

Les Craven, principal clarinet with Welsh National Opera, tells the story of the different instruments he has used over the years and how he eventually abandoned wood in favour of hard rubber clarinets



An alternative TO WOOD

I started playing clarinet aged seven on a rosewood simple-system E flat clarinet with no maker's name, then later on a Hawkes and Sons E flat, also simple system. Next I had a French simple-system Couesnon C clarinet, then my first B flat, a metal, silver-plated Clinton-system clarinet which, at some stage in its life, had been owned by Charles Draper. At least that's what I was led to believe, as it had Charles Draper's name on the side of the instrument. I later discovered that Draper used to have these military instruments stamped to show he had approved them.

At the age of ten I changed to Boehm system, and my parents bought me a B flat and an A made by Selmer (the B flat a 'Centred Tone' model, favoured by Benny Goodman, the A a Series 9, the latest model at the time). I won a Junior Exhibition with them to attend the Royal Academy of Music Junior Department, and was subsequently invited to play in rehearsal with the London Philharmonic Orchestra under the baton of Colin Davis.

After studying with Christopher Ball at the Royal Academy Juniors and later with Sidney Fell at the Royal College of Music, I auditioned for and won a trial for first clarinet with the

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BBC Welsh Orchestra aged 19. I won my first permanent principal clarinet job aged 21, and much later became a session musician and guest principal clarinetist, performing and recording with the major London orchestras. Today, the position I have held for 23 years with the Welsh National Opera still requires hours of personal practice and orchestral rehearsal on a daily basis. This, at the age of 63, takes its physical toll, so I am very conscious of ergonomics and economy of effort in playing.

I originally bought some Ridenour hard rubber clarinets (not synthetic or composite material but pure, solidified rubber) to keep as a spare set for when my Leblanc Opus clarinets were being serviced or when I had to play in outdoor situations. These days I use them more and more, and over the years they have seen much service in many operas and also on TV concerts where heat from studio lights could badly affect the wood of my Leblanc clarinets. Rubber clarinets cope with climate extremes very well, and touring to hot countries, I feel safer with these hard rubber clarinets than with my wooden pair.

My experience is that in cold conditions, hard rubber clarinets warm up more quickly than wooden instruments but remain more stable in terms of tuning. This stability is true also in hot conditions, whereas wooden clarinets can become very sharp, requiring considerable adjustment at the barrel. Like many clarinetists I have been disappointed when an expensive clarinet cracks and, more often than not, the sound and intonation is impaired. Cracking is not the preserve of new clarinets, of course, and a clarinet can crack at any age.

Rubber is an easily sustainable crop which is produced in many developing countries and is a 'green' alternative to the diminishing reserves of mpingo wood. About 35 years ago I tried a hard rubber clarinet (much inferior to the Ridenour instruments) and although I was not impressed by anything else, I was rather surprised at how warm and round the tone was. Unknown to me at that time, the clarinet maker Tom Ridenour was also coming to the same conclusion.

Just after I first heard about Ridenour clarinets, I needed a C clarinet I could leave in the opera pit. As a professional player, it is expected that one can transpose, but the sound of the B flat clarinet transposing is not ideal in all circumstances. I have found that the C clarinet is very efficient in being able to deliver lightness of texture, attack and subtle timbre change. Rossini, Verdi, Smetana, Mahler and Richard Strauss are among the many composers who have employed the C clarinet in symphonies and operas, and I firmly believe that they knew the sound colour was different.

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I decided to buy the Ridenour 'Arioso' hard rubber C clarinet, not wishing to expose my old, beautiful Noblet C clarinet to the dry, variable atmosphere of the theatre in Cardiff. After a while I liked my new C clarinet so much that I decided to sell the Noblet and decided to buy rubber Ridenour B flat and A clarinets to match the C. These clarinets are now about 17 years old and still play as well as ever, with a round focused sound and great intonation.

With extraordinarily easy emission of sound, these clarinets make playing articulated high passages much easier than on a wooden clarinet and practically eliminate undertones, especially on the A clarinet. For those not familiar with this phenomenon, undertones, or 'grunts' as the Americans often call them, are notes that have an unpleasant low harmonic sounding at the same time as the intended note. These are particularly prevalent on wooden A clarinets in the clarion/clarinet register A, B and C (thumb and register key).

TECHNICAL FEATURES

On the Ridenour 575 A clarinet the C/G sharp key is slightly differently placed and has an accessible independent rod and screw mechanism. This normally lies underneath the left-hand ring key rod mechanism which makes changing the pad and the spring on the C/G sharp a laborious process. The innovative Ridenour design, with an anchored post for stability, makes general maintenance much easier.

How did Tom Ridenour settle on hard rubber as the material for his clarinets? He tells us in his own words

I was an acoustical designer for Leblanc in Wisconsin in the 1990s but left Leblanc in 1997. Then I started working for a company called Brook Mays in Texas.

They frequently sent me several makes of clarinet to test and assess, and among one batch there was one that kept standing out purely because it had a beautiful sound. It blew evenly, and very importantly the high notes in the upper register and altissimo did not have the harsh edge I associated with other clarinets. The response was instant, even in altissimo, and I could increase the dynamic without loss of quality in tone.

This amazed me as I would normally have discarded this clarinet which had an awful tuning scale and mechanism. When I looked down the bore it looked like a gun bore – straight as an arrow and with a high gloss finish that cannot be achieved in any wooden clarinet. Nor can the stability of the dimensions be matched in wood.

So I took a piece of abrasive, scratched the surface of the clarinet and exclaimed 'that's hard rubber!'. I sent a message to the owner of Brook Mays saying that if we could put the correct dimensions into the bore and create the perfect tone hole placement, the clarinet would not only be acceptable or competitive, it would be superior.

The rest as we say is history. I then built a new clarinet using this material based on a wooden clarinet I had designed. Each time we checked the production line and selected a clarinet to randomly compare with the original wooden design, the randomly selected hard rubber instrument tuned and sounded better than the wooden original.

Hard rubber takes very, very precise dimensions with much greater consistency than machined wood – wood that after machining goes through a polishing procedure that basically destroys the fine dimensions of a reamer. To compound the problem, the clarinet is handled by a worker throughout the process. Hard rubber clarinets are much more consistent than wooden clarinets, tune more uniformly, are more stable and won't crack.



On the lower joint, the A clarinet has separate posts and rod for the right-hand A/E flat key. The new design means less stress and wear on the screw and longer playing life for the spring. The register key also has a unique ergonomic design, supplied with all Ridenour clarinets with the option to replace it with a conventional register key at no extra cost. For me, the ergonomic key is a huge advantage as it requires less movement from the thumb to operate. The padding and consequent seal on Ridenour clarinets is excellent, with double skin pads on the lower joint and Valentino synthetic pads on the upper. Other padding options are available.

The sound on all Ridenour clarinets projects well, maintaining the warmth, evenness and rounded beauty that are integral to the core sound, unlike some wooden clarinets which can have an unpleasant, harsh, cutting, edgy sound, especially in the altissimo. The throat tones around the break in the upper chalumeau area (G to B flat) are the clearest and purest I have ever experienced. Crossing the break in very quiet dynamics – for example in the notorious opening of the Debussy *Rhapsodie* – is smooth and effortless.

Knowing that these clarinets are manufactured in Asia, many players

have concerns about the strength of the keywork. But, as previously stated, I have used them for many years and they have never let me down. I own the least expensive models: the 576 B flat and the 575 A. The difference between the 576 and the top-of-the-range Libertas is that the Libertas has more anchored posts and a slightly more focused sound with the same accurate tuning scale.

All Ridenour clarinets have in-line jump trill keys, similar to the original Leblanc design trill keys. Normal trill keys have some sideways movement when depressed (particularly the first and second side keys – E/B flat and the next one along) and lift off the tone hole at an angle. This means that the pad may not always return to the exact previous position on the rim of the tone hole, particularly as the mechanism wears. The in-line system guarantees that the pad goes down in the exact same position each time.

BASS CLARINETS

The Ridenour bass clarinet plays in a very similar way to the other clarinets in the range, in as much as it crosses the breaks with ease and there is no increase in resistance in the clarion or clarinet register. One feels that there is not a

fight with the instrument, whereas with wooden bass clarinets there is often a discernible change of character in the sound when crossing over to the next register, and the clarinet becomes harder to blow.

Like all the other Ridenour clarinets the bass will not crack – an important matter for such a major financial outlay. The quality of throat notes is superb, especially when compared to much more expensive bass clarinets. This inexpensive hard rubber low C bass is good news for professional players and students on a budget.

At the Royal Welsh College of Music, where I teach, the bass clarinets are kept in a storeroom which has very cool and dry air conditions. These wooden, extremely expensive bass clarinets have cracked almost beyond redemption, leaving them sounding dull with little beauty or interest in the sound. Having got them repaired to a level where they could be played, they promptly cracked again – so, for me, hard rubber clarinets are definitely worth considering.

Having come to admire these instruments without ever being paid as a sales representative, I am now acting as their sales agent in the UK. You can find more information on my website (www.lesliecraven.co.uk). ■

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- Clarinet Fingerings
- Educator's Guide to the Clarinet

“Les, the RCP 576b is a fantastic clarinet, it has great tuning....is easy to play, effortless crossing of the break, evenness of note - chalumeau to altissimo is amazing, lovely, even, dark, warm sound in all dynamics and registers. I'm delighted and I play it in “Charlie and the Chocolate Factory”

JAMES MAINWARING

one of London's finest clarinetists,
solo artist, west end musicals
and recording sessions



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