

The Clarinet

by Margaret Thornhill

Choir

JEFF ANDERLE AND THE SAN FRANCISCO CONSERVATORY OF MUSIC CLARINET STUDIO ENSEMBLE

On a brisk spring day in late March, during the height of the COVID-19 lockdown in California, I spoke with clarinetist Jeff Anderle about his work with the clarinet studio at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

At SFCM, Anderle is chair of woodwinds and coordinator of woodwind chamber music. He teaches clarinet and bass clarinet, and also teaches courses in professional development, including a required course taken by all entering degree students. An extremely active freelance clarinetist and music entrepreneur, Anderle does teaching residencies, performs with Splinter Reeds and the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, is co-director of the Switchboard Music Festival, one half of the bass clarinet duo, Sqwonk, (with composer/clarinetist Jonathan Russell) and was a member of the iconic, avant-garde bass clarinet quartet, Edmund Welles. Anderle, who received his M.M. from SFCM in 2006, has mentored the SFCM clarinet studio class since 2008, initially subbing for his former teacher, San Francisco Symphony clarinetist Luis Baez. Since 2010, the studio has regularly performed as an ensemble in concerts on campus, in the community, and notably at ClarinetFest® 2019 in Knoxville, Tennessee, featuring music by living composers.

MARGARET THORNHILL: *Jeff, can you give me a little history of what you have been doing with clarinet ensembles at SFCM? I think the first time I saw anything about this was when I first heard Jon Russell's *Eleven* in a YouTube video some years ago, which inspired me to buy the piece for my group to play.*

JEFF ANDERLE: That was 2010, and our first big project. We actually worked on Steve Reich's *New York Counterpoint* and *Eleven* at the same time. That was the first big impetus for the piece; we had a really big clarinet studio that year, at least for the conservatory – enough people that we could do NYC, which I had done as a solo but not with an ensemble. Jon wrote *Eleven* as a companion piece for that performance.

MT: *So I assume that you've been doing a lot of new music in the nine years between then and taking the studio to Knoxville in 2019? Where does the repertoire come from?*

JA: Knoxville was very successful and the students loved doing that. A lot of works are from composers that I know or pieces that students will bring sometimes. Composer friends would contact me or I would contact them and say, "I think this would be really interesting if you would write something for a big group of clarinets." And so it has been pretty organic in that way.

MT: *I missed your performance in Knoxville, but I heard your recording of Jon Russell's *Evil Robot Spooky Space Jam* on his website. It sounds just spectacular with the group that you took to ClarinetFest®!*

JA: *Evil Robot* was a true premiere at ClarinetFest® (we did the San Francisco premiere last fall), but we also took two other pieces we had performed before, in order to bring them to a larger audience. Marc Mellits' *Prometheus* was originally a string quartet and Jon Russell arranged that for us, with Marc's permission, to do in 2016 or '17. It's for 8 clarinets. For Knoxville, we doubled some parts.

Also, Kyle Hovatter's *A Circle to the Head*. Several years ago I wanted a piece I could play with a clarinet ensemble as a visiting master class teacher. So I asked for essentially a concerto for bass clarinet and an ensemble of eight clarinets, where the clarinet parts are fun to play: a little bit tricky but not that hard, so it could be put together quickly before I got into town, and after I got there with a little bit of rehearsal. I did this in a visiting master class at ASU a few years ago, and it worked great.

I premiered it in a faculty recital at SFCM. All of this stuff is for sale – that was one of the main reasons for bringing it to ClarinetFest®.



San Francisco Conservatory Clarinet Studio and mentors at ClarinetFest® 2019 (left to right): Jerome Simas (SFCM clarinet faculty), Jonathan Russell (guest bass clarinetist; SFCM alumnus), Lara Mitofsky-Neuss (SFCM alumna), Jeff Anderle (SFCM clarinet faculty), Johnny Wang, Ivan Ferguson, Emily Ji, Ayslin Rice, Cristian Barazal and Sahand Soltani-Nobakht

MT: *Do you mind telling me some of the other premieres that you have done?*

JA: We did a piece *Black Oak* by Max Stoffregen, for clarinets and drum track. This was performed at the Switchboard Music Festival.

MT: *I heard that on YouTube and thought it was cool.*

JA: And a work called *Madeira* by Hauschka [the German experimental composer Volker Bertelmann, who works under that name] which I arranged for clarinet ensemble from the original for mixed ensemble. There is no recording of the clarinet version, but there is a recording of the original that I played on. We also have another work for 11 clarinets by Hauschka, called *When She Walks*.

There was another project that we did with the Bay Area composer Lisa Bielawa when the Conservatory had a centennial year a couple years ago. She rewrote this piece for us called *Centennial Broadcasts*. Originally I was trying to get 100 clarinets to play

it, but we got about half that. It's a piece that takes place in an outdoor space, and there are subgroups that move around and interact with each other. I have dreams about doing that sometime at ClarinetFest®.

MT: *Can I ask where you did that?*

JA: We did that in Hayes Valley, outdoors, in the neighborhood. We got a permit to be in one of the little parklets. It was intended to grab the foot-traffic that was already in the neighborhood.

MT: *Two things stand out about your clarinet group: one is this focus on new music. I can't think of any other academic department doing this as intentionally, with the quality and the direction in which you are taking it. And also the fact that you got a student group to travel to ClarinetFest®! Since that happens in the summer, for most schools it is sort of out of the question for them to bring their students along to perform.*

JA: I was really lucky that we got a lot of support from our dean to cover a lot of

the cost of bringing our students out, which is amazing. He was just really into the idea of having students participate in an international conference, and as a recruitment thing. He saw the merit and was open to doing it again, which I am excited about.

Another one of the reasons it worked was that my faculty colleague Jerry Simas came out, and there were alumni Jon Russell and Lara Mitofsky-Neuss who were already going to ClarinetFest® for other reasons. So the group at Knoxville was a mix of faculty, alumni and current students, which I think was one reason the level was really high.

MT: *Another thing that is distinctive about your group: you are often playing with them, particularly bass clarinet. You are a fabulous player, with so much flexibility – I think that's probably really engaging for them.*

JA: I like to include myself or other music faculty or alumni, just so the students get a chance to rehearse and perform

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at a higher level, and usually at a faster pace than they do with their normal chamber ensembles that they play in at the conservatory.

One of the goals of doing something like this is – we’re talking about playing contemporary music, and by living composers – but the type of contemporary music I am most interested in is the stuff that is really fun to play and to listen to. I think it’s fun for students to play something really different that does push them

and challenge them but that also makes them smile, and if I’m there demonstrating as well, and sort of encouraging them to think outside the box, in terms of style especially, I just think it’s a nice experience for them.

MT: *Does this give the students a focus for connecting with living composers and sort of broadening their outlook, or are they coming to this with the experience of having done a lot more new things just generally?*

JA: I think the typical SFCM student is doing some type of contemporary music, that’s just the type of student we often get. There are different levels of comfort, but generally they like to engage with living composers.

MT: *It sounds like you are investing a fair amount of time in using this as part of their curriculum.*

JA: Yes, it’s a big part – like using the studio class for their rehearsals. It’s a really great pedagogical tool as well. You get to talk about things like intonation, blend – it’s a nice break from the other stuff that we are doing.

MT: *During the time that you’ve been on the faculty, has the conservatory changed or expanded the scope of its vision?*

JA: When I was a student there, we were at the original building out in the Sunset District. Moving to Civic Center changed things a lot for us, and adding a ton of new faculty and a new president, and a new dean. We have another new building coming which will open up in the fall – mostly a dorm, and three new performance spaces, and some teaching spaces.

I think the philosophy of the conservatory has changed as well. We are truly interested in teaching the whole person, and not just teaching the skill of executing a musical piece. All our faculty have for a long time been this way, but as we bring new faculty along, they’re really looking at – what is a career in music going to look like for you? And, what are the various skills you are going to need beyond playing your instrument to get to that place?

Recognizing that, yes, some percentage of our students will go on to have full-time performing jobs, but a larger percentage of them will not. And that’s fine: here are the other skills you need to start a teaching studio, or freelance, or start some other sort of musical ensemble, or get a job in arts administration – really looking to the whole range of career options that are available to someone with a collegiate degree in music, and trying to support students in whatever they decide to do once they graduate.

CONTEMPORARY REPERTOIRE FROM THE SFCM CLARINET STUDIO ENSEMBLE

**indicates the work was premiered by the SFCM Clarinet Studio Ensemble*

WORK	COMPOSER	NO. OF PLAYERS
* <i>Chaconne in D</i>	Bach, arr. Kyle Hovatter	4
* <i>Centennial Broadcast</i>	Lisa Bielawa	50-100
<i>September</i>	Earth Wind Fire arr. Lowenstern	9
* <i>Madeira</i>	Hauschka, arr. Anderle	9
* <i>When she walks</i>	Hauschka, arr. Anderle	11
* <i>a circle to the head</i>	Kyle Hovatter	8 + solo
* <i>Prometheus</i>	Marc Mellits, arr. Jon Russell	8
<i>New York Counterpoint</i>	Steve Reich	11
* <i>Eleven</i>	Jonathan Russell	11
* <i>Evil Robot Spooky Space Jam</i>	Jonathan Russell	9
<i>Supra</i>	Jonathan Russell	9
* <i>Black Oak</i>	Max Stoffregen	9
<i>How to play</i>	Ken Thomson	5
* <i>Burst</i>	Ken Thomson	4
<i>Be-In</i>	Evan Ziporyn	5
<i>Hive</i>	Evan Ziporyn	4

For score availability, contact Jeff Anderle anderle@sfc.edu or visit the composers’ websites.

MT: *It's becoming obvious at the present moment that this is even more important than we thought. And I'm sure that, knowing that you think in this entrepreneurial way, you are probably spending a lot of time thinking what the isolation will do to people as we come out of this?*

JA: Definitely! One of my other roles at the conservatory is in the professional development department teaching classes around these topics. So that's a big part of my teaching philosophy: you can't just learn a piece; you have to learn a piece *and* what to do with it.

MT: *Many conservatories teach what is typically a single course in, say, how to manage your career, but I wonder if you have gone in a different direction than you see other schools doing, partly as a result of your life experiences as an entrepreneur?*

JA: We had the same one-course requirement that most schools have which I started teaching 6 or 7 years ago, but around that time we realized

this just wasn't enough for students, and that it was coming too late in their training because we offered it their senior year. So now we've moved that to the first class they take. They get comfortable with these ideas around career and professional skills right away, and then they have an additional two units in professional development they have to take some time later in their study. There's also a financial literacy course they take as freshmen. So they start with these basics, right at the very beginning. We have a very extensive menu of professional development offerings they can take as electives, but they are required to take two more after the first year. It's not optional. We want our students to be engaging with these topics in a meaningful way.

MT: *Is there anything else that you'd like the world to know about clarinet at SFCM?*

JA: For the clarinet department, the things to know are: we have a lot of teachers (Luis Baez, Carey Bell, Jerry Simas and Jeff Anderle) and not that many

students! And everyone gets along really well! And something else – there are a lot of side-by-side opportunities here. Whether clarinet or wind chamber music, we're trying to model great playing and also different career paths for our students, so that when they come in they can have some really clear models of what they should be doing. ❖

ABOUT THE WRITER



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