

Tafelmusik

THE CHALUMEAU & CLARINET

By Colin Savage



“The tone has so much interest, individuality and unending agreeableness that the entire scale of art will suffer a considerable deficiency if this instrument is lost.” These words from the journalist and composer C.F.D. Schubart regarding the chalumeau in the 1780s are sadly prophetic, but with this week’s programme we seek to remedy the situation.

The chalumeau is a single-reed instrument, descended from the simple reed pipes of Greek, Roman and Middle Eastern antiquity. In these ‘idioglot’ instruments, a slot is carved into the top end of a tube of cane, and when the player blows through it, the vibrating tongue of cane makes a sound. Adding holes along the length of the tube allows different pitches to be produced. Mersenne describes such an instrument in his *Harmonie universelle* (Paris, 1636) as a chalumeau, the name derived from the Greek *kalamos* (reed pipe).

As woodwind manufacture became more advanced toward the end of the 17th century, makers fitted recorder type bodies with a separate reed on a mouthpiece (‘heteroglot’ instruments) and positioned the tone holes to produce a scale, adding two diametrically opposed keys at the top to extend the range to an octave plus three notes. The Nuremberg workshop of Johann Christoph Denner is often credited with instigating these improvements, and many fine woodwinds of all types remain with his stamp, and that of his sons. Unfortunately, there are fewer than ten extant chalumeaux from the baroque period, and only one by Denner. The chalumeau was produced in four sizes, three of which will be heard tonight.

The chalumeau’s gentle cantabile qualities were exploited in dozens of operas in the first quarter of the 18th century, especially in Vienna. Fux, the Bononcini brothers, Caldara, Ariosti, Conti and others wrote obbligato parts for one or more chalumeaux, especially in pastoral or amorous arias. Handel used a pair of chalumeaux in the first version of *Riccardo primo* (1727) in a charming aria about a lonely lamb, but the intended players seem to have left London before the opera was finally produced, and Handel rescored the aria for oboes. The chalumeau is also well represented in chamber music and concerti by Telemann, Vivaldi, Fasch and especially Graupner. Curiously, there seems to be no music for the chalumeau by French composers, and only a few works postdate 1750.

The baroque clarinet developed almost simultaneously to the chalumeau, and the Denners were certainly involved. By modifying the bell to resemble an oboe (rather than a recorder foot joint), and moving the key on the back of the instrument higher, the overblown upper

register becomes available. This range is brighter in sound than the lower register, reminding listeners of the trumpet or *clarino*, hence the name 'clarinet'. Due to the acoustical nature of the single reed cylindrical bore, opening the register key sounds a twelfth above the fundamental (rather than an octave as in other woodwinds), so there is a gap between the top end of the so-called 'chalumeau' register and the lowest note of the higher register. Composers often avoided this note, until makers added another long key to complete the chromatic scale. Over 40 two- and three-keyed clarinets survive, in a variety of pitches. From the position of the makers' marks, we can determine that many of these were meant to be played with the reed against the upper lip, a position that affords a clear, open sound, but with less control over articulation.

Since the upper register of the baroque clarinet is generally more stable in sound and intonation, much of the music features this range, with occasional forays into the low register for dramatic colour change. These contrasting effects were used in operas, cantatas, and orchestral works from 1715 onwards, by many of the same composers who wrote for the chalumeau, including Conti, Caldara, Telemann, Vivaldi, Graupner and Handel. The clarinet's unique tone was heard in Rameau's operas in Paris in the 1750s; Leopold Mozart described "that idyllic combination, clarinets, horns and bassoons" at Vauxhall Gardens in London in 1764; and an ad in the *New York Gazette* from 1758 seeks clarinetists for a similar ensemble. The clarinet was well on the way to becoming an integral member of the woodwind section, though its versatility in a variety of ranges, and stronger tone, undoubtedly contributed to the demise of the chalumeau.