

Is there a typical orchestral clarinet tone?

The Webster's dictionary definition of typical is #1 "characteristic of an individual" or #2 "displaying the essential characteristics of a group". I think that covers about everyone, don't you?

I read a review a few years ago about a clarinet recital. The reviewer stated that the performer had "a typical orchestral sound". So what is a typical orchestral sound? Is there really such a thing? I happen to know the performer and he gets a very nice sound. Knowing his sound, I know what the reviewer meant by his statement. The trouble is there are so many good clarinet sounds today, which one is the "typical one"? If he's talking about world orchestras, forget it. There are so many different concepts of sound around the world, that there can't possibly be a "typical" one. I assume the reviewer was referring to the American orchestral sound. So what is a typical orchestral sound? Is it bright, dark, mellow, harsh, big, small, what? Well that's what you have to decide for yourself. I have my vision of what the typical sound is, but I prefer a slightly darker sound.

Let me start when the American clarinet sound got it's beginning. The two players I believe to be the most influential for developing that sound, were Simone Bellison and Daniel Bonade. I consider them to be the grandfathers of the American orchestral clarinet sound. Both of them taught almost all of the famous American clarinet teachers and players of the next generation. It seems there is now a blending of their tonal heritage. From what I have heard via word of mouth, as well as from some old recordings, Bonard appeared to have a rich, pure sound and Bellison seemed to have a big, almost rougher or reedier sound. I've heard a story that Bellison was quoted in saying, when asked about the extraneous noise in his sound when heard up close, "I don't play for the second clarinetist, he just wants my job anyway, and I play for the conductor". I don't know how true that is but it makes for a good story, spread the rumor. I never had the privilege of hearing either one of them in person so this is all hear say. Of course there were many others that had an influence on the development of the American orchestral sound. Some of them were, Lindemann, Polatschek. Christmann and Duques and I'm sure several others.

Following Bonade and Bellison, came the next generation of players and teachers. Representing six of America's finest orchestra's were Ralph McLane, in Philadelphia eventually followed by Anthony Gigilioti, and now by Ricardo Morales, Robert McGinnis in NY followed my Stanley Drucker, Robert Marcellus in Cleveland followed by David Schifrin and now Frank Cohen, Clark Brody in Chicago and now Larry Combs and John Bruce Yea, Harold Wright in Boston and now William Hudgins, and Kalman Bloch in LA and now Michelle Zukovsky. Of course there are many other orchestras in America with great clarinetists but these are six of the most prominent. Which of these clarinetists has or had the "typical" American clarinet sound? Which one fits the Webster dictionaries first definition, and does that mean all the others fit into the second definition? If you're familiar with these players you will have to agree that there is a great

variety of clarinet sounds, both past and present. Makes you wonder if there is a typical sound or ever was. I think there is a typical type of sound, but there are also a great variety of tone qualities in our orchestras, and lets be grateful for that. I think what people think of as the typical clarinet sound came from the generation following the two master teachers. But if you listen to what's happening to that sound in the past few generations of players, you will hear a change in the wind, or the reed in this case. In my opinion it is getting darker and warmer though a large number of players still seek that "typical" clarinet sound of old. The American sound has certainly had a major influence on the worlds clarinet sound through recordings and tours, but it is obvious to this writer that the opposite has occurred as well. I think many of the worlds clarinet sounds have become more focused and richer and the American sound has have become fuller and darker.

When I asked my principal teacher Leon Russianoff, who studied with both Bonade and Bellison, who I should try to sound like he said, like Eddie Palanker, yourself. He said to me, "have you ever heard two great singers sound alike? Why would you want to sound like someone else?" Good point, especially coming from a teacher that produced so many great players playing in American orchestras that do not sound alike, but sound so good. So what is the typical American orchestral clarinet sound? I think it's the one that has the characteristics of an individual you would most like to emulate. You know, the one that you think sounds the best.