

The *Morceaux de concours* for Bassoon since 1984: A Parisian Tradition Continues
by Jeffrey Lyman

As a professor of bassoon who must advise and assist students in writing research papers for the Doctor of Musical Arts degree, I am often asked to name examples of DMA documents that have clearly served the discipline beyond their publication in their respective institutions. One could hardly hope for a more user-friendly or consistently useful reference text for bassoonists than Kristine Fletcher's *The Paris Conservatoire and the Contest Solos for Bassoon*.¹ The book began as a DMA document when Ms. Fletcher was a student of Ronald Tyree's at the University of Iowa, and it has since taken its place on the bookshelves of thousands of bassoonists around the world. The topic is fascinating, the music infinitely varied, the author's scholarship impeccable and the treatment of the subject is comprehensive. Comprehensive, that is, up to its publication date. Fletcher's text finishes with the contest solo from 1984, Pierre Max Dubois' *Sonatine-Tango*, and surely anyone who has consulted this book must wonder what has been composed since, or even if the annual commissions continue today.

Before answering these questions, it may be helpful to give a bit of background on the music and the *concours* that required their use. According to Fletcher, "On completing their course of study, students enter the contest, or *concours*, held annually for their particular disciplines. They attempt to prove their progress to date by competing for a First Prize. Often, on a professor's recommendation, a student takes part in the contest before the expiration of the course."² According to Fletcher, the student has one month to prepare both the new solo (if one has been composed for that year) and a second work (required since 1970).³

In 1985, the CNSMDP discontinued the annual commissions, and now the commissions occur every few years. During the tenure of director Marc-Olivier Dupin (1993 to 2000), a selection of pieces for various instruments was commissioned from year to year, at the director's discretion. According to Anne Bongrain of the Conservatoire's information department, "the director chooses to commission five or six new works by composers; these composers are chosen by himself or suggested by specific professors. Different instruments are chosen each year, with a distinct preference for instruments with limited repertoires. As we want these works to become part of the living repertoire, composers are given the opportunity to 'beef up' the accompaniments by the addition of instruments other than the piano, up to small chamber ensembles. Electronic music can also be included."⁴ Ms. Bongrain stated in a more recent communication that as of early 2004, no new commissions are planned for bassoon for the next few years.⁵

Today, the annual contests continue, but prizes are no longer awarded. The current professor of German bassoon Marc Trénel relates that, "As far as the contests at the end of studies are concerned, they still exist but they have been reformulated: there is

¹ Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1988

² Fletcher 39-40

³ Fletcher 41

⁴ Personal communication from Anne Bongrain to the author, July 22, 2000.

⁵ Personal communication from Anne Bongrain to the author, February 13, 2004.

no longer a 'prize' with the assignment of a first, second or third prize (the second and third having the possibility of replaying the contest the following year). Instead one speaks now of 'mention' (very good, good or fair) and the students cannot appear again in the next year no matter what the outcome."⁶

When it comes to the actual music, it might be argued that for most of their illustrious history, the *morceaux de concours* of the Paris Conservatoire were, if you'll pardon the pun, conservative. If one considers only those works composed at the end of the 19th century and the turn of the 20th, it would be easy to point to a rather formulaic approach to their composition, one whose simplest incarnation includes a slow introduction followed by a cadenza and a flashy allegro. It is also true that the contest pieces composed during the first decades of the 20th century rarely if ever reflected the trends of the *avant garde* Parisian musical life of those years. That is certainly not the case with the works composed for bassoon from the 1950's through today, which run the gamut from traditional tonality through improvisatory music written in spatial notation. Compare the musical language of Alexandre Tansman's *Sonatine* with that of Roger Boutry's *Interférences I*, or the sound world of Ginette Keller's *Ébauches* with Pierre Max Dubois' *Sonatine-Tango*. Variety and originality are especially evident in the five newest works. While two are in the familiar format of bassoon with piano accompaniment, the other three break with tradition completely through the introduction of other instruments.

Here then is a list of the contest pieces since 1984⁷, along with the additional required works from the standard repertoire that appear on the *concours* each year. The official *commandes* of the Conservatoire are listed in bold print, and descriptions of the newest commissioned solos appear after the list.

1986: Michel Philippot (1925-1996), Composition pour basson et piano (Éditions Salabert E.A.S. 18368, 1986)

Antonio Vivaldi. Concerto in c minor.

1987: Bruno Bartolozzi. *Collage*. (Edizioni Suvini Zerboni)

Tôn-Thât Tiêt. *Jeu des cinq éléments II*. (Éditions Jobert)

Georg Philipp Telemann. Sonata in f minor. (Éditions Billaudot)

1988: Claude Ballif. *Solfegietto*. (Éditions Transatlantiques)

Carl Maria von Weber. Andante et rondo hongrois. (Éditions Billaudot)

Antonio Vivaldi. Concerto in B flat. (RV not specified)

⁶ "En ce qui concerne le concours de fin d'études il existe toujours mais il a été remodelé: il ne s'agit plus des 'prix' avec l'attribution d'un premier deuxième et troisième prix (le deuxième et troisième ayant la possibilité de repasser le concours l'année suivante). On parle maintenant de 'mention' (très bien, bien ou assez bien) et les étudiants ne peuvent plus se représenter l'année suivante quelque soit le résultat." Personal communication from Marc Trénel to the author, January 6, 2004.

⁷ The archivists at the CNSMDP could not find the works for the year 1985 when contacted for this article.

1989: Karlheinz Stockhausen. *In Freundschaft*. Werk No. 46 3/4 (Stockhausen Verlag)
Johann Nepomuk Hummel. Concerto in F major, 2nd and 3rd movements. (Musica Rara)
Work of the candidate's choice.

1990: **José-Luis Campana (b. 1949), *Involtura Sonora pour basson (ou fagotto) et violoncelle*** (Gérard Billaudot 1990)
François Devienne. Sonata in g minor. (Musica Rara)

1991: Tôn-Thât-Tiêt. *Jeu des cinq éléments II*. Éditions Jobert)
Etienne Ozi. Third Sonata. (Éditions Ouvrières)

1992: Martial Solal. *Seul contre tous*. (Éditions Salabert)
Antonio Vivaldi. Concerto in C major, F. VIII No. 13. (Ricordi)

1993: Vincent Persichetti. *Parable for solo bassoon*. (Elkan-Vogel)
Bernard Crussell. Concertino (without the Polonaise). (Fazer)

1994: **Renaud Gagneux. Opus 41 for bassoon and clarinet.** (Éditions Durand)
Camille Saint-Saëns. Sonate pour basson et piano, opus 168. (Éditions Durand)

1995: Tôn-Thât-Tiêt. *Jeu des cinq éléments II*. (Éditions Jobert)
Antonio Vivaldi. Concerto in B flat major, F. VIII No. 24 (Schirmer)

1996: **Claude Pichaureau (b. 1940), *Nympha-Lotus Triptyque pour basson avec accompagnement de piano*** (Éditions Choudens 1996)
Etienne Ozi. Second Sonata. (Ricordi)

1997: Philippe Hersant. *Hopi pour basson seul*. (Éditions Durand)
Johann Nepomuk Hummel. Concerto in F major, 2nd and 3rd movements.

1998: Ysang Yun. *Monolog*. (Bote & Bock)
Wolfgang Amadée Mozart. Sonata KV 292 for bassoon and cello.

1999: **Alexandre Ouzounoff, *NAIROBI, la nuit pour basson et percussion*** (Éditions Salabert E.A.S. 19727, 1999)
Franz Berwald. Concert Piece, opus 2. (Musica Rara)

2000: Odette Gartenlaub. *Profils pour basson et orchestre*. (Éditions Combret) Originally commissioned for the *concours* in 1966.
Antonio Vivaldi. Concerto in d minor, F. VIII no. 5 (Editions I.M.C.)

2001: Philippe Hersant. *Niggun pour basson seul*. (Éditions Durand)
François Devienne. Quartet op. 73, no. 3 in g minor for bassoon and string trio.

2002: Yoshihisa Taïra. *Monodrame II pour basson seul*. (Éditions Musicales Transatlantiques, 1989)

François Devienne. Sonata no. 6 in C major for bassoon and basso continuo.

2003: P. Winter. Concerto in c minor. (Editions Joseph ACS)

Antonio Vivaldi. Concerto of the candidate's choice.

2004⁸: Tôn-Thât Tiêt. *Jeu des cinq éléments II*. (Éditions Jobert)

Karlheinz Stockhausen. *In Freundschaft*. Werk No. 46 3/4 (Stockhausen Verlag)

MICHEL PHILIPPOT: COMPOSITION POUR BASSON ET PIANO

Michel Philippot was, for much of his career, aligned with the studio and compositional style of Pierre Schaeffer, one of the pioneers of electronic and electro-acoustic music. With this training in mind, it might be unusual to note that when asked to compose a *morceaux de concours* for bassoon, he composed in the most traditional pairing of all, that of bassoon and piano. Viewed in the greater context of the contest pieces as a whole, the chromatic language that characterizes Philippot's Composition is not without precedent, but compared with its immediate predecessor, Dubois' *Sonatine-Tango*, this work signals a stylistic about face. Rather brief and without the overt virtuosity or flashy cadenzas in the traditions of many contest solos, the work is equally (if not particularly) demanding for both the bassoonist and the pianist. As expected in this repertoire, the bassoon part covers the entire range of the instrument, but the real difficulty of this piece is in the precise interaction required of the two players and not in technical display. Gérard Condé notes this property in much of Philippot's work, and likens his music to "a subtle play of mirrors, where the elements reflect one another, neglecting the notion of theme and development in favour of the principle of continuous variation and a balance of musical planes, lines and colours."⁹ Like the Campana, Gagneux and Ouzounoff works, this is truly a duo, not simply a solo vehicle for bassoon with accompaniment.

JOSÉ-LUIS CAMPANA: INVOLTURA SONORA

The old traditions of the *concours* run headlong into the most modern musical experiments in this duo for bassoon and cello, the first work in the entire history of the bassoon *morceaux* to be composed for anything other than bassoon and piano or bassoon solo.¹⁰

⁸ According to Marc Vallon, in 2004 "two students performed, Mathieu Moreaud and Antoine Blot. They both got their diploma with 'mention Tres Bien a l' unanimité.' Blot played the Tôn-Thât Tiêt *Jeu des cinq éléments II* and Moreaud played Stockhausen's *In Freundschaft*. Personal communication from Marc Vallon to the author, March 7, 2005.

⁹ Gérard Condé: "Philippot, Michel Paul", *Grove Music Online* ed. L. Macy (Accessed 2 January 2004), <<http://www.grovemusic.com>>

¹⁰ Remarkably, there is only one unaccompanied work in the entire catalog of bassoon *morceaux de concours* composed specifically for the event, Pierre Petit's *Thème et Variations* (Paris: Eschig), the solo from 1976. Unaccompanied works have appeared fourteen times since 1985, and include works by Philippe Hersant, Bruno Bartolozzi, Claude Ballif, Vincent Persichetti, Martial Solal, Yoshihisa Taïra, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Ysang Yung and Tôn-Thât Tiêt.

José Luis Campana, who was born in Buenos Aires in 1949, left Argentina in the early 1970's after completing degrees in both music composition and psychology at the University of Buenos Aires. He continued composition studies in Paris with Betsy Jolas and Ivo Malec, and eventually taught analysis at the Conservatoire. In 1992 he co-founded the ARCEMA (Atelier de Recherche, Création et Enseignement de la Musique Actuelle) at the Université d'Orsay in Paris.¹¹

Involtura Sonora, besides being the first duo contest piece for bassoon and cello, could well be the most difficult of all the bassoon *morceaux*. It is a thicket of thorny technique, a kaleidoscope of exotic timbres, full of special effects for both soloists. As an example, the first phrase the bassoonist plays is marked *son détimbré, transparent, très léger* and *sans attaque et quasi glissando*, and these directions are followed throughout the piece by a glossary of colorful descriptions and by dynamics that range from *de rien* through *fff molto vibrato autant que possible*. The composer favors a tonal effect in which the sound of the bassoon is muted through fingering alterations and by pinching the reed, thereby mimicking the sound of a bass clarinet. Other effects include flutter-tonguing, multi-phonic, wide tremolos and harmonics. The rhythmic demands are as severe as the tonal and technical demands, and one could hardly imagine the panic felt by those poor students faced with preparing such a duo in the brief period of time allowed by the rules of the *concours*.

An interesting bit of trivia for those bassoonists brave enough to tackle this work can be found between the end of page 5 and the top of page 7 of the duo. The bassoon part on these pages was lifted by the composer and used again at the end of another work, *D'un geste apprivoisé...* for bassoon and compact disc.¹² Both bassoon works were composed for Pascal Gallois, and *Involtura Sonora* also bears a dedication to the cellist Pierre Strauch.

Involtura Sonora has been recorded in a breathtaking performance by cellist Strauch and bassoonist Marc Vallon. The two play this insanely difficult music as if it's the Mozart Sonata for bassoon and cello, with an accuracy and a musicality you will not believe. The recording appears on the Musique Française d'Aujourd'hui label, under the title *Noctal: José Luis Campana*.¹³

RENAUD GAGNEUX: OPUS 41

Compared with Campana's duo, Renaud Gagneux' Opus 41 for clarinet and bassoon is a piece of cake. The work alternates between long lines in rhythmic unison and sections that feature the tone color effect known as *bisbigliando*. Wind instruments achieve this effect, which in Italian means "whispered", by alternating fingerings on a sustained pitch. In this score, the fingerings for these effects are mostly left up to the players. Other effects include multi-phonic and slap-tonguing for the clarinet, *sons roulés* (a specific type of unstable multi-phonic) for the bassoon, and quarter-tones and flutter-tonguing for both. Multi-phonic fingerings are provided for the clarinet, but curiously are not given for the bassoon's *sons roulés*. Some moments of technical

¹¹ Editions Musicales Européenes web site (Accessed 2 January 2004), <<http://www.emepublish.com/english/eme111.htm>>

¹² Paris: Éditions Musicales Européenes 199X?

¹³ Musique Française d'Aujourd'hui D SK 4968

virtuosity appear here and there, but the real test in this work is whether or not the two players can perform in perfect rhythmic unison.

CLAUDE PICHAUREAU: NYMPHEA-LOTUS

At first glance, Claude Pichaureau's *Nymphaea-Lotus* looks like a typical recital piece for bassoon and piano, but the subtitle "Triptyque concertant: Parade-ouverture, performance, parade finale" alludes to certain unique demands placed upon the performers. The pianist enters on stage alone, begins a fanfare and is joined by the bassoonist off-stage or *en coulisse*. When the bassoonist eventually makes it to the stage, there is a brief cadenza that leads to a humorous allegro in which the pianist closes the lid of the piano and slaps out a percussive accompaniment. The Performance alternates between a mock-serious Andante and a Scherzando peppered with rhythms and harmonies that recall Dave Brubeck's *Take Five*. The Parade Finale summarizes everything that came before, and closes only after the bassoonist screams out a *de rigueur ff* high e', then reaches one step further in a final quick run up to high f'.

ALEXANDRE OUZOUNOFF: NAIROBI, LA NUIT

Of all the latest contest pieces for bassoon, this is the only one that follows in the early tradition of having a bassoonist compose the work. Yet that is as far as tradition goes in this rocking duo for bassoon and percussion. It is no surprise to find Alexandre Ouzounoff stretching both the players and the genre in *NAIROBI, la nuit*, as Ouzounoff himself is not easy to characterize. As a bassoonist he plays everything from the classics to electro-acoustic music, jazz and world music. Many composers have written works specifically for him, several of which are published by Éditions Salabert in the Collection Alexandre Ouzounoff. He is the author of a method text on contemporary techniques titled *Actuellement le basson*, he is the editor of music by Ozi and Gebauer, and has recorded chamber music by Poulenc and Magnard as a member of the Trio d'Anches Ozi. It is this omnivorous musical appetite and his broad experience as a true world musician that shows through in this knockout of a piece.

NAIROBI, la nuit pairs the solo bassoon with a percussionist playing temple blocks, tom-toms, bongos, cymbals and vibraphone. It is impossible to pinpoint a style by which to identify the sound of the piece, but as the title suggests, the composer could be recalling some of the music he wrote for his earlier exploration of African musical traditions, his compact disc *Made in Nigeria*.¹⁴ The bassoonist must be fluent in contemporary techniques, as the work includes brief *glissandi*, flutter-tonguing (even on a high e'!), harmonics and a few multi-phonics. The multi-phonetic fingerings are left for the performer to determine, perhaps because the work was intended for performance on both the French and German fingering systems.

The composer's only other nod to tradition appears in the form of the work, which follows the favorite format of the early contest pieces, a slow introduction followed by a virtuoso allegro. The bassoon sings out full-throated calls over an accompaniment of

¹⁴ European Music Production Records EPC 892, 1993. At the time of the writing of this article, the complete compact disc is available through www.musiquesindependantes.com or www.alapage.fr, and individual tracks can be downloaded from <http://www.vitaminic.co.uk/main>

cymbals and tom-toms in the free opening section. The impressive allegro is based upon an increasingly complicated treatment of short melodic *ostinati*. The fragments are shuffled, expanded and riffed until the bassoon breaks into a rapid-fire assault of triplets over brilliant cymbal strikes. Once the energy is spent, the work closes as it began, with a recollection of the vocalizations of the introduction.

With such a broad variety of styles and musical languages represented over almost two hundred years, the *morceaux de concours* can be counted among the greatest achievements of French musical history and have produced one of the greatest treasure troves of music for bassoon. It is good to see that the tradition continues to this day, despite the fact that we have to wait a few years between each new *commande*. As long as the music continues to be as interesting as these latest works, we bassoonists should look forward eagerly to the arrival of each new piece.