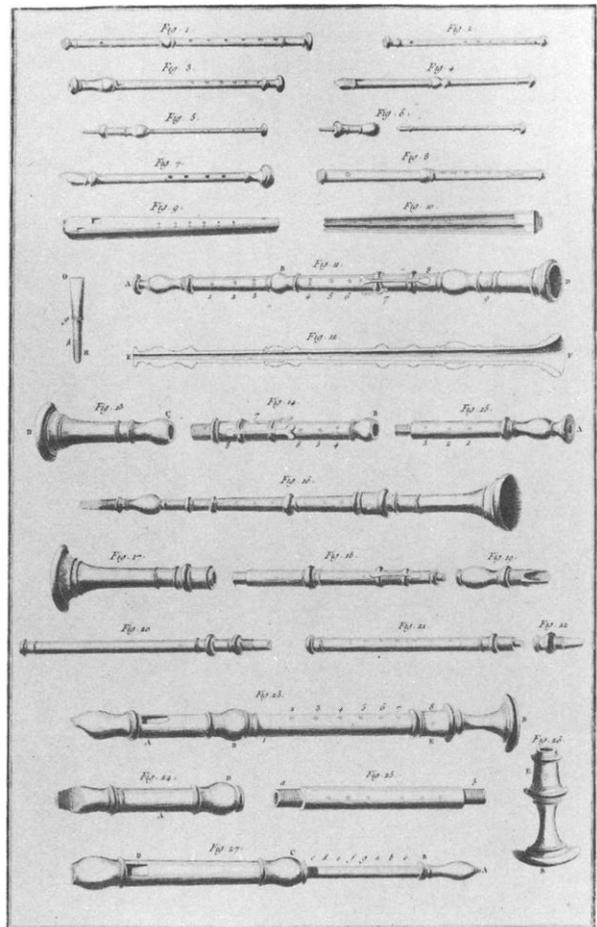
1 Mezzotint of a clarinettist by Johann Elias Ridinger (1698–1767) (The Hague, Gemeentemuseum)

By the way, whether it is better while playing to place the reed against the upper or lower lip—which clarinettists call on top or underneath—I have no preference. I have heard good people play in both manners. Here, what one is used to is most important.

This is the only method which suggests that clarinettists in the 18th century played with the reed against the lower lip. Although the method was actually published in the 19th century, several arguments can be made to show that it essentially describes clarinet playing in the 18th century. For one thing, the preparation required for publishing anything at the time must have delayed the book's appearance somewhat. Backofen was 34 years old at the time of publication, with a well-established career, having embarked on his first tour as a clarinettist in 1789. He probably wrote his method some time during his stay in Nuremberg from 1794 to 1802, looking back on his experience in the 18th century.³

Returning to Backofen's remarks concerning reed position, it is important to note the familiar way he comments on 'ober sich oder unter sich blasen'. Surely if this were some remarkably recent or revolutionary style of clarinet playing, he would have used different words. The absence of any such implication indicates that the fact that a large number of clarinettists were playing with the reed facing down rather than up was not especially interesting. Presumably both reed positions had been used for some time already. Obviously both reed positions were worth noting, particularly in a method for beginners, but the last observation, 'Gewohnheit macht hier alles', effectively contradicts any idea that Backofen considered one position better than the other.

As to why so many methods for clarinet appeared in the late 18th century in England and France, and so few in Germany, Austria and Bohemia, one can only surmise that the answer must lie in the national character of these countries. There was probably a more or less equal number of clarinettists in each area. Although the English and French had an older tradition of music publishing, there were certainly enough German and Austrian publishers in the late 18th century to print a method for the clarinet. Indeed, the very earliest publications with information on playing the clarinet—Eisel (1738) and Majer (1732)—came from Germany. The fact that by 1800 the clarinet had been a part of German musical life for about 100 years, having originated at Nuremberg around 1700, makes it seem odd that the Germans did not write methods for the instrument in



4 Wind instruments from the 'Lutherie' of Diderot and D'Alembert, *Encyclopédie* (Paris, 1751–65)

the late 18th century, when the clarinet was just gaining widespread popularity. Perhaps German clarinettists were kept so busy playing both at home and abroad—to what seems to have been a larger extent than their French and English counterparts—that they never had a chance to sit down and compose a method. Backofen's work is clearly the earliest German work of any depth on the subject.

The profusion of English tutors for the clarinet can perhaps be attributed to the large number of amateur musicians in England. The English methods are usually quite short, containing an introduction and lessons in music theory, a fingering chart (where the clarinet is illustrated with the reed on top) and some popular melodies. They would not have been of great value to a serious clarinettist in the 18th century, but rather would have appealed to a beginner or an amateur with few pretensions.

The most useful instrumental evidence relating to reed position can be found on clarinet mouthpieces that bear the maker's stamp. While no completely adequate study has been made in this area, it is not difficult to discern the various trends that help in assessing reed position. Of the English and French mouthpieces stamped by their makers, most show the stamp on the same side as the facing for the reed. If all the stamps on the instrument are aligned, the clarinet is, not unexpectedly, to be played with the reed against the upper lip.

Clarinets from Germany, Austria and Bohemia are more problematical. This is because their mouthpieces are seldom stamped, which could indicate that the makers failed to see the point in stamping mouthpieces since there was no distinct preference in reed position. Two instrument makers of particular interest are the Grensers of Dresden. Both made clarinets and both enjoyed a reputation of excellence. At least two well-known clarinetists active around 1800 owned Grenser instruments. Unlike the mouthpieces of other German makers, the mouthpieces of both Grensers are easily identified by their uniquely patterned notches, which prevent the string securing the reed from slipping off. Mouthpieces with these notches are associated with at least eight extant Grenser clarinets.⁴ None of these mouthpieces are stamped, however. This poses no problem in identification, but fails to help in establishing the preferred reed position of the Grensers. It seems that nearly all the mouthpieces credibly associated with 18th-century German clarinets, from the Grensers, who worked until the first decade of the 19th century, back to Jacob Denner (*d* 1735), are not stamped. In view of the fact that German makers were quite rigorous in stamping the other joints of their clarinets, the phenomenon of unstamped mouthpieces is perhaps best explained as a tacit vote on the part of these makers for a choice of reed position.⁵

Among the extant Austro-Bohemian clarinets there is one important exception. This is the mouthpiece on the only surviving clarinet by Theodor Lotz (*c* 1748–1792).⁶ Lotz is perhaps best known as the maker of the basset clarinet used by Anton Stadler, for whom Mozart wrote his Quintet K581 and Concerto K622. Lotz's clarinet is in B flat and is made of boxwood with ivory mounts, five brass keys, and a mouthpiece in grenadilla. All the joints are stamped, including the mouthpiece, which has the stamp on the side opposite from the reed facing. If all the stamps are aligned, the clarinet must be played with the reed against the lower lip.

It is interesting to note that with few exceptions, no 18th-century mouthpieces of any nationality show teethmarks. Whatever the reed position, both the upper and lower teeth would have been covered by the lips. Oddly enough, Van der Hagen instructs his readers to place the side of the mouthpiece opposite the reed against the teeth. There is no convincing instrumental evidence to show that this was the usual position. Since 18th-century clarinet technique probably grew out of oboe technique, evidence indicating clarinetists' use of a double embouchure is not surprising.

Iconographical evidence is more difficult to assess: the main problem lies in the exact dating of works of art. With regard to France and England, there is such an abundance of depictions of clarinets with the reed on top that the only images of interest would be works of art which provide examples to counter the assertion that all clarinetists of those nationalities played with the reed against the upper lip. One early and rather confusing example, from the 'Lutherie' of Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (Paris, 1751–65), depicts a two-keyed clarinet from both the top and bottom

5 The clarinetist Villement (1780) by Pierre Bazin (Amsterdam, Rijksarchief voor Kunsthistorische Dokumentatie)





6 Clarinet and horn players: anonymous Dutch etching, first half of the 18th century (The Hague, Gemeentemuseum)

(illus.4). In both views the mouthpiece is consistently shown so that the reed would be placed against the lower lip. This is probably an error, though the chalumeau portrayed just below the clarinet shows the opposite reed position, which perhaps indicates an awareness of the two possibilities. A later addition to the *Encyclopédie* shows a five-keyed clarinet with the typical French reed position, against the upper lip. Still, it is possible that the French habit of playing with the reed on top was not as pervasive as one might be led to believe.

This possibility is strengthened by a later portrait of the French clarinetist Villement, signed by Pierre Bazin and dated 1780 (illus.5).⁷ Here, the five-keyed clarinet is held to allow a clear view of the mouthpiece. The light area on the tip of the mouthpiece is a reflection, not to

be confused with the reed, which would have parallel sides and would be more clearly defined. This French clarinetist played with the reed against his lower lip. No information about either the clarinetist or the artist has been found.

Two other 18th-century works of art shown here are an anonymous Dutch etching (illus.6) and a mezzotint by Johann Elias Ridinger (1698–1767) (illus.1). The first shows a figure playing a clarinet standing to the right of another figure playing a horn. The clarinet seems to have only two keys and is possibly being played with the reed on the underside of the mouthpiece, since a turned ring spanning the width of the mouthpiece area on top would prohibit attaching the reed there. Also there is no sign of the sides of the reed, which would be evident if the reed were on top. This example is not particularly

convincing however, as the mouthpiece is rather indistinct. The figures are in the style of the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, but the text below is in Dutch thus settling any question regarding origin. The text includes the usual comparison of the trumpet and clarinet, actually hinting at the use of the clarinet as a substitute for the trumpet. It is interesting to note that in common with many depictions of Baroque clarinets, the exterior of the instrument is quite conical in shape. (The example from the *Encyclopédie* is similar in this regard.) In fact, the clarinet closely resembles an oboe, except for the obvious differences in turning. This conicity could be due to the artist's attempt to create perspective. Another possibility is a slight exaggeration of the tendency towards conicity that many extant Baroque clarinets actually have. The Jacob Denner clarinet in the collection of the Brussels Conservatoire (Brussels 912; see EM Jan 83 p.60, illus.1) for example, is slightly conical in its exterior, despite a cylindrical bore.

The mezzotint by Ridinger has been described in detail elsewhere.⁸ No firm conclusions can be drawn concerning reed position, yet the feeling one gets while looking at the embouchure is that the reed is against the lower lip. This could be due to the player's protruding upper lip, or perhaps to the absence of any indication of the reed in an otherwise detailed portrait. In the detail of the player's head (illus.2), one notices the clarity with which the several notches on the top of the mouthpiece are illustrated. Do these depict the string securing the reed, or is it possible that the model chose to pose with the clarinet without a reed? In the latter case these notches would be in the mouthpiece itself, making it clear that the facing for the reed is turned downwards against the lower lip. This is one of the finest 18th-century illustrations of a Baroque three-keyed clarinet.

The last portraits to be considered are from the early 19th century. Clearly no argument can be made to show a direct relationship between these portraits and clarinet playing in the 18th century, especially since a preference for playing with the reed against the lower lip prevailed in the first few decades of the 19th century. By this time one expects to see this reed position. Nonetheless, many clarinetists resisted the trend, provoking commentary like that in the *Allgemeine musikalisches Zeitung* of 1808 where an anonymous writer exhorts all clarinetists playing with the reed against the upper lip to switch.⁹ Thomas Lindsay Willman, the English virtuoso, played with the reed on top until his death in 1840 (though it should be noted that as early as 1800 tutors

appeared in England describing both reed positions). So these portraits cannot be considered unimportant.

A portrait of Prince Nikolaus II of Esterházy by Joseph Fischer (1809, the year of Haydn's death) and an anonymous drawing of Nikolaus dated 1811 show him playing the clarinet.¹⁰ During the period Haydn worked for the prince, he composed works in which the writing for clarinets surpasses any of his previous writing for that instrument. The parts for clarinet in the London Symphonies, for example, are far less demanding and adventurous than those in *The Creation*, which was composed during Haydn's employment by Nikolaus II. Since Nikolaus himself played the clarinet, and in particular since—as is clear from the drawing—he played with the reed against the lower lip, one strongly suspects the clarinetists in his employ did the same. Anton Stadler had connections with Count Johann Charles Esterházy, who was probably Stadler's pupil. Given this connection with Stadler, and the Lotz preference for playing with the reed against the lower lip, one wonders whether Stadler might not also have influenced the Esterházy clarinetists through his own preference for that reed position.

The last portrait shown here is of a Dutch youth holding a clarinet, painted by Johannes Reekers in 1813 (the date is on the chair) (illus.7). The clarinet is slightly old fashioned for the time, with only five keys and the bell and joint holding the long keys made in one piece. As the angled portion (the light area) of the mouthpiece points outward, the reed must be placed against the lower lip. The French influence, evident in other aspects of the youth's appearance, does not seem to have affected him in this regard.

To conclude: although the English and French preferred playing with the reed against the upper lip, both reed positions have been shown to have been used in France and elsewhere on the continent. There is an abundance of additional information relevant to this area, yet further analysis would only yield the same conclusion: both reed positions were used.

One final point should be made, however. The centre of greatest musical development in the late 18th century was Vienna. The finest composers worked there most of the time, attracting excellent musicians. Evidence relating to Austrian, Bohemian and German clarinetists strongly suggests that they played with the reed against the lower lip as often, or more often, than not. In re-creating the music of this era on period instruments, it surely makes sense to base our approach



7 Dutch youth holding a clarinet (1813): painting by Johannes Reekers (1790–1858) (Haarlem, Frans Halsmuseum)

on that of these clarinetists rather than the influence of the French, English, Dutch, Flemish, Americans etc. In playing Mozart's or Beethoven's works for clarinet on the instruments of their time, we should try as much as possible to reproduce the music as the composers might have heard it. Here reed position is not controversial: one reed position is no more 'authentic' than the other.

The author wishes to thank Magda Kirova for her assistance in preparing reproductions of portraits in the Gemeentemuseum collection.

¹T. E. Warner, *An Annotated Bibliography of Woodwind Instruction Books, 1600–1830* (Detroit, 1967)

²For the sake of completeness, a Norwegian treatise on music and playing musical instruments entitled *Den første Prøve for Begyndere udi Instrumental-Kunsten* should be mentioned. It was written by Lorents Nicolai Berg and appeared in 1782, and has been fully described by Albert R. Rice in the *Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society*, v-vi (1980), pp.42–53. Norway was rather remote from the cultural centres of 18th-century Europe, but the work does contain some interesting information, not the least of which is Berg's stated preference for playing the clarinet with the reed against the lower lip.

³P. Weston, *More Clarinet Virtuosi of the Past* (London, 1977)

⁴I have personally seen eight Grenser clarinets with this type of mouthpiece, and wish to thank Nicholas Shackleton for suggesting this connection.

⁵In a note in the *GSI*, xxxi (1978), pp.144–6, Cary Karp points out that on the two-keyed chalumeau, where the keys are mounted on the lower end of the mouthpiece joint, a difference in key length would prohibit rotating the mouthpiece to play with the reed against the lower lip, leaving one with no option but to play with the reed on top. However, Carp continues, on all extant two-keyed chalumeaux, the keys are fitted with such extreme care, despite a difference in length and therefore overall shape, that they can easily be interchanged, creating an instrument to be played with the reed downwards. This ease of interchangeability could hardly have been accidental, since such great care is required when fitting the keys to allow for this possibility. For example, in the case of the three-keyed Baroque oboe, the two 'identical' E flat keys are only very rarely interchangeable, even though the shapes are the same. Along similar lines, a two-keyed Baroque clarinet by Scherer (Paris, early 18th century) in a private collection in the Netherlands is stamped as usual on all joints, except the mouthpiece, with the maker's name and the symbol of a lion. In addition to the stamp, Scherer added the letter 'T' on all joints, including the mouthpiece, as a way of marking this instrument as one of a pair of clarinets, the other of which, formerly in the same collection, is identified by the letter 'D'. On the mouthpiece, the 'T' appears on both the reed side and the side opposite, clearly indicating an option in reed position.

⁶This clarinet is in the Musée des Instruments Anciens de Musique, Geneva; I wish to thank Fritz Ernst for allowing me to examine it.

⁷I wish to thank David Ross for telling me about this portrait.

⁸D. Ross, 'Ridinger's Youth Playing the Clarinet', *The Clarinet*, vii (1979), pp.9–12

⁹The same writer claims that the switch to playing with the reed against the lower lip will cause players to 'lose some of the high notes'. It is interesting to note that the only single-reed instruments whose makers (Jacob Denner and Liebav) showed, by the placement of their stamps, a definite preference for playing with the reed on top were the chalumeaux, which were usually played only in the fundamental (i.e. the lowest) register.

¹⁰Both are reproduced in *Musikgeschichte in Bildern*, iv/3 (Leipzig, 1969), pp.150–51.



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