

Aston Magna concerts begin with rare baroque reed

By Andrew L. Pincus, Special to Berkshires Week Berkshire Eagle

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GREAT BARRINGTON -- The chalumeau is to the clarinet what the recorder is to the flute -- except that you can still hear the recorder played in public but the chalumeau, almost never.

The obsolete instrument will emerge from the history books Saturday night when Aston Magna opens its season with a program titled, "The Art of the Chalumeau." Eric Hoeprich, who has performed on the baroque clarinet several times in the early-music series, will be featured in a concerto and various ensemble pieces.

"The chalumeau appears to have come out of the blue -- invented by Johann Christoph Denner, c.1700," Hoeprich, who lives in England, wrote in an email. "It was made in four sizes, not unlike the recorder, but the smallest, the soprano, seems to have found favor with composers, possibly due to its higher and more penetrating timbre."

Made of wood, few original chalumeaux have survived. In the 6 p.m. program at Simon's Rock, Hoeprich will play a replica he made of a soprano instrument. He'll be joined in the program by baroque oboist Stephen Hammer, soprano Kristen Watson and a string ensemble.

The centerpiece of the program is a chalumeau concerto by Johann Friedrich Fasch. Hoeprich will also be heard in the accompaniment to an aria from Vivaldi's opera "Juditha triumphans" and in other pieces, all composed for chalumeau. Vivaldi, for one, composed extensively for it.

The chalumeau lasted only until the late 18th century, when the clarinet eclipsed it. Like the usual clarinet, it is cylinder topped with a single reed, but the addition of keys to the clarinet, supplementing finger holes, allowed it to cover a wider range.

Composers promptly went for the newfangled instrument. Mozart's 1789 Clarinet Quintet and 1791 Clarinet Concerto are among the early examples.

Enter Hoeprich, who not only collects historic clarinets - he has more than 100 of them - but also makes replicas for modern use. One of his copies is of the basset (low-pitched) clarinet that Anton Stadler, for whom Mozart composed his quintet and concerto, used in performing them.

A bit of sleuth work was required. Stadler's instrument is lost but Hoeprich worked from an engraving he discovered that depicted the instrument as used in a 1794 concert in Riga, Latvia. On the replica, he has performed and recorded the Mozart quintet with Aston Magna musicians and recorded both the quintet and concerto in Europe.

"He is one of my highly esteemed and favorite colleagues," Aston Magna director and violinist Daniel Stepner said in a phone interview. They first met in 1980 when they, along with Stepner's frequent partners Laura Jeppesen (viola da gamba and Stepner's wife) and John Gibbons (harpsichord), joined Frans Brüggen's Orchestra of the 18th Century in Holland.

All were founding members of the pioneering group, which is still active today. Hoeprich was principal

clarinetist.

Hoeprich is American, born in Baltimore. He began the clarinet at 7, graduated from Harvard and lived for 30 years in Amsterdam before settling in Bedfordshire, just north of London.

He is the author of the authoritative study "The Clarinet" and teaches at the Paris Conservatory, the Royal Conservatory in The Hague and Indiana University's Early Music Institute. He performs mostly in Europe.

"He's had this remarkable traveling career," Stepner said, yet partly because of state support for the arts, "Europe has much more work for him" than his home country.

The chalumeau is one of many instruments left behind in the march of progress. Perhaps the most famous example is the arpeggione, a bizarre six-stringed instrument remembered mostly for the famous sonata Schubert composed for it. The piece is usually played on the cello. The viola da gamba was superseded by the cello but, like the recorder, regularly appears in early-music performance because of the large volume of literature left for it by Bach and other composers.

If Hoeprich's Mozart clarinet is a copy, the 19th-century instrument that he uses to play Brahms' chamber works is the real thing. It originally belonged to Richard Mühlfeld, for whom Brahms composed those works.

"Playing Brahms on a period instrument is a wonderful experience," Hoeprich wrote, "just as it is to experience any great music via the instruments from the composer's milieu."

And the chalumeau isn't entirely dead. On a commission from Hoeprich, Dutch composer Pim Moorer wrote a piece for chalumeau and orchestra that Hoeprich premiered in 2012 in Belgium. Perhaps appropriately, it's titled "Nachspiel" -- "epilogue."

If you go ...

What: The Art of the Chalumeau (early clarinet) with clarinetist Eric Hoeprich will introduce the chalumeau, as part of the Aston Magna Concert Series

When: Thursday, Friday and Saturday at 6 p.m.

Where: Bard College at Simon's Rock, 84 Alford Rd., Great Barrington

Admission: Prices range from \$20 to \$50

Information: ashtonmagna.org or 413-528-0100