

The Golden Age of the Bass Clarinet

By Edward Palanker

Several years ago a player came to me for a few lessons because he thought his tone was a bit on the bright side and a little small. At our first few lessons I worked with him getting to open up his throat more so he didn't constrict as much and to use a little stronger reed and more breath support. Then shortly after he showed up with the neck and bell of his bass clarinet gold plated. At that point I thought it looked sort of funny and I really didn't think it made any difference, he disagreed. I suggested he try some different mouthpiece, let him try a few of mine, and thought some of them made a big difference. I must admit that my reaction to the "Golden" bass clarinet was not a positive one. I encouraged him to purchase a different mouthpiece in the near future but never heard from him again. I suppose my suggestion, or reaction to his "gold" plating was not to his liking. A few summers ago, in 2005, I called Morrie Backun about getting a wooden bell for my Selmer bass. I tried one that year and thought it was interesting enough to purchase one. He told me I would have to send him the bell of my bass when he gets a large enough piece of wood to make it for me, and that the cost was now about twice what it was when I first inquired. Since I only have the one bass, I know, I should have a back up, I decided not to do it because the only time I could send him the bell was a short period of time in the summer during our symphony vacation and he couldn't guarantee me that time slot would work. Besides, I found out that I couldn't fit the bell in my case, and the last thing I needed was to have to carry my bell separately along with my bass, double case and of course my beer and pretzels. Hey, you got to have a beer or two on the trip back from a run out concert. So I thought about the flute players with their gold flutes, gold head joints or embouchure plates so I decided to go for the gold instead. Heck, it cost a third the price of the wooden bell back then and I had it back in three weeks during my summer vacation. I love it. Two coats of 24K gold, the true golden age of the bass clarinet.

Over the years I'd often get the compliment, you know, that instrument really sounds great, to which I would usually respond, how about the player? Now when someone says, your instrument is

beautiful, I simply say, thank you. It is amazing how many complements my golden bass clarinet gets. I've even been told what a beautiful saxophone I have, oh well; I took it as a compliment anyway. It was well worth the price just for the celebrity, besides, it was a tax deduction.

Now the big question is does it really make a difference? I honestly can't say if it does or not. Perhaps if I could play it the way it was and then the way it is now I might be able to tell but I can't do that so I can only say, maybe, but it sure looks good, all shiny and bright.

I think it may make the altissimo register sound a little richer, which is what I was really hoping for, you know, those awful notes above the fourth E. I really don't like those notes much. I don't mind going up to the G or even the G# occasionally but beyond that, maybe the reference to a saxophone becomes realistic. Of course a good reed, open throat, good breathe support and keeping my tongue in the proper position helps, but I still don't like them.