

Bill Connor's new work for bass clarinet, *Sciamachy Ohne Schatten*, is perhaps unique in that it has not one but two different accompaniments, one for wind orchestra and a completely rewritten piano accompaniment. Both versions were premiered by Andrew Roberts last year, a journey not without challenges due to injury and illness. Stephanie Reeve met up with Roberts, who is also an experienced technician and repairer, to find out more

# SHADOW BOXING

**SR** How did the piece come about?

**AR** The Maghull Wind orchestra (MWO), conducted by a former Liverpool Hope University student of mine, Phil Shotton, was performing as part of a BASBWE (The British Association of Symphonic Bands and Wind Ensembles) conference at Scarisbrook Hall School. Bill Connor was also taking part in the event. I performed the *Schindler's List* theme on clarinet with MWO and a party piece of mine: the Béla Kovács solo work *Homage à Manuel de Falla* on bass clarinet. Bill came to me afterwards and said, 'I never realised the bass clarinet had such an amazing palette of colours, and the range – I've never heard anything like it! How about a concerto?' He emailed me a week or two later saying that he had already started something. I replied saying I couldn't afford to commission him. He replied, 'No money, just possibilities.' Those were his exact words. The work was also commissioned by MWO to be part of the concert for its 40th year celebrations, which in itself was amazing. I don't know of any other community band that has thrived for that long in the UK.

**SR** Tell me about Bill Connor.

**AR** Bill is currently chairman of BASBWE and based in Lancashire. I knew of him and had worked with him through his outstanding education work. He's a great believer in going into the junior schools and getting kids involved in improvising, although I was quite adamant that I don't improvise! Having worked with

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some of the biggest film music names like Hans Zimmer and John Williams, Bill now has a contract to compose for Disney. He's worked for Granada TV and written a lot of TV jingles, theme tunes and incidental music. He is quite literally globe-trotting most of the time, with a completely packed schedule.



Bill Connor, Andrew Roberts and Phil Shotton

**SR** Does the concerto sound like film music, perhaps with an element of Disney?

**AR** Not at all. If I'm honest it surprised me because it was in a contemporary idiom and really quite taxing for me and the wind orchestra. The process was fascinating, and I felt privileged to be working with Bill. I was amazed to see him work, often at a lightning speed, moving sections of music around and changing orchestrations or registers for the best effect. I've been very fortunate in my playing career but I have to say this was one of the most special times – spending hours with Bill in his music room (well, shed, actually!), poring over scores and three large computer screens, listening to the music come alive. It was an honour to work with Bill in such close proximity. He gave many hours of his precious time to make sure that we were both happy with the end result.

Bill was very organised. He regularly sent me wav files of the draft versions. He was writing beyond the normal range of the instrument, so I found fingerings and said, 'This is doable, this is what it sounds like – I might not guarantee it every time though!' He felt the notes were less important as long as the gesture and the overall shape were there.

**SR** Where did the title come from?

**AR** Bill came up with the title *Sciamachy* and said from the very beginning that he wanted to exploit really big jumps and dramatic changes. Probably the nearest translation you can get for *sciamachy* is shadow boxing – fighting an imaginary enemy. Jokingly I said he should add '*Ohne Schatten*', which means without a shadow, as in *Die Frau Ohne Schatten*, the opera by Richard Strauss. Bill really liked the idea. He slightly changed the

title for the piano reduction, which became *Sciamachy: Schatten Suche*, which means searching for the shadow.

SR So how did the Concerto evolve?

AR It was quite a long process because Bill's diary was so full. It began in November 2016 and took quite a long time to evolve, but by October 2017 we had something of a structure we could work with. By January 2018 Bill had got quite a lot of it ready, and by April 2018 the wind orchestra version was completed. It was always going to be challenging for band because it's rhythmically not straightforward. Unfortunately I missed out on the opportunity to perform it as a concerto with wind orchestra at ClarinetFest due to logistical problems, so I asked Bill if he felt he could make a piano reduction as there was still an opportunity for a performance with piano.

redesigned needing less effort to operate the pinky keys and play down to low C. The tuning was also better in many ways if not quite perfect! I already had a fabulous Blashaus crook at that point, which worked just as well on the Privilege.

I had to gradually rebuild my new Privilege. The first stage was actually taking it apart and waxing the body for three weeks to try and protect it from cracking. That's lots of coats of wax polished into it. It shows just how dry the wood really was, which is a big issue. If wood isn't seasoned properly it can crack. I have developed a unique design for the bass clarinet pads, which make an immense amount of difference, so I fitted these too.

I also experimented with the bell. A long time ago I made a wooden bell. My father-in-law used to be a piano technician and organ repairer, and he gave me an old Bosendorfer piano leg to work on. At that stage I wasn't equipped with the machinery I have now and it ended up two inches too short! Making wooden bells for bass clarinets often comes down to finding appropriately sized wood, especially as grenadilla is now a protected species. I didn't want to go through that again, so I had the original bell silver plated to more than twice its weight – expensive, but I'm glad to say that when it was done it was extremely worthwhile.

SR How did it change the sound?

AR It was a real challenge competing with a 101-piece wind orchestra – I just had to get everything right with the instrument. I had a mouthpiece from Brad Behn that he made specifically for me to use with Légère reeds, which worked brilliantly.

With the combination of the

Blashaus crook and the new heavy bell it was then just a case of trying to build the projection.

I believe there is some real advantage in the increased mass of the instrument, and both the crook and the bell really emphasise the harmonics and increase projection.

There's a misconception among many clarinet players that a big sound at close quarters will be big sound in a large hall, and it isn't true. I believe there is a focus and centre that you get from incorporating extra harmonics in the sound. British players generally find they don't like too many harmonics in their sound, preferring a fundamental-based tone quality. However, harmonics are undoubtedly the means to great projection, even at very quietest dynamics. It almost dirties the sound a bit, but those harmonics make the sound carry in larger acoustics. The bass clarinet has different harmonics to the ordinary clarinet, which give it a unique and powerful sound with a wonderful range of colours.

SR And then you were then ill just a few days before the performance?

AR Yes. I went into the Philharmonic Hall to test the acoustics. It felt great, and I recorded with my Zoom recorder at the back of the hall. When I'd finished I went to get the Zoom and couldn't get back on the platform! I ended up in hospital for five days with a perforated bowel, the week just before the concert! Thankfully we'd had a number of rehearsals beforehand. I came out of hospital on the Thursday and we had to make a decision →



Bill sees the reduction as a departure from the concerto – not intended to be a piano reduction in fact, but a reduction of the ideas with the same solo materials in a different environment

SR So all was going to plan?

AR Actually, no. I had an accident in December 2017 and sustained an injury to my right hand pinky finger. After resting the injury and consulting with a specialist I came back to playing to find I was struggling with quite a lot of stuff in the low register. My instrument worked well but it took quite a bit of pressure to operate the six pinky finger keys in the right hand and was just too painful. I was upset because I thought I wouldn't be able to perform this great new work.

Fortunately, I spoke with the bass clarinetist Sarah Watts about my problem and she very kindly said, 'Why don't you try the Selmer Privilege bass and see if it helps. I've got a spare one.' So she left it with me for three months. I also met with Erik Claeys from Selmer and he offered to take me to the factory to select an instrument, but the earliest appointment they had was 10 May. As the concert was 17 June, that didn't leave me enough time to work on setting up a new bass. However, Erik told me that Windstruments in Bradford actually had four of them. My friend, a genius flute maker, Willy Simmons, came along as another pair of ears and we picked one out. There was something about the sound that we really made it 'the one', and the tuning was pretty close if not perfect. So I bought it.

SR So how different was the Privilege to your old Selmer?

AR I used to play a Selmer 37, from around 1985. I'd worked on it extensively over the years. The Privilege keywork has been

about whether I was able to play. Both Phil and Bill were adamant that if there was a risk I shouldn't do it. The medical team said that I had made a good recovery and were reasonably happy for me to play. Bill was so supportive as a composer potentially losing an opportunity to have his work performed. He might have put pressure on me but he didn't.

**SR** How did the performance go?

**AR** I walked on and walked off and I don't remember much in between. Fortunately it was videoed because I had no recollection of how it felt and how I responded. I just got through it and was totally knackered by the end. It took me a week to listen to it and I was quite surprised because the balance was really good. You could hear everything from the bass clarinet clearly. The wind orchestra managed a tricky score well under the expert guidance of Phil. We're hoping that it will get more airings, perhaps at a forthcoming BASBWE event.

I was amazed to see Bill work, often at a lightning speed, moving sections of music around and changing orchestrations or registers for the best effect

**SR** Tell me more about the piano reduction.

**AR** I asked Bill if he could make a reduction for piano to perform at ClarinetFest. He had it ready in just a week with a totally different accompaniment – the version he retitled *Schiamachy: Schatten Suche*. Again, he sent me a wav file so I could learn it, which I then sent to the accompanist, Chen-Lin Fan. She said, 'Er, this is quite difficult!' Anyway, she did a brilliant job of it in the concert. Bill sees the reduction as a departure from the concerto – not intended to be a piano reduction in fact, but a reduction of the ideas with the same solo materials in a different environment. A bit like the same person being transported into a different place and time.

**SR** Is either version likely to be published?

**AR** I don't see why not. Bill did talk about extending it to symphony orchestra, so I think he sees it as a malleable work. In structural terms it is a fight in which the bass should be overwhelmed by the accompaniment at some points. This was successful with the 101-piece wind orchestra, although perhaps less so with the piano reduction, which might have been my fault having beefed up my bass sound so much! However, compressing the work by ten minutes and changing things from the wind band version that wouldn't have worked so well in the piano version made it much more effective. A few people who have heard both versions have told me that they prefer the piano version in some ways because it's structurally tighter. ■

You can watch the premiere performance of *Sciamachy Ohne Schatten* recorded at the Liverpool Philharmonic hall on 17 June 2018 here: <https://youtu.be/9M1B700nOuU> (or visit YouTube and use the search function).

[www.theclarinet.co.uk](http://www.theclarinet.co.uk)

✉ [aroberts@theclarinet.co.uk](mailto:aroberts@theclarinet.co.uk)

☎ +44 7968 555534

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