

Introduction

Modern music history, eager to make a smooth and sensible connection between the eras, focus primarily on composers' innovations, sometimes making an exception for the novelty of certain popular instruments by mentioning them in the course of the evolution. The reason might be that written music is the best witness of music of the past time, since it is in one of the only track left by the composer, although lots of mysteries are still remaining about the vast subject of notated music. However, if great composers led the way to open doors in musical traditions since centuries, they were almost systematically helped or inspired by players who were equally responsible for their innovations. Up until the 20th centuries, composers were also players and they composed a fair amount of music for themselves when their instruments were highlighted. But when writing for the others, and especially in the the context of concertos, skillful players were consistently around them. In this perspective, the players had a huge impact on the development of their instrument and repertoire, although they are very rarely mentioned in history books. Some players have been crucial for their instrument, since they were active at the crossroad of eras and thrived towards novelty by means of skills and adventurousness.

When looking at the clarinet history, and more precisely at the players that shaped it in the late Classical and early Romantic eras, one can see the same few names appear: Josef Beer, Anton Stadler, Heinrich Baermann, Bernhard Crusell, Simon Hermstedt... If quite an amount of information is findable on Anton Stadler, mainly because of his ties to a certain Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, or Heinrich Baermann, greatly for his musical friendship with Carl Maria von Weber, little is findable about the other three players. Focusing on the oldest of them, Josef Beer, for the reason I found his years of life extremely remarkable (right at the turn of the 19th century, he would have starter(ed) his career with the very first works for clarinet by Carl Stamitz and finish it when Weber already composed for the instrument, what a leap!) and realized there was not much to read. Skimming through all the clarinet general history books, I was shocked to read that, in his book *The Clarinet; a cultural history*, Kurt Birsak gives this short line of information about Beer in those terms: « **Joseph Beer** (1744-1812) was a member of the court orchestra in Berlin. He is not to be confused with another famous virtuoso. »¹ In short, the only thing to remember about Beer is that we should not mix him with another player. This sentence summarizes the general treatment this player received in contemporary writings on the clarinet. The name of Beer is present in every clarinet source and mentioned as an important player, but the story usually finishes there. Pamela Weston, on in the other hand, is very clear: « the significance of Joseph Beer (1744-1812) in the beginnings of clarinetistry cannot be overestimated. »²

¹ Birsak, Kurt. *The Clarinet; a cultural history*. Translated from Germany by Gail Schamberger. Druck und Verlag Obermayer GmbH. 1994. p. 96.

² Weston, Pamela. *Heroes and heroines of clarinetistry*. Trafford. 2008. p. 35.

Paired with a not-so-important classical composer (Carl Stamitz), too old to be associated with the first great early-romantic composers (Beethoven, Weber), right in the same time Mozart and his clarinetist Anton Stadler were there to take all the glory, Josef Beer has been put aside and his tremendous impact on the clarinet development and repertoire evolution have been kept in darkness.

In order to enlighten Beer's contribution to clarinet history, it was crucial to build the most extensive biography, a task that was not undertaken until now. Indeed, Josef Beer's biography generally holds within a few lines in history books and authors name him as a compulsory step in woodwind history, without taking time to discuss his career. However, when looking closer to his impact on late 18th and early 19th centuries music for the clarinet, his role is essential and no less surprising. Crossing countries with the army from Bohemia to France, he learned and solidified his instrumental technique there fast enough to become the best clarinet player available in the kingdom of Louis the XVIth. Enjoying a decade of success, mainly due to his warmly applauded appearances at the Concert Spirituel, he left to enjoy the life of a wandering virtuoso before settling down in St-Petersburg where he played for the wealthiest figures of the country, contributing to the thriving of clarinet music. Ten years employed by the Empress Catherine the Great were enough to satisfy Beer who then accepted a position at the King of Prussia's court and finished his life there, playing and teaching fine young musicians.

In order to compile information able to constitute a clear biography, a great variety of sources were studied, including period encyclopedias, daily papers reviewing Beer's public appearances, period writings about related subjects, music manuscripts and first editions, as well as clarinet methods and treatises and secondary sources. Josef Beer having travelled greatly during his career, many sources are in foreign languages: French, Czech, German, Russia, English... the author would like to thank her colleagues for the translation of those sources when it was necessary.

Although a tradition of writing the name of our main character spelled « Joseph » exists, I chose to stick to the German speaking way of writing « Josef », as it was his mother tongue.

Since Josef Beer had a genuinely eventful story, it was essential in this work to try to portrait his way of playing, inter alia by comparing general trends of clarinet playing at the end of the 18th century with reviews of his specific playing in order to pull out conclusions we can apply nowadays on the music he performed. Thus this research concludes with a chapter targeting performance practice and attempting to give clues on historical informed clarinet playing for music setting on the turn of the 19th century. Beer revealed himself as the best example of a player renewing his playing, both technically and musically, during the course of his enlivened life.