

Clarinet & Saxophone

Spring 2015 Volume 40, No 1

**What Has
Music Ever
Done For Us?**

**Iain Ballamy
Interviewed**

Ligature Choices

**The
Italian
Influence**



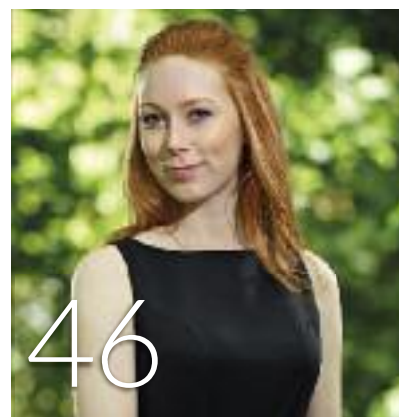
Inside

Regulars

- 2 **Editor's Notes**
Richard Edwards
- 2 **Clarinet & Saxophone Society**
Details
- 4 **News**
- 35 **Reviews**
 - 35 Accessory
 - 36 CD
 - 41 Music
- 45 **Diary**
Details of concerts, courses and playdays
- 53 **Classifieds**
- 54 **Letters to the Editor**
- 55 **New Members**
- 55 **Index of Advertisers**

Features

- 6 **Iain Ballamy** Food for thought, William Upton
- 10 **Charles Hine** Interviewed, Stephanie Reeve
- 13 **Who Are Our Readers?**
Peder Riis-Jensen talks to Stephanie Reeve
- 14 **The Italian Influence** Italy's role in the development of bass clarinet repertoire, Sarah Watts and Rocco Parisi
- 16 **Wolfgang Dietz** An interview with a remarkable clarinet builder, Art Marshall
- 18 **Selecting a Saxophone for Classical and Jazz Performance**
Tracy Heavner
- 20 **Ligature Choices for Clarinet and Saxophone** Did you know there was so much choice?
Chuck Currie
- 23 **Paul Dunmall** Paul reaches 60, John Robert Brown
- 24 **Trinity College London Woodwind Syllabus, 2015 - 2016** Clarinet and saxophone grade one, Stephanie Reeve
- 26 **Soap Box**
The long forgotten art of practising, Sarah Bolter
- 28 **The Chase** Duet to play, Keri Degg
- 30 **Tributes** Paul Vaughan, Buddy de Franco
- 32 **Reports** Hindhead; 10th International Clarinet Competition, Saverio Mercadante, Italy; Fourth European Clarinet Congress
- 34 **Where Can I Play?** Birnam, Perth, Crieff, Callander, Inverurie, Putnoe
- 44 **Caroline Franklyn's New Year Quiz** The answers and winners
- 56 **What Has Music Ever Done For Us?** Final word, Robert Parker



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Jazz fans are famously fond of the 'bag them up and zip them in' approach to pigeonholing musicians. In the case of ECM recording artist Iain Ballamy, however, the critics have a hard time categorising him. Iain's career covers everything from pure-toned folk lyricism with vocalist June Tabor and eclectic electro-acoustic soundscaping with his Anglo-Scandinavian band Food through to concerto performances with the BBC Philharmonic and surreal reinterpretations of popular classics with Norwegian button accordionist Stian Carstensen.



Iain Ballamy Photo: Dave McKean

IAIN BA WITH FO

Across Iain's many projects there's one thing you can't help but latch on to – his signature sound, which manages to be fat, sleek, rubbery, smoky, grainy and smooth, all at once. "Tonally I don't approach playing standards any differently to folk or contemporary music with an orchestra", Iain tells me. "As a saxophone player it's all about your sound. I don't want to put on a funk sound for funk or a trad sound for trad. The challenge becomes finding the music that suits you rather than changing your sound to more-or-less suit the music. That's something that comes with maturity and age – learning to love what you've got, and to make the music that represents and suits you."

In the mid 1980s Iain made his name as a shock-headed wunderkind, part of the first generation of British jazz musicians to take their lead from other homespun and European talent rather than from across the Atlantic. "Luckily for me", he says modestly, "I fell in with a bunch of people who admired the likes of John Taylor, Stan Sulzmann, Kenny Wheeler, Dave Holland and John Surman. At an early age I realised that my path wasn't to become a certified American-style jazz musician. I was born in the wrong place, the wrong time, wrong everything really. But despite this I think I'm firmly in the jazz tradition – a tradition where, having been inspired by the history and legacy of jazz, you learn your craft, gain experience and then seek to make a personal contribution to it yourself with music that hopefully reflects your own life, times and environment. The alternative path, learning to showcase an encyclopaedic musical knowledge encompassing everything from Buddy Bolden to Ornette Coleman, would feel more like becoming a curator of jazz."

This approach is evident in his ironically named Anorak quartet, described knowingly by some as 'left of straight-ahead'. Their album *More Jazz* features idiosyncratic reworkings, or more properly recompositions, of popular jazz standards; *All the Things You Are*, *I Got Rhythm* and *Stella by Starlight* become *Of All the Things*, *I Got Rid of Them* and *St Ella* respectively. "The way I would describe Anorak", Iain says, "is as a doffing of the hat to the mainstream jazz of the post 1950s, what used to be called 'modern' jazz. I've tried to revisit that repertoire and find a personal connection to it. Rather than just taking the

Chuck Currie

Ligature Choices for

I've tested ligatures extensively, including recording them in performance halls. I'm looking for a vibrant, dark, warm, well projected tone with clear articulation on all clarinets and saxophones. I tend to favour the lower partials, but there must be enough presence of upper partials to give a contained ringing sound and project well.

The testing has led me to believe that metal projects better than fabric, leather or string and ligatures that have two vertical rails on the reed surface with nothing touching the edges of the reed, and minimal mouthpiece contact are the best, at least for me. Fabric ligatures and some metal ligatures have too much material in contact with the mouthpiece, dampening the tone, in my opinion and the opinion of those who have listened 'blind' to the recordings I have made.

Beware! Any ligature that has minimal contact with the mouthpiece has issues with slipping on the mouthpiece, especially in an orchestral situation where one is shifting the mouthpiece between A, Bb and C clarinets. A thin mouthpiece patch on the back of the mouthpiece almost totally obviates the problem, but not with all ligatures.

TWO RAIL LIGATURES

Daniel Bonade Inverted



The legendary clarinetist and teacher was the first to design the 'two rail ligature', but unfortunately over a few months of playing, the metal weakens and the circumference of the ligature starts to touch the edges of the reed with a noticeable dampening of the sound. Robert Marcellus, Bonade's most influential student, pioneered cutting out the centre part of the ligature so that there are four shorter rails. This gives the reed more freedom and expression, but at the expense of seating it firmly, since the metal is a little soft, so one loses a little bit of the focused ring in the sound. Articulation is improved a little. These are fine ligatures but need to be replaced once or twice per year, as soon

as the metal tires and starts to contact the edges of the reed.

BG Super Revelation



constricting the mouthpiece.

Amongst the best of the fabric ligatures. Smooth and warm with good projection, very focused, but a little dampened by the fabric

Rovner Versa



all. The thicker the plate - the darker the sound. In addition, there are two "flaps" of fabric that can be pulled out from just under the edges of the plate and placed over the plate, so there are really six different setups. I don't recommend pulling the fabric over the plate, as it just dampens the reed, very warm, but restricted upper partials and less projection.

Rovner Versa X

This latest fabric ligature from Rovner is excellent; the freest and warmest of all those I have tried. I still find the sound very slightly dampened compared to metal ligatures, but I could play any of these fabric ligatures with this one preferred. The Versa ligature with the thin plate configuration is the most similar to this. This ligature also has the fabric flaps that can be pulled out over the metal plate, again not recommended.

BG Traditional



the edge of the reed. I don't know why, but I've found it a little dull and stuffy on every instrument. That includes the gold plated version.

One would think this ligature would work very well indeed. It's modelled directly from the Bonade Ligature and the metal never touches

Vandoren Optimum



uneven reeds. The 'four point' plate will actually dig little holes into the stock of the reed and does not seat it that well on the mouthpiece table. Nice and warm, but lacking 'ring' and clean articulation.

The sideways rails do not work at all in my opinion. They dampen the reed a lot. This is the same rail design as the Vandoren M/O ligatures. Vandoren's promotional material says: 'Two small contact points secure the reed without dampening or restricting its natural vibrations'. I couldn't disagree more. If you switch plates back and forth on the Optimum ligature you can form your own opinion. The plate to use, in my opinion, is the one with two vertical rails. However, there is an awful lot of metal on this ligature and it seems to dampen the sound to me.

Rico H



letter H. A fine ligature, very warm, not quite as much ring, projection or clear articulation as two rails without the horizontal strip of metal. If a player's sound is a little bright, this ligature will ameliorate that. It has the benefit of a very secure fit on the mouthpiece, although that does dampen the sound

This is a direct imitation of the vintage Harrison ligatures. It does have two rails, but they are joined in the middle, forming that

Soap Box: Sarah Bolter

The Long Forgotten Art of Practising

Having just finished another year of teaching, I'm finally getting round to that letter that desperately needs to go out to pupils and parents alike as to what my expectations of them are as far as practice goes. It seems to be that writing on a report that 'they really must get into a practice routine', is not understood as also is the definition of what 'practice' actually is. So many times I speak to the parents and they are defensive of their children and say...

"But I've heard them playing!"...yes, we all like to play things we can or that we know but practising is about improving and working on something that is challenging and will move them forward.

"I got them to practise twice last week.... for 10 minutes!".....wow...well for anything past grade one that wouldn't have even got them through the pieces!

"I don't like pushing them....I think it should be something they want to do!"

I hated practising and am still not that keen, always something else that needs doing, but the end result and my own self discipline keep me motivated (sometimes!). That's something that most people have to learn and rarely are born with.

"They have exams at school" - OK.

However, in this day and age they will have exams probably every term of their educational life, including the possibility of music exams. Build your practice into your timetable alongside revision.

"They don't have time to practise!" - mmm, lots of answers to that one, including the one that can't be repeated, "Why on earth are they here then!", or "Why am I wasting my time". Surprisingly to some, my time and trying to keep my sanity is very important to me!

Teaching is a two way process and you

can only progress if they 'bring something to the table'.

Time for practice can always be found but initially that's about educating the parents into time management and the important role that they play, which hopefully will then pass onto the children. I don't generally have time to clean my house but it's amazing how much I can get done when I know someone's coming to visit, which can be just as stressful and difficult to fit in as getting something prepared for a recital! Actually thinking about it, I think most of my students who have got past the dizzy heights of grade five have had 100% supportive parents. No not the 'pushy parents' but ones who see the value of music and who didn't buckle at the first hurdle. Parents who trusted me, parents who didn't ring me half an hour before a lesson to say they weren't coming, parents who sent their child religiously every week and strangely enough for me, parents that I never had to chase for non-payment!

Why has it become so much harder to get a student to practise these days? Why is music now so low on the priority list in the home as well as at school?

I understand that the opportunities open to children these days are vast and

the world literally is at their fingertips but trying to awaken the passion, determination and drive required to progress just seems so much harder now. I was given the opportunity of taking up one thing: music, dancing or sport. Unfortunately from a very young age I realised that I was not the right build for either dancing or most sports involving running (dangerous for me partaking or anyone watching!), so music it was! Children can now take several minutes to explain why they can't practise. Monday - dancing, Tuesday - swimming, Wednesday - gymnastics, Thursday - drama, Friday - tennis, Saturday and Sunday football and rugby, and that's just the girls! I do understand that the wealth of opportunity should be explored but the phrase 'jack of all trades, master of none' springs to mind.

Distractions

Thinking back to when I was first learning, yes, we did have television, but we only had one set with only three channels. Rarely was there something on that we all wanted to see so you were always looking for something else to do. The phone was in the hallway which meant very little privacy when talking to anyone and you could only use it for emergencies because it was expensive. Seeing and speaking to friends was done at or just after school (unless they lived close by, which wasn't in my case). Weekends were easier, especially Sundays, as nothing was open so it was always a family and friends day, a chance to cycle for miles to see your friends and just sit around and talk. I'm not talking about the 1950s, I'm talking of the 1970s/80s! It doesn't feel that long ago but must sound like the dark ages to children of today. No internet, no social networks, no mobile phones - how did we cope?

Electronic development though, can be