



Clarinet & Saxophone

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MICHAEL LOWENSTERN

YouTube's king
of the bass

Just Because
ROB BUCKLAND'S NEW SOLO CD

Free sheet music
HERB HALL TRANSCRIPTIONS

*Rahsaan
Roland Kirk*
THE PIONEERING JAZZ
MULTI-INSTRUMENTALIST

*Mühlfeld in
Manchester*

TALES FROM HIS
TOURS



PLUS: NEWS | LETTERS | REVIEWS: GEAR, BOOKS, CDS AND SHEET MUSIC | DISCOVERING ROBERT KHAN | PROTECTING INSTRUMENTS OUTSIDE | UPCOMING COURSES

Regulars

- 4 **News**
- 14 **Letters**
- 16 **Single Reed Doctor**
Protecting your instruments
when playing outdoors
- 36 **Reviews**
 - 36 Gear
 - 39 Books
 - 40 CDs
 - 46 Sheet music
- 51 **Diary**
- 54 **Classifieds and
Membership update**

- 12 **CASSGB Online Clarinet
& Saxophone Competition**
Find out the results of our recent
competition for UK-based, full-time
students aged 18 and over, including
comments from the judges
- 15 **Opinion**
Jazmin Ealden shares her thoughts
on the visibility of women in the
classical saxophone community

31

Rahsaan Roland Kirk



INSIDE



18

Michael Lowenstern

Features

- 18 **Michael Lowenstern**
YouTube's king of the bass clarinet tells Chris Walters about his musical
education, what it takes to keep his channel running, and how he found the
right work-life formula
- 22 **Just Because**
The latest CD from Rob Buckland, *Just Because – Short Stories for Solo
Saxophone*, was entirely recorded and self-produced at home during the
pandemic. Michael Pearce chats with him about the project
- 24 **Mühlfeld in Manchester**
At the turn of the 20th century, Manchester concertgoers were treated to
celebrated concerts by the clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld – the dedicatee of
Brahms' clarinet works. Geoff Thomason tells us more
- 27 **Free sheet music**
Two transcriptions of jazz solos by the clarinetist Herb Hall, transcribed by
Samantha Wright
- 31 **Rahsaan Roland Kirk**
Kenneth Morris explores the life and recorded legacy of Rahsaan Roland
Kirk, the jazz instrumentalist best known for his ability to play multiple
instruments at the same time
- 34 **Discovering Robert Khan**
A new disc from Ensemble Émigré features the world premiere recording of a
quintet for clarinet, horn, cello and piano by the neglected German composer
Robert Kahn. Ingrid Pearson tells us more
- 56 **From the archives**
Stephanie Reeve continues the story of how CASSGB put pressures on
universities and exam boards to reverse negative attitudes towards the
saxophone in the late 1970s and 1980s

Nate Holder appointed first RNCM International Chair in Music Education



Saxophonist Nate Holder, recognised internationally as an advocate for decolonising music education, has been appointed to the new role of RNCM International Chair in Music Education on a three-year tenure.

In addition to his work as a saxophonist, which includes performances and recordings with artists such as Ed Sheeran, Ghetts, Zoe Birkett and KOKOROKO, Holder works as a consultant and speaker to address bias and under-representation in music education resources, departments, hubs and boards. His published books include *Where are all the Black Female Composers?*, *Where are all the instruments?* and *Why is My Piano Black and White?*

In his new role at the RNCM, Holder will work with students each year on core Music in Context modules addressing current issues in music, as well as Music Education modules across all undergraduate, postgraduate and popular music programmes.

Polaris Duo Saxophone & Harp Database

To celebrate 10 years of playing together, the Polaris Duo has launched a new Saxophone & Harp Database, featuring a repertoire list (with links to recordings), plus details of other ensembles and available albums of music for the combination.

The duo hopes the free resource (available at www.polarisduo.com/saxandharpdatabase) will make it easier for other saxophone and harp duos to find repertoire and recordings, and for audiences to discover the versatility this instrumentation can offer. If you'd like to add something to the database, you can submit new items via the contact form at the bottom of the database webpage or by emailing info@polarisduo.com

Gillian Blair (saxophone) and Elinor Nicholson (harp) formed the Polaris Duo in 2011 while studying at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester. The duo is dedicated to presenting new music and expanding the repertoire for this uncommon pairing of instruments, which has led to numerous UK, European and world premieres of new arrangements and commissions.



Polaris Duo: Gillian Blair (saxophone) and Elinor Nicholson (harp)

Fans raise £3,000 to replace stolen sax

Jazz multi-instrumentalist Toni Kofi said he was 'completely gobsmacked' after a crowdfunding page raised over £3,000 to replace his stolen saxophone. Kofi's vintage 1930s King Zephyr alto saxophone was stolen around 2am on Monday 20 March from the World Heart Beat Music Academy in Wandsworth, London, where Kofi has taught for over seven years. The charity offers music opportunities to local young people aged 5 to 25 from low income and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Upon hearing the news, Viv Broughton, owner of Hackney-based Premises Studios in London where Kofi regularly rehearses and records, set up a GoFundMe page to help raise funds to buy a new saxophone. Within just 12 hours, friends, fellow musicians, and donors from all over the world had matched the £3000 GoFundMe target.

Kofi said: 'It was a really nice surprise, I could not believe it. I didn't know that all these musicians cared so much, I almost burst into tears. This is something that I never, ever encountered. It was just such a beautiful thing. It just shows that good definitely overcomes evil.'

Kofi debuted his new alto, a vintage King Super 20 Silversonic with solid silver bell and neck, at a gig at London's 606 Club to mark International Jazz Day on 30 April.



Toni Kofi with his new alto sax

Michael Lowenstern

You Tube's king of the bass clarinet tells Chris Walters about his musical education, what it takes to keep his channel running, and how he found the right work-life formula

If you ever visit YouTube and have an interest in the bass clarinet, it's likely that you will have encountered Michael Lowenstern and his channel, Earspasm Music. Lowenstern's videos are forthright, whimsical and imaginative; they are designed to entertain. But they also offer a glimpse into the buzzing mind of a talented educator – someone with a creative approach to topics that clarinetists and bass clarinetists care about.

Lowenstern backs up his opinions with some impressive playing chops, particularly on the bass clarinet, his preferred instrument. He's not afraid to dive into heated debates around gear and accessories – his all-black Selmer bass, keys included, is a statement in itself – but when discussing gear, it's in the service of sounding great, not looking great.

Myth-busting comes into it too. His video on bass clarinet ligatures ('\$2 Shoelaces or a \$70 Vandoren? The ultimate Ligature showdown') argued that there was no significant difference in sound between any brand of ligature and other objects including a shoelace, a rubber band and a luggage tag. This and many of his other videos serve as a gentle provocation – a reminder of what's important and what's not when playing music.

Lowenstern is an interesting figure in the

musical firmament, having successfully pursued a 'traditional' route into orchestral playing before becoming conflicted about certain aspects. Rather than stifling his frustrations, he decided to call time on that job and move into a new career in business, away from music. This freed him as a musician, and he now credits his musical success, at least partly, to the fact that he is a 'double life major' – devoting time to developing his own musical vision alongside a senior role at Amazon. Given the uncertainty of many musical career pathways right now, Lowenstern's example is one to take note of.

His website (www.earspasm.com) features his own musical performances, a gear shop and a blog. Many of his blog posts come from questions submitted to his website by young students, and he always answers these considerately and in depth.

You can hear several albums of his music – original jazz/ electronic compositions for bass clarinet – on Spotify and other streaming services. These are ambitious, quirky and fascinating (I'm including my own sales pitch here as Michael is refreshingly unbothered about self-promotion). I caught up with him in April, when uncertainty was still hanging over the resumption of live music in his native New York City.

I don't take myself, or music, too seriously, and I think that offends some people



Born Ronald Theodore Kirk on 7 August 1936 in Columbus, Ohio, Rahsaan died of a second stroke at the age of 42, following an appearance the previous day at the University Student Union in Bloomington, Indiana. Blind from the age of two, he reportedly changed his name from Ronald to Roland and added Rahsaan both as a result of dreams.

As will become evident from his record legacy examined in this article, there can be no doubt that within his short life he was a genuine mover and shaker in the history of jazz – but not without his critics. Following one of several visits to Ronnie Scott's in London, one emerging reporter was heard to comment, 'Now that was an enigmatic saxophone performance wrapped around a conundrum of styles within a riddle of showmanship!'

Kirk delivered post-modernist jazz long before the term was invented

Three facts are irrefutable: Kirk delivered post-modernist jazz long before the term was invented; his records garnered an amazing number of four- and five-star ratings in the US *All Music Guide to Jazz* (AMG); and many of his live performances were considered extremely exciting, principally from his ability to increase listener interest chorus after chorus.

Even after suffering his first stroke in 1975 and losing the use of one arm, he managed to continue playing for two more years until his death. As with many children growing up without one or more of the five senses, the remaining ones are often enhanced. Although little is known about Kirk's specific situation, it is quite likely that his hearing and memory for what he heard (and even what he had previously played and liked) were well above 'normal' levels.

While many photographs of Kirk at work can be found in the literature, it's useful to actually define what he actually hung around his person: a manzello (a modified saxello, which is a soprano sax with a slightly enlarged, up-curving bell), a straight Buescher alto sax (which he termed a 'stritch') and a standard tenor saxophone.

Capable of playing three single-reed instruments at once, Kirk's awesome instrumental configuration gave him the ability to project three-part harmony, when one part was set as a drone. Each required keywork modifications, apparently involving rubber bands and sticky tape, which became even more necessary following his stroke. His three-sax set-up was supplemented by various sound generating devices, including his voice, clarinets, cor anglais, flutes, recorders, penny and slide whistles, a harmonica, gongs and sirens. Furthermore, this entire armoury of noise creation was aided and abetted by his complete mastery of circular breathing techniques.

From his early teens, the ability to play more than one instrument at a time was exploited initially by local (territory) rhythm and blues outfits. Later in his short career he developed two more playing techniques: singing/humming into a flute while playing, and simultaneously playing transverse and nose flutes. All of this was part of his off-the-wall audience stimulating routine on jazz club engagements. He also included episodes with a trumpet or an English hunting horn and had been known to play trumpet with a sax mouthpiece, or a garden hose with a trumpet mouthpiece. He described the latter device as 'the black mystery pipes'

and was most certainly a component of his mission to rename jazz 'black classical music'.

The sources I was able to consult for this article failed to include much information on Kirk's education, aside from he attended the Ohio State School for the Blind. Several books claim that long before taking up the clarinet and C melody saxophone, he was proficient on bugle and trumpet. What is clear, however, is that almost any type of music interested him, as well as African-American history and the Civil Rights Movement, which led to the creation of his own musical lobbying vehicle, The Vibration Society.

It is almost true to say that he was influenced by (and happy to play) any type of jazz from New Orleans to avant-garde, and he also loved classical, R&B and much pop music of the 50s, 60s and 70s. He liked to play alongside stride pianists, Dixielanders, Chicagoans, Boppers and anything post Charlie Parker. The classical composers who interested him most were Saint-Saëns, Hindemith, Tchaikovsky, Dvorak and Villa-Lobos, with several critics remarking that snatches of these composers' compositions can be heard in Kirk's performances captured to disc.

Nevertheless, his improvisations were principally rooted in soul jazz or hard bop, with the latter demonstrating that he led, in chronological terms, recorded varieties of what is now classified as avant-garde. It must be made clear that many of his jazz club appearances were more an entertaining combination of showmanship and album publicity than a demonstration of his creative musicianship. Ronnie Scott, who hosted Kirk for a number of gigs, largely ignored the eccentric showmanship and welcomed his virtuosic tenor playing – and one thing Ronnie never did was to book a less than a world-class tenorist!

Rahsaan Roland Kirk
playing at Lanchester
Polytechnic in Coventry,
UK, January 1972



PHOTOGRAPHY: KENTRETHEWAY

gear

GEAR REVIEWS

ROYAL GLOBAL BASS CLARINETS

Firebird: £6,450 | Polaris: £4,950

Available at www.reedandsqueakcases.com



Firebird (left) and Polaris (right)

Bass clarinets are expensive! And despite the overwhelming sea of B flat clarinet possibilities, there are not nearly as many for the bass clarinet. The primary options for a new Boehm-system low C wooden instrument are either a Buffet Prestige or Tosca, or a Selmer Privilege. There are also models by Yamaha and Uebel, but they are not as popular choices. In any case, the prices range from £7,500 to over £11,000. The clarinet world has long been in need of quality bass clarinets at more affordable prices.

In steps Royal Global. Royal has been around for about 15 years now, producing clarinets in China. These are not the instruments that you typically expect from China, however. The owner, Yuan Gao, is a professional clarinetist in Boston and owns the Royal Global factory. While making use of the cheaper manufacturing costs, the instruments are still built to professional standards, and many top clarinetists have recently switched to Royal clarinets. A couple of years ago they introduced the Firebird bass clarinet; last year it was updated to the current model and a new instrument was also offered, the Polaris. These are not copies of existing bass clarinets, but Royal has put the time into developing a new instrument.

Reed and Squeak is the new UK distributor for Royal Global, and I've had the opportunity to have one of each of these bass clarinets for the past week and a half to test and review. These instruments have been a joy to play, and are very high quality, professional-level horns at a relatively low price point. The Firebird is selling for £6,450 and the Polaris for £4,950.

Each instrument has its own sound and character. I don't believe the price reflects a difference in quality, but rather the different features available on the Firebird which attribute to its sound, namely the neck and bell.

The Firebird neck has extra bracing along the bows, giving it more weight, and I am told that it uses a different metal in its neck and bell receiver. The Firebird also comes with a grenadilla wood neck resonator which slips over the receiver tenon of the two-piece adjustable neck. It may sound gimmicky, but I noticed a clear difference in both sound and response when I took it off. I felt that the resonator helped to centre the tone and give it more punch, the articulation was crisper, and I noticed some notes responded better. Adding the resonator to the Polaris' neck gave the same result. The Royal Global US representative, Brian

Corbin, makes neck resonators that are available separately as an accessory and also carried by Reed and Squeak.

The Firebird also has a wooden grenadilla bell. I did tests changing between this bell and the Polaris' metal bell, and my experience was that the wooden bell helps tighten up the sound and gives it more richness and crunch, reminiscent of the sound that I love from my Selmer. Royal wooden bells are also available to purchase separately and fit both Royal and Buffet bass clarinets.

Overall, the Firebird is punchy, present and full-bodied. The Polaris, in comparison, I found to be lighter and more mellow, attributing that partly to the lighter metal used in the neck. While still clear and focused, it is less direct and forceful, which might contribute to a smoother sound. Attack and response in the altissimo seemed a bit easier and cleaner on the Polaris.

I put the Firebird's neck and bell on the Polaris and the result was an instrument that sounded quite similar to the Firebird, and vice versa