the senior recital of

Loucas Vasilarakos, clarinet

with Dr. Micheal Seregow and Austin Frohmader, piano

On the program:

Concerto for Clarinet in A major (K. 622), first movement
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756 - 1791)

Mozart’s Clarinet Concerto lives on to be the most standard work in the instrument’s repertoire. The piece, Mozart’s last instrumental work before his death, was written for the clarinet virtuoso Anton Stadler, with whom Mozart harbored a close friendship. In addition to Mozart's infatuation for the clarinet’s tonal beauty, many of Mozart’s finest clarinet works were composed with Stadler in mind, including the Kegelstatt Trio, Quintet (K. 581), obligato lines in La clemenza di Tito, and the famous Concerto (K. 622).¹ Originally written for the basset clarinet (a longer instrument that is characterized by its extended range and warm, mellow tone), the piece was later altered by publishers to fit the range of a normal clarinet. As a whole, the concerto is divided into three contrasting sections: Allegro, Adagio, and Rondo: Allegro.

The first movement of the concerto opens with a light, orchestral exposition before the clarinet takes over with the same thematic content. Almost instantly, the simplistic theme captures the quality of the clarinet beautifully, giving mature lyricism a chance to sing above intense passage work. Within the exposition alone, the clarinet’s standard characteristics are utilized: beautiful phrases, registral leaps, and flourishes of notes decorating the themes. With instances of minor phrases morphing back into the familiar, light-hearted character that dominates this movement, the exposition ends with a flurry of notes, showing off the clarinet’s technical ability. These remarkable characteristics are elaborated on in the work’s development before a seamless transition in the recapitulation, ending the movement with the dominating material heard in the exposition.

Abîme des oiseaux (Abyss of the Birds), for clarinet solo
Olivier Messiaen (1908 - 1992)

Olivier Messiaen can be regarded as one of the most important French composers of the twentieth century, extending beyond Western musical norms and incorporating his Catholic faith, interest in ornithology, as well as characteristic modality into his works. Subject to both World Wars, Messiaen composed The Quartet for the End of Time during an arduous detainment at a World War II internment camp. The work, whose title stems from an angelic force announcing “there should be time no longer” (Book of Revelation), was written for fellow musicians also interned at the camp. The full quartet is eight total movements, each showcasing Messiaen’s unique compositional style, harmony, and orchestration. Upon completion in 1941, the musicians, including Messiaen at the piano, gave the premiere performance to other prisoners and officers at the camp.²

Contextually, Abyss of the Birds is the third movement of the full quartet. Written for solo clarinet, the piece alternates moods, differentiating from sadness to perky optimism. Regarding Abyss, Messiaen writes:

‘‘Abyss of the Birds’ for clarinet alone. The abyss is Time with its sadness, its weariness. The birds are opposite to time; they are our desire for light, for stars, for rainbows, and for jubilant songs.’’

These descriptions are captured holistically throughout the work. Beginning with desolate long tones at a low, piano volume, the piece grows in intensity, eventually introducing “the birds.” These birds are characterized by light, staccato rhythms and complex flourishes over the entire range of the clarinet, bringing stark contrast to the hopeless tones that preceded. These two conflicting dispositions comprise the content for the entire movement, ending with one final flourish of hope followed by four low and concrete pitches.

Solo de concours, for clarinet and piano
André Messager (1853 - 1929)

André Messager, primarily regarded as a composer of French operetta, was a talented organist, composer, and conductor. A student of esteemed composer Camille Saint-Saëns, his works are model examples of the French school of composition, employing a light and elegant quality. After having established a career as a composer, Messager wrote Solo de Concours in 1899 for the annual Paris Conservatory competitions, which tested and awarded young musicians at the school. In congruence with similar pieces composed for this accredited event, Messager’s work offers a display of effervescent themes, impressive contrasts, and ambitious virtuosity. Stated by Fauré as being “familiar with everything, knowing it all, and fascinated by anything new,” Messager’s well-rounded musicianship is demonstrated perfectly in this standard concert piece.³

Solo de concours opens with cheerful melody atop a confidently stated piano accompaniment. Throughout the first section, flurries of scales and arpeggios are used in contrast with expressive melodies. After an impressive portrayal of technique, the work changes moods completely, alternating song-like melodies and technical accompanimental decorations between the piano and clarinet. The cadenza explores the dramatic character that the clarinet can illustrate so well, with a complete portrayal of the instrument’s range, dynamic contrast, and technical ability. The piece then transitions back to familiar, light-hearted melodies before concluding with a driving display of technique, confidently concluded with unison attacks in both the clarinet and piano.

Concerto for Clarinet, *for clarinet, string orchestra, harp, and piano*  
Aaron Copland (1900 - 1990)

Aaron Copland’s Concerto for Clarinet has become a repertory staple for clarinetists and audiences alike. The work, written over the course of one year, was commissioned by and dedicated to the legendary jazz clarinetist Benny Goodman. Though commissioned, Goodman trusted Copland’s esteem and legacy, giving him complete artistic freedom to complete the work. In fact, the only editorial correspondences between the pair occurred after the concerto’s completion in 1948. The only stipulation regarding the commission was Goodman’s two-year exclusivity with the work’s performance, however both Goodman and American clarinetist Ralph McLane (Principal Clarinetist of the Philadelphia Orchestra, 1943-1951) acted as premiere performers for the concerto. Goodman gave the radio premiere on 6 November 1950, and McLane succeeded with the concert premiere on 24 November. Initially, the work did not garner great success, with some reviews referring to the piece as “second-rate Copland.”[^4] However, with continued American performances and two recordings by Goodman, the concerto gained a significant increase in popularity.[^5]

The concerto can be divided into two continuous sections, or movements. The first contains many expressive, ”Copland” qualities, such as leaping melodic lines and shifting metrical pulses; the movement ends with a lengthy cadenza. This cadenza, an enigma amongst clarinetists, introduces the following section’s tone: a riveting drive with inherent influence from the jazz genre.

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*All program notes written by Loucas Vasilarakos (2020).*