

Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue for Bass Clarinet

When clarinet players think of Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue, we conjure up thoughts of the opening glissando. I, like most of my colleagues, have spent many hours practicing that solo as a student. But there is another part in this piece that, although not as famous, exposed or as difficult, is nonetheless more controversial.

There are two versions of the orchestration for Rhapsody in Blue: the original, written for the Paul Whiteman Aeolian Hall jazz concert (jazz band version), and the more commonly played version for full orchestra. The reason for the controversy is that in the original jazz band version, the bass clarinet solo is written in the lower octave of the bass clarinet, and it is a solo, that is, all by itself. However, in the orchestra version it is written an octave higher, but it is now doubled an octave lower by the cello section in the original bass clarinet register. (Are you confused yet?). Many players prefer to play it in the original lower octave, but I like it in the higher octave as orchestrated by Ferde Grofé. Should this passage be played in the original jazz band version, or should it be performed as Grofé orchestrated it for full orchestra?

There are compelling reasons for both, so you will have to form your own opinion. The first time I played this part in 1963, my first year in the BSO, I did not know of the "tradition" of playing it an octave lower. I practiced it as written and rehearsed it that way. After the rehearsal, the second clarinet player, Gordon Miller, praised me for it but said my predecessors all played it an octave lower and that is was easier that way. I went home and listened to my recording of the Philadelphia Orchestra, Eugene Ormandy conductor, with Oscar Levant, piano. This on a state-of-the-art Columbia recording. I was not able to tell anything because I could not hear the bass clarinet or the cellos over the piano. So I looked over the score and decided that my way, the way Grofé wrote it, was the correct way. Now keep in mind that I have since played this piece with dozens of conductors and pianists, from the world famous to the unknown, and not once have any of them ever asked me to play it in the lower octave. We play this at least once a year. The exception was when we do the original version, without cellos, then I play it as written in the lower octave.

If you play it in the lower octave you are in the same octave as the cellos, and in a live performance the bass clarinet cannot project over the entire cello section to sound like a “solo”. But playing it an octave higher than the cello section, as written, the bass clarinet becomes the “solo” voice as Grofé intended with the cellos just adding color in much the same way the double basses add color and depth to the cello section in orchestral writing. Ferde Grofé knew what he was doing when he separated the octaves. The problem is that when you hear a modern recording, the bass clarinet may dominate in either octave because it can be engineered to the dynamic the conductor or recording engineer wants. You can’t get the same effect at a live performance unless you blast or the conductor insists that the cellos play softly to let the bass clarinet come through, little chance of that happening.

Now, if you go to an audition and this is given you should learn it both ways. You should probably ask the proctor if the committee has a preference, and if not, you should probably play it in the lower octave if there is nothing to indicate which way to play it in the music, but be prepared to play it higher if asked.