



# BREAKING THE GLASS CLARINET

## Repertoire Contributions

### by Joan Tower and Libby Larsen

Alexandra Doyle compares the clarinet works and compositional perspectives of Tower and Larsen, two composers who broke through the “glass ceiling” of the clarinet world.

by Alexandra Doyle

If ClarinetFest® 2023 was any indication, we live in a time when new music is thriving. As a whole, we clarinetists love to perform works by living composers, and if we have a chance to collaborate with the composer directly, that’s even better. If you want to hear a clarinet piece by a composer of your own nationality or gender, or any other person who reminds you of yourself, you can find it. Not so long ago, that wasn’t the case. Before the late 20th century, nearly all of the repertoire pieces regularly performed by clarinetists were written by European men. Luckily for us, women composers in the 20th century began to push against this glass ceiling, and their works (as well as rediscovered works from generations past) have since become part of our standard catalogue. Two of these women, Joan Tower (b. 1938) and Libby Larsen (b. 1950), were kind enough to join me for Zoom interviews in March 2022 to discuss their ideas on writing for the clarinet and composing in general, as well as a few pieces in more detail.

The pair have been close colleagues for many years. “I think of [the 1980’s] as a time of realization of dreams for which I had no role models. We had to find each other, and we did,” said Larsen. She isn’t sure that she felt like an outsider in the ’80s and ’90s, but in retrospect, she feels a sense of alienation about that time period. “It was really due to the systemic develop-

Photo © Bernard Mindich



Joan Tower

ment of the world of academic composition. [It] didn’t include women at the core. ... There have been women on the edges, the margins, the shadows, for hundreds of years. And I see many more at the center now. We’ll see if the center holds.”

Tower agrees that her experience didn’t feel explicitly sexist at the time, but she also felt like her voice wasn’t breaking through. On the plus side, she feels that the relative anonymity gave her a chance to improve her work without too many eyes watching her. “I was surrounded by these very



Photo by Ann Marsden

Libby Larsen

successful men at a young age, and I just thought that’s the way it was—they were supposed to win and I’m supposed to not be heard. Now that I look back on it, that’s not the way it should have been. ... It was a slow path upwards for me, and I think it was much more rewarding. I’m sort of appreciative, not that it was fair, but for me personally it was actually a blessing.”

While she agrees that it makes sense to consider gender dynamics in terms of her biography, Tower thinks that gender should be left out of the discussion of in-

Example 1: Larsen's *Song Without Words*, measures 16 & 17, © 1983 by E. C. Schirmer Music Company, Inc., a division of ECS Publishing, [www.ecspublishing.com](http://www.ecspublishing.com)

strumental music itself. “Without words, it’s an impossible issue. ... People heard my first big piece, *Sequoia*, and they said I wrote like a man, because it has 64 percussion instruments, and it’s kind of loud. I didn’t like that statement. It was like I had to be embarrassed by the power of my music, and I should never be embarrassed by that power.”

Both Tower and Larsen think of the clarinet as an instrument with immense musical potential and see writing pieces for it as an opportunity to showcase a wide variety of styles—and an opportunity to write some extremely difficult literature.

“I love the clarinet. It’s one of my favorite instruments. It can do everything—it can run around as fast as possible, get dynamics in all registers, it can play short, it can sing; it’s an amazingly powerful and flexible instrument,” said Tower. “[My clarinet concerto] is impossible—it’s the hardest piece I ever wrote.”

Larsen also sees the clarinet as a cultural vehicle for many facets of the American experience. “There are certain acoustic instruments which I think of as instruments that carry the development of our American culture in equitable ways. For instance, the clarinet was taken up by our classical culture. You hear it in the concert hall, in honky tonks and dives and bars. ... You hear it as an instrument that’s expressing so much of who we are in so many ways.”

Both Tower and Larsen prioritize rhythm over pitch in their works. Larsen

said of her development as a composer, “I began to think that it didn’t matter what pitches I chose, if I could capture the ear and the soul of the listener through the use of rhythm.”

Tower has nearly the same idea.

“I put more thought into rhythm and tempo than I do into pitch. I think rhythm is the guiding contextual narrative that makes things happen at the right time, right place, right speed.”

Interestingly, Tower composes with little regard for the traditional theory-based approach to music. “My compositional process is completely organic and intuitive. I don’t trust the logic-based stuff: ‘I’m going to use a tritone and it’s going to modulate to...’ etc. I gave that up a long time ago, because I was in that whole environment of theory, and I was lost right away. I don’t have that kind of brain at all. I tried, but me and theory are parting.”

When she’s composing, Larsen spends most of her time conceptualizing a piece, considering the big picture of the work and “how the music will be in the air,” including imaging the acoustics of the halls where a work might be performed. “When I think I’ve got it, the idea that started at the back of my head has moved right up to the front, and then I’m ready to take my paper and pencils and start writing it out,” she says.

The remainder of this article will discuss four pieces by these composers in greater detail, exploring the composers’ ideas and approaches to the instrument.

These particular works were chosen due to their popularity as well as their similar instrumentation; the featured works include one unaccompanied piece and one work for clarinet and piano from each composer.

### SONG WITHOUT WORDS

Written in 1986 for clarinet and piano, Libby Larsen’s *Song Without Words* memorializes amateur clarinetist Richard Lamberton, the father of one of her childhood friends. The piece was composed for his funeral service, so Larsen did her best to write a piece of music that captures the fleeting, flowing nature of love and the different types of love we can experience during our lives.

“It’s not a marble statue piece; there’s no way to memorialize in stone the soul of a person, and love is ephemeral... I wanted to create a feeling of the emotional traveling that takes place when we’re establishing memories of people who are no longer with us physically.”

The main pitch idea of the work is a tritone resolving to a fifth, which Larsen uses to evoke time and space. She describes the relationship between the clarinet and piano as not a dialogue but a flow, with the clarinet moving in and out of the piano sound, and vice versa (see *Example 1*). *Song Without Words* has a clear ABA structure representing our experience of coming from love and ultimately returning to love, not in a straight line but in a circle without beginning or end. Larsen urges clarinetists working on this piece to

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focus on flowing phrases, without audible beats or overly strict attention to bar lines and other potential phrase disruptions.

### **DANCING SOLO**

A four-movement piece for unaccompanied clarinet, *Dancing Solo* was completed in 1995 and still sounds unbelievably fresh. Anyone who’s worked on this piece knows that it’s a challenge, but luckily for us, Larsen knew the anxiety this piece might produce. “Accuracy is your job, but making music is what needs to happen. I would write into the score if I wanted to hear the pitches very specifically. Accuracy is part of the preparation; it shouldn’t be

part of the performance. The energy is the most important.”

Caroline Hartig, now professor of clarinet at The Ohio State University, commissioned this piece from Larsen. In the process of writing it, Hartig went to stay at Larsen’s house for several days and did almost nothing but play her clarinet, just so that Larsen could get an idea of Hartig’s sound.

“I wanted to listen to her practice and play: play me something you love, play something difficult, play something you hate, to find out where the crossroads was. We did that, and my mind just exploded. I thought, ‘That’s American playing.’ I hadn’t heard those colors before. She never put the clarinet down except for eating.”

The piece relies heavily on easily-recognized jazz idioms, such as swinging rhythms, vibrato, sudden and intense dynamic shifts, and ostinato patterns. It was inspired by jazz pianist Oscar Peterson (1925-2007) and legendary dancer Fred Astaire (1899-1987), especially Astaire’s improvisations.

The first movement, “with shadows,” specifically references Astaire in a black-and-white movie improvising a dance with his own shadow on the wall next to him. Larsen emphasized that the long tones in the movement are not the shadows—a common misconception. The opening run provides a pitch-based motive for the entire work.

The image shows a musical score for the clarinet, specifically measures 12 through 20 of the piece "Dancing Solo" by John Larsen. The score is written on a single staff in treble clef. It features several distinct rhythmic and melodic patterns. The first measure (12) starts with a triplet of eighth notes, followed by a series of eighth notes. The second measure (13) is marked "straight" and contains a sequence of eighth notes. The third measure (14) has a slur over it and includes a sixteenth-note triplet. The fourth measure (15) is marked "L" and "R" and contains a sequence of eighth notes. The fifth measure (16) is marked "L" and "R" and contains a sequence of eighth notes. The sixth measure (17) is marked "5" and contains a sequence of eighth notes. The seventh measure (18) is marked "swing pulse 8" and contains a sequence of eighth notes. The eighth measure (19) is marked "f" and contains a sequence of eighth notes. The ninth measure (20) is marked "pulse 4" and contains a sequence of eighth notes. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, triplets, and dynamic markings.

Example 2: Larsen’s *Dancing Solo*, “eight to the bar,” measures 12 through 20, © 1994, Oxford University Press

Example 3: Tower's *Fantasy... those harbor lights*, cadenza at measure 351, © 1983 by Associated Music Publishers (BMI) New York, NY

“Eight to the bar” follows, which Larsen conceived as “the elegance of waiting.” A great tap dancer or rapper will keep the beat while they consider their next move, and the vibrato pulses between rapid-fire passages in this movement evoke the same musical treading of water (see *Example 2*).

The third movement is “in ten slow circles,” and it uses elements of serialism to create these circles marked by slurs in the part. Almost all of the circles begin with pitch class set [0, 3, 7, 11] when transposed to T0, meaning that when they are transposed to start on the same pitch, the following three notes are the same. Notably, circle five ends with [11, 7, 3, 0],

creating a sense of symmetry in the middle of the movement. Larsen confirmed that, while unusual for her, this use of serialism was intentional. She wanted to see if she could compose a circle that would be audible to the listener.

The work ends with “flat out,” described by Larsen as “not like an argument, more like you’re held in place and breaking free from it. Dangerous, and like you could be out of control at any second.” Larsen likes to drive too fast, and this movement should embody that feeling.

On the whole, Larsen says, “Beware of thinking of this piece as a technical chal-

lenge—it’s a piece about what it’s like to be alive in the virtuosic world in which we live.”

To read more about *Dancing Solo*, consult Caroline Hartig’s “Master Class” article in *The Clarinet* 30 no. 1.

### **FANTASY . . . THOSE HARBOR LIGHTS**

Written in 1989 for Richard Stolzman, Joan Tower’s *fantasy . . . those harbor lights* is a single-movement work for clarinet and piano, more in the style of a sonata than a concerto. By coincidence, both of the duo works discussed in this article are about love, albeit two very different kinds of love.

Tower wrote this piece in honor of the memory of her first love. Although she was born in New York, her family spent some of her formative years living in Peru. When she was 16 years old, Tower fell in love with an American Marine who was stationed in the same city. Unfortunately, her father became infected with tuberculosis around the same time, and her family left Peru to return home and seek medical attention for her father.

“Leaving him was so painful,” Tower said. “They played our song, ‘I’ll Be Loving You Always,’ as the ship was about to leave, and that became part of this piece.” You can hear quotes from the song within

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# Wings

Joan Tower

for Solo B♭ Clarinet\*

♩ = 40-44

♩ = 80-88

Meno mosso ♩ = ca. 66

*(pp)* molto legato

*pp* delicate and clear (grace notes should not be too fast)

Example 4: Tower's *Wings*. © 1983 Associated Music Publishers, Inc., New York

the cadenza (see Example 3), and there is a jitterbug-style section with a boogie bass line that represents the couple dancing together. The opening of the work begins with a slow, soft piano motif embodying the rocking of the ship on the waves as Tower left her Marine behind.

## WINGS

One of the most frequently performed unaccompanied clarinet pieces of the late 20th century, *Wings* (1981) was written for Laura Flax after Tower heard her play Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time* in numerous performances with the Da Capo Chamber Players, in which Tower played the piano. "That piece affected my way of thinking about time, which directly had an impact on *Wings*. It starts out with a very long note, which was directly from Messiaen." (See Example 4.)

*Wings* went through a few other titles before the final iteration. Initially, it was called *Panthers* because of the way Flax could creep around the clarinet, powerful yet stealthy. Then, the work developed several soaring motives, and Tower changed

the title to *Falcons*, eventually landing on *Wings*.

"I am concerned with the narrative of the action of music... How the music moves physically, up and down and in time. That's how I propel it forward: I'm very concerned with height, is it going up, staying, or falling. *Wings* was a significant turning point for me and gave me the confidence to keep exploring those corners of action," said Tower.

To read more about *Wings*, consult Rebecca Rischin's "Master Class" article in *The Clarinet* 26 no. 2.

## CONCLUSION

These works are related not only by their composers' similarities, but also by their musical similarities. The importance of rhythm and time without too much emphasis on beat is representative of our time in music history, and it perhaps speaks to the qualities of the modern clarinet that these pieces bear so much similarity to one another. Joan Tower's parting words for clarinetists were to compose occasionally, even if you don't know how, and even if the piece never sees the light of day. She

believes that dipping our toes into the water of other facets of music will help all of us become better musicians and more understanding colleagues. ♪♪



Dr. Alexandra Doyle is an adjunct professor of music at Sinclair College and Thomas More University, where she teaches clarinet lessons and academic music courses, as well as coaching the TMU Chamber Winds. She is also on faculty at the Stivers School for the Arts and is the author of a chapter on women performers in Oxford's forthcoming *Handbook of Wind Music*. Alex is a Vandoren Artist-Clinician and works for the Taneycomo Festival Orchestra as both clarinetist and marketing director. She earned her graduate degrees from the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music and her bachelor's degrees from the University of Houston.