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The role of the contrabassoon
An examination of the development of the contrabassoon through orchestra excerpts

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Abstract:

An examination of the role and musical development of the contrabassoon throughout the different periods. The study is being made through analyzing various common orchestra excerpts, both in themselves and in relation to the scores. Furthermore, the thesis contains my own ideas of and reflections on the excerpts.

In the end I will briefly touch the subject of how the contrabassoon is being used in contemporary pieces and how it is constantly being developed.

Introduction:

In this thesis I will examine and describe the role of the contrabassoon through the ages in Western classical music tradition as seen through the eyes of a contrabassoonist. I will analyze the musical development of the contrabassoon through famous solos and audition repertoire and in addition to the description of the pieces I will give my personal take on the excerpts. I have chosen this topic and this focus because I have always had a fondness for the contrabassoon, and I chose to specialize in it during my studies. The contrabassoon is often a little misunderstood and not very highly regarded. Until recently most auditions for positions with contra did not even include contra playing in the audition! The successful candidate was just supposed to learn it on the go. I have long wanted to give the contrabassoon a sort of renaissance and to contribute in making the instrument a lyrical one as well. In recent years many good contrabassoonists have appeared and nowadays there are even solo pieces and concertos being written for contrabassoon.

I will begin the paper with a short history of the development of the contrabassoon and a description of the instrument. Then the paper will be
divided into paragraphs focusing on the different epochs with a short introduction on each composer and their pieces. In all the paragraphs I will be providing an example of the contrabassoon solo or excerpt and also smaller cuts from the full score to show the solo in context.

I have primarily chosen to focus on compositions I have played myself in the orchestra or prepared for auditions.

A short history of the development of the contrabassoon:

The development of the modern bassoon and contrabassoon can be traced back to the 16th century when the shawm family was common through Europe. They contained the bombardes or pommers, which where straight, conical tubes and a mouthpiece with a double reed. The family included instruments from the third octave above middle C (treble shawm, the direct antecedent of the oboe) to the contraoctave (great bass shawm). The latter had reached their limits of development, since it was at this point almost 3 meters long and extremely unwieldy.

In the middle of the 16th century the U-shaped body was introduced, which made the instruments easier to handle. The body was made from hollowed-out wood, and due to its mellow sound, it was called dulcian – “sweet-sounder”.

The dulcians came in several sizes and tuning, and they are the direct precursors of the modern-day bassoons.

In the middle of the 17th century instrument makers in several places in Europe began constructing the dulcian, which had until now been made of a single piece of wood, in four parts: wing joint, boot, long joint and bell. A third key was added to the two that the dulcian had, and the bassoon was born.
The oldest surviving contrabassoon is now in Leipzig and dates from 1714. It is about 2.7 m high and inscribed “Andreas Eichentopf in Northausen 1714”. It is modeled on the contemporary bassoon and therefore has four parts and three keys. The range went down as far as C4 (according to some sources Bb5), but was not fully chromatic.

In the early 18th century, the contrabassoon was scored in church music as a reinforcement of the double-bass.

In the fourth version (1749) of his St. John Passion Bach asks for a low contrabassoon (bassono grosso) with a range of C1–Eb3. Before this, Johann Friedrich Fasch had scored for a contre bassono in his Fantasie für Bläser (ca. 1740). Today the pieces are rarely performed with contrabassoon though.

The contrabassoon came in a variety of forms, depending on the maker and the place. Mendelssohn scored for a so-called serpent and in France the sarrusophone was the local version.

The bassoon makers Heckel Biebrich stood for the development of what is considered the modern contrabassoon.

Historical overview paraphrased from the Vienna Symphonic Library.¹

The physics and characteristics of the contrabassoon:

The contrabassoon is the biggest and lowest member of the woodwind family. It is fundamentally similar to the bassoon but sounding an octave below. The biggest contrabassoons from the Heckel-manufacturers go down to subcontra A (A0), which is the lowest note on a full piano, and lower than any other orchestra instrument can go. Most of the contrabassoons only extend down to the B flat right above.

Below is photo of a baroque contrabassoon next to a modern day Heckel-contrabassoon. It is very easy to see why the instrument was

¹ Vienna Symphonic Library, “Contrabassoon – history”.
considered very impractical and difficult to deal with!

The third picture is a contrabassoon built in Milan in 1732 by the Italian woodwind maker Joannes Maria Anciuti. The bell is formed like a dragon’s head and the tongue rattles when the instrument is being played.\textsuperscript{2}

\textsuperscript{2} Beatus Musicus
The Classics – Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven

In the time of the classical composers the contrabassoon was almost exclusively used as a harmonic bassline, doubling the basses and celli. The instrument was rather new, and the possibilities were yet to be explored. There were few to none independent entrances.

Mozart did not use the contrabassoon very much, except for one composition: ‘Maurisches Trauermusik’ and it is not so often played, so I will not be going into further details with that.

The compositions I wish to analyze will be Joseph Haydn’s ‘The Creation’ and Ludwig van Beethoven’s Symphony number 5.

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809):

One of the most famous moments for contrabassoon is from Haydn’s *The Creation*. It is an oratorio from 1798 inspired by Händel’s *Messiah*.

The piece describes the creation of the world based on the Christian biblical writing, the Book of Genesis, and is divided into three parts. It begins in the disorder and formlessness before the creation, then the six days of creation, and ending with Adam and Eve.

In the aria 22 “Nun scheint der in vollem Glanze der Himmel” the two bassoons and the contrabassoon enter on a ff low B flat sounding in octaves with the accompanying text: “By heavy beasts the ground is trod.”

What better way to let heavy animals tread than to make three bassoons play their lowest note as loud as possible!
Another humoristic touch from Haydn’s hand is in the recitativo number 21 when the angel Raphael sings about the lion that roars with joy. Two trombones and the contrabassoon enter with a fortissimo chord but when Raphael says ‘brüllend’ (roars), the contra finishes alone with all the strings. It is a delightful way of painting pictures with tones.

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3 Haydn, *The Creation*, 128
The piece itself is not very often listed on auditions for contrabassoon, but it happens from time to time. See example below.

It is obvious that Haydn wrote this contrabassoon part as double of the bassline. The style is baroque and early classicism with a clear rhythmical and harmonical motor. It goes relatively high – up to G3 but not lower than F2.

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4 Haydn, The Creation, 123
This kind of music is both fun and challenging to play. It is not overly difficult, and B flat major is a good key for bassoon, but it still takes some practice and energy to plan the breathing and to get the flow through the many fast notes.

**Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827):**

Beethoven used the contrabassoon purely as a doubling of the contrabasses in his compositions which resulted in some very virtuoso and challenging contrabassoon parts.

He uses the contrabassoon much in the not so commonly played ‘Missa Solemnis’, but I have chosen to focus on one of his most famous symphonies, number 5 in C-minor.

In this symphony plus also in symphony no. 9 the contrabassoon enters, along with the piccolo flute, in the last movement.

**Symphony no. 5 op. 67:**

The symphony number 5 in C-minor was written between 1804 and 1808. It is one of the best-known compositions in classical music and one of

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5 Haydn, *The Creation*, contrabassoon part, 5
the most frequently played symphonies. It is furthermore considered one of the cornerstones of western music.

As mentioned above the contrabassoon enters in the last movement of the fifth symphony and this is the first time in history that the contrabassoon appears in a symphony, so we may guess that this was an exciting experiment on his part. As David Chatterton of the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment explains:

“The range of the classical contrabassoon is two and a half octaves, from low C to high G. Beethoven used the whole range in his fifth symphony, incorporating trombones and contrabassoon for the first time in any symphony, so it was a really new thing for him and for everybody.”

The way Beethoven uses the contrabassoon suggests he meant for it to be a reinforcement of the double basses. Stephen G. Buckley explains that already from his third symphony, Eroica, opus 55, pitches below the double basses of that time’s capabilities started to appear with increasing frequency. It is implausible that Beethoven should suddenly have forgotten the limitations of the double basses’ range. Some instances might be oversight in editing and proofreading but some might also be explained by the practice of reinforcing the double basses with one or more contrabassoons.

Buckley further writes:

“The contrabassoon in Vienna in 1800 had a lower compass of C (meaning it was the lowest note the instrument at that time could play and is a sounding C1, ed.). Beethoven may in fact have written pitches below E in the double bass part knowing that the contrabassoon, which would have played from the same part as the double basses, would be present in some

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6 Schaufler, Beethoven: The Man Who Freed Music, P. 211
7 Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, “Introducing Beethoven’s Contrabassoon.”
8 Buckley, “Beethoven, the Viennese violone, and the problem of lower compass”.
cases, and knowing that double bass players would either transpose unplayable notes, or simply leave them out.”

Thus, in the beginning of the contrabassoon’s symphonic era it was used as extra manpower for the low strings and relied upon to play the notes that were out of their range.

Today there is only mention of the contrabassoon in symphony number 5 and 9, but it is known that Beethoven had contrabassoons on the premieres of his 6th and 7th symphonies.⁹

In the score below it is visible how the contrabassoon follows the bass line and is quite independent from the other winds. It is also an example of how Beethoven uses the full range of the contrabassoon in a relatively short time. Within seven bars the whole scale from C1 to G3 is covered.

It is also visible both in the excerpt and in the score how the contrabassoon part is purely chord progressions and harmonics work and with basically no melodic lines. Only in bars 334-336 there is a forte upwards-going C-major figure, that is the last theme of the last movement.

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⁹ Buckley, “Beethoven, the Viennese violone, and the problem of lower compass”. 
Beethoven, *Symphony 5, Op. 67*
Because of the virtuosity, the demanding range, and the importance of the part this is a very common orchestra excerpt for auditions. I have had

Kolbinger, Orchester Probespiel, 41
the opportunity to play the part in context a few times and have also prepared it for auditions several times.

Whenever I prepare it, I try to imagine how it would sound on a string instrument and how a double bass player would play it. I try to imitate the bow movements with the air and phrase with the same energy as they do.

The difficulties come in getting the notes to speak with quality and evenness. The higher up in the register you go on contra the airier the sound gets, and some notes do not speak very well, which poses quite the challenge in that speed.

Ideally you want the fullness that a string player’s bow can create and for that to happen there needs to be a constant and very focused air pressure, not to mention perfect timing with the fingers.

The passage between bar 80 and 90 is particularly difficult, because the movements are not only going up or down – it is broken chords with staccato going both upwards and downwards and in the lowest register you need to move very large columns of air to get the notes to speak.

The symphony is in C-minor, a very dramatic key, but the last movement is in C-major, so in the end light won over darkness, and the bassline should be played as triumphantly and sparkling as possible.

**The Romantics – Brahms and Strauss**

In the beginning of the romantic era the composers started to experiment with the instruments and by the time of the late romantics such as Richard Strauss the contrabassoon had become a standard instrument and quite often used in a soloistic role.
Johannes Brahms (1833-1897):

In Brahms’ music we hear the contrabassoon being used as a melodic instrument as well as a bass instrument. The contrabassoon appears in the Haydn Variations, Ein Deutsches Requiem and in three out of his four symphonies. Arlen Fast, the contrabassoonist of the New York Philharmonic notes this regarding the use of the contrabassoon at that time:

“The Requiem was written in 1868, and there had just been a 25-year period between 1842, when Glinka wrote Russland and Ludmilla, and 1867 when Verdi wrote Don Carlo, when no orchestral composer that I can document wrote for the contrabassoon. I think that the instrument was so primitive and so weak tone wise, that composers quit writing for it. But during all this time, all kinds of double reed contrabass instruments were being built. All manner of shapes and sizes, as well as materials were tried. The Requiem was one of the first pieces to be written which included the contra again, after this 25-year hiatus.”

So, from the beginning of the 1800’s when Beethoven experimented with the contrabassoon, it was used by orchestral composers up until 1842 and then it was absent for 25 years. As Arlen Fast speculates it might have been because the instruments of the time were so poor and difficult to work with. But the instruments were constantly being developed and around 1868 Johannes Brahms clearly felt confident enough about the quality of the instruments around that he wrote rather demanding parts for them in his compositions.

I wish to analyze symphony number 1.

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12 Fast, “What contra for Brahms’ Requiem?”
Symphony no. 1, Op. 68:

It took Johannes Brahms 14 years to complete his first symphony. He was constantly feeling inferior to Ludwig van Beethoven and said himself “I shall never write a symphony. You have no idea how the likes of us feel when we hear the tramp of a giant like him behind us.”13 Beethoven’s symphonies were held in so high regard by Brahms (and many other of his contemporary composers) that trying to accomplish the same as him seemed like an impossible task.

Yet Brahms spent a great amount of time working on writing for symphonic orchestra, and finally he succeeded at the age of 43.

The symphony premiered in 1876 in Karlsruhe and consists of four movements. The contrabassoon is scored in movement 1, 2 and 4 and plays a quite significant role in the two outer movements. It appears already in the first bar, playing a repeated 8th note C together with timpani and double basses. Since the contrabassoon sounds an octave below what is written, this is the lowest note in the whole section. One could say it is the heartbeat of Brahms’ much awaited and struggled with first symphony.

13 McConnel, “Brahms – symphony 1”
After the slow, fateful opening, the rest of the movement continues in a quick 6/8. The contra doubles the bassoons and lower strings in a counter melodic line against the higher pitched instruments. Later the bassoons join the other woodwinds while the contrabassoon stays with celli and double basses.

14 Brahms, *Symphony no. 1 Op. 68*, 1
In the middle of the movement the tempo slows, and the contrabassoon plus double basses start the new part with an ominous, tension filled chromatic rise. This will be further discussed in the excerpt section.

The contrabassoon appears in the second movement but does not play a particular big role. It is merely some chords.

But the fourth movement is once again opened by the contrabassoon. The transition between the third and the fourth movement is attacca, and the fourth movement is marked by a descending line in contrabassoon and low strings.

Later follows a lovely chorale with bassoons, contrabassoon and trombones.

The rest of the movement is joyful allegro non troppo, ma con brio, where the contrabassoon runs the motor with the low strings and

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15 Brahms, *Symphony 1*, Op. 68, 10-11
occasionally bassoons.

In Brahms’ compositions the contrabassoon is still used as a reinforcement of the double basses and celli and it is still very much a part of chord-oriented bassline, but it is more independent than in classic composers’ music. It moves freely between the low strings and the woodwind group, at times playing with the strings and at times with the other woodwinds or low brass as heard in the chorale of the fourth movement of the first symphony. Though Brahms has given it a few entrances of its own, for example the beginning of the fourth movement, it very rarely leaves the comfort of either playing with the low strings or the bassoons and it has no solos of its own.

The excerpt:
The excerpt goes high and low, fast and slow. It is quite a fun excerpt to practice. I have played the piece in orchestra a few times, and I personally enjoy Brahms’ writing for contrabassoon. It is demanding, but he understood the effect and the strengths of the contrabassoon very well.

Just the beginning from bar 46-51 is very exciting to play. The three bassoons play together against the celli and basses. Later from 161 and onwards it is the opposite. The contrabassoon plays with celli and basses against the bassoons.

In passage from 169 the tribute Brahms paid to Beethoven is also visible. He uses a rhythmical figure of four notes short-short-short-long – the same

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16 Kolbinger, Orchester Probespiel, 43-44
rhythmical theme as Beethoven used in the first movement of his fifth symphony.

When practicing this excerpt, I try to find as much energy and drive as I can. It is a dramatic waltz, and it must really lead somewhere from the lowest lines.

In the middle part from 293 the contrabassoon and the double basses are an omen of the recapitulation to come. From the depth they push up the suspense chromatically all the way to the climax in 335. David McConnel writes: “Contrabassoon and lower strings introduce an ascending line that accumulates energy, driving the music into the recapitulation.”

This part rarely comes in auditions, but when I play it in the orchestra, I aim at keeping the intensity flowing all the way to the end.

The fourth movement is exhilarating and a bit scary to play. You have been sitting for an entire movement, just waiting, and then it is up to you to start the finale.

Richard Strauss (1864-1949):

As with Mahler and Ravel, Richard Strauss implemented the contrabassoon in many, if not most, of his works, and he gave it demanding parts and quite a lot of solos. In Also Sprach Zarathustra (1898) the contrabassoon opens the whole piece with an extremely long, sustained low C. A long note with a lot of impact!

Furthermore, the contrabassoon has active and important parts in Tod und Verklärung (1889), and Don Juan (1888) amongst others. He also scored very challenging solos for it in his two one-act operas, Elektra (1909) and Salome, and it is precisely Salome that I will discuss in this paper.

Salome Op. 54:

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17 McConnel, “Brahms – symphony 1”.

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Salome is based on Oscar Wilde’s play which Strauss saw and then he immediately started working on an opera. It was premiered in Dresden in 1905. Due to the combination of biblical themes and erotic content the opera was banned in London until 1907 and the piece was not allowed on the Vienna State Opera before 1918.\(^{18}\)

It was described as ‘thunder’, ‘noise’ and ‘orchestral cacophony’ and Strauss’ music shocked the audience. They had never heard this type of music on the stage or perhaps ever. The music is complex and incorporates forty-nine instrumental and vocal parts, which is a much larger number than its predecessors. The dissonances, bitonality and even effects created by the orchestra express the feelings of terror and obsessive infatuation that occur in the opera. He even brought in unusual instruments like heckelphone, which is a hybrid between English horn and bassoon, and kettledrums.\(^{19}\)

All in all, Strauss’ opera was a bomb that exploded upon its audience. The unsettling and twisted story combined with music written in a way no one had ever heard before.

The famous solo appears in the end of scene 3 and opens with the theme connected to Salome. Furthermore, the solo comes with the sardonic comment from Strauss, that if the player cannot execute the solo satisfactorily it should be played by first bassoon. Nicholas John makes this comment after noting how the bassoons’ voices are rather overshadowed in both Salome and Elektra:

"(The contrabassoon) takes the spotlight for two striking solos in Salome, both associated with Jokanaan’s cistern. The first solo carries a footnote suggesting that if the player is ‘not outstanding the part should be given to the first bassoon. Perhaps (...) this is a deliberate

\(^{18}\) Pugh, “Salome”.

\(^{19}\) Pugh, “Salome”.

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It is very visible from the score how the contrabassoon voice is the absolute center of attention. Nothing is happening besides some tremolo in the violas. The stage is the contra’s – all by itself in all its glory.

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20 John, *Salome/Elektra*, 135-136
21 Strauss, *Salome* Op. 54, 125-126
Since we are dealing with an opera with a story it is crucial to interpretation of the solo that one knows what is going on on the stage. The opera is based on the biblical tale of King Herod and his stepdaughter Salome, who asked for John the Baptist’s head on a silver plate.

While King Herod is having a feast, Salome visits the prisoner, whom she is infatuated with, in the basement. It is John the Baptist, and he rejects her outright. Later King Herod asks Salome to dance at the party, and she agrees if he will give her what she desires. King Herod accepts, and Salome dances the dance of the seven veils. In short, she starts out wearing seven veils and in the end she wears none. After completing her end of the deal, she asks

Kolbinger, Orchester Probespiel, 46
for John the Baptist’s head on a silver plate. King Herod fulfills her wish but is horrified when he sees her kiss the lips of the severed head, and he then has her crushed by his soldiers’ shields.

This is the atmosphere of the opera, and what I and other contrabassoonists try to reflect in the solo.

Miles Maner of the Chicago Symphony Orchestra shares some interesting insights after explaining the story in a short video about the excerpt:

“"This is the world I’m trying to evoke with this excerpt. I try to execute the dynamics in a way that are unpredictable and unsettling and nauseous. I’m trying to scare the audience. And I’m using subtle vibrato here and there to mimic sort of a dark energy that is slithering beneath the surface. But more than anything, I’m actually trying to be elegant. A sense of ease should be in all the playing you do."”

Maner’s last point is very crucial in my opinion. While the story is horrifying and sickening, I find it very important to still be elegant. It is still a story about a young girl dancing with several veils. The dance is gruesome and her desires the same, but within the horror, there should still be elegance.

This excerpt is a big challenge just to be able to play. It is very technical, and the breathing is quite the obstacle because the phrases are so long. Whenever I prepare it, I need to spend much time just getting the septuplets even and clean.

The solo is both terrifying and magical to play. It is possible to show lyricism, monstrosity, impending doom and youthful elegance. With this solo the contrabassoon has come a long way since it was support for the double basses in Beethoven’s time!

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23 Maner, “Orchestral excerpt insights.”
French contrabassoon – Ravel

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937):

Ravel wrote what is probably the most famous solo for contrabassoon. It appears in the Ma mere l’Oye suite. The piece was originally a five-movement piano duet written in 1910 but Ravel himself orchestrated it in 1911.

The fourth movement is called Les entretiens de la Belle et de la Bete or conversations between Beauty and the Beast. It is a charming waltz with the clarinet leading a lovely melody as Beauty, while the contrabassoon later interrupts with a theme constructed of a sustained note and a chromatic triplet in the end. The theme is heard with the triplets leading downwards in the beginning, but then upwards after the first two entrances and thus creating an atmosphere of urgency.

The example from the score below shows the first soloistic entrance of the contrabassoon. The contra only plays in this movement, and before this solo there is only four chord notes. At least Ravel did the player the favor of letting them test the reed a bit before throwing them into the solo of the century!

The score shows the thematic figure of the solo and how it is indeed very open. The contrabassoon is only accompanied by typical waltzy off-beats in strings and lower woodwinds. More and more instruments join in and the contrabassoon’s melody is intertwined by the clarinet melody, now in first flute, then oboe.
After the part with the contrabassoon solo a few bars of aggressive ff off-beat notes in woodwinds and strings lead into the next part where the

24 Ravel, *Ma Mere l'Oye*, 36
clarinet and the contrabassoon are playing their melodies simultaneously with only long notes in the other instruments.

One can almost imagine them dancing together – Beauty and the Beast!
Ravel, Ma Mere l’Oye, 40-42
The solo is very exposed and long, something that does not happen often in the world of contrabassoon. It is also quite technical and requires a player who masters their instrument to perfection.

Note the high B3 right at number 5. This note is quite beyond the comfort zone of the contrabassoon. Furthermore, the fast chromatic triplets are difficult to play evenly and in time and since many of them are in the high register which requires challenging fingerings this solo is on the list for almost all auditions.

On the website for the Los Angeles Philharmonic the movement is described thus:

“Conversations Between Beauty and the Beast:
Beauty is a beguiling waltz sung by the clarinet, the beast a grunting contrabassoon. The magical transformation of the latter into his original princely state is heralded by a harp glissando and violin harmonics. The prince then speaks in noble cello tones.”26

Ravel certainly used the contra for much more than a doubling of the bass line.

26 Howard, “Ma mere l’Oye.”
When I have prepared the solo, I have always tried to incorporate the humanity of the prince already from the beginning. Yes, it is a beast, and it has to sound beastly, but it is also a human trapped inside and I want it to shine through that he is desperate to be seen and heard as what he really is. From my perspective it is imperative to capture the sorrow, desperation, and elegance in solo as well as the obvious anger and frustration. One could say the prince within the beast sings with sadness when the triplets lead downwards, but when he hears Beauty’s voice, he finds hope and love. The

Kolbinger, Orchester Probespiel, 54
triplets start to go upwards, and the tempo get a bit faster at the animez peu a peu. The solo is quite beautiful when done with grace. One should try to be elegant, just like Manor comments he tries to be in the Salome-solo.

The dynamics never go above mezzoforte and most of the time it is piano and pianissimo with small crescendo-diminuendo, which in my opinion indicates that is should not be too brutal and beastly.

The idea to score the movement in this way is really very clever, seeing as the clarinet is both elegant and mischievous and the contrabassoon possesses both ugliness and charm hidden within its somewhat funny sound.

**The 20th Century – Shostakovich**

**Dimitri Shostakovich (1906-1975):**

Dimitri Shostakovich was a Soviet-era composer who spent most of his life falling in and out of favor with the totalitarian regime led by Josef Stalin.

Shostakovich used the contrabassoon in almost all his 15 symphonies, two cello concertos and two violin concertos. The contra often plays a big role with many audible phrases and soli. I have chosen to look at symphony no. 10.

**Symphony no. 10, Op. 93:**

“Shostakovich’s Tenth Symphony is 48 minutes of tragedy, despair, terror, and violence and two minutes of triumph.”

The symphony was composed between 1946-1953 and was premiered be the Leningrad Philharmonic Orchestra in December 1953.

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28 Mangum, “Symphony no. 10”
Shostakovich felt as mentioned much of Stalin’s wrath; he was publicly denounced, his works prohibited, and his status reduced to that of a ‘non-person’. People disappeared from day to day, and many of them never returned. There was hunger and poverty and misery. So when Stalin died in 1953, there must have been a ‘collective sigh of relief’ as John Mangum of the LA Phil puts it, and the 10th symphony is believed to be a musical depiction of life under Stalin. In particular the strict, fast and menacing second movement is believed to be a portrait of Stalin.30

The contrabassoon does not play for the first 278 bars of the first movement, and then enters together with second bassoon in bar 279.

Subsequently follows a long and slow solo for first bassoon accompanied only by second bassoon and contrabassoon in octaves. The first bassoon is exploring the theme introduced earlier by the clarinet while the second and contra play broken chords and a sort of counter melody.

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29 Mangum, “Symphony no. 10”
30 Mangum, “Symphony no. 10”
The trio solo is lamenting and haunting with the solo bassoon a quiet wail and the second and contra a slithering dark force moving against it down below. Though scored in E minor, the key varies into C# minor, which is a very delicate and sorrowful key.

It is hard to not feel the weight of the millions of tormented lives under the communist regime when one plays this part.

This particular excerpt is a more traditional way of using the contrabassoon; doubling the second bassoon as an accompaniment to first bassoon, but Shostakovich often gave the contrabassoon unison (sounding in octaves) solos together with the first bassoon, leaving the second out.

In addition, he almost always made the contrabassoon double on third

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31 Angehöfer, Orchesterstudien, 38.
bassoon for a short passage, often humorous and/or fiendishly difficult bassoon trio, like in the cello concerto number 2.

**The contrabassoon as a solo instrument – Kalevi Aho, Erwin Schulhoff, Terje Leirstad**

In more recent years the contrabassoon has even progressed out of the orchestra and up in the front of the stage. There has been written solo concertos and sonatas for it. The biggest challenge for the contrabassoon as a solo instrument is its limitations in tone stability and technique. The overtones are hard to get to match with a piano and generally the contrabassoon does not have a lot a projection and thus being easily outweighed by the brighter instruments’ timbre.

The Norwegian composer Terje Leirstad (1955-) has written a few compositions for contra, for example a sonata, a concertino and a solo piece.

But even as early as 1922 the Czech composer Erwin Schulhoff (1894-1942) wrote a solo piece for unaccompanied contrabassoon called *Bassnachtigal* (bass nightingale). The piece is very demanding and virtuoso, asking much of the player. The piece is sometimes listed on auditions for prestigious contrabassoon positions.

The Finnish composer Kalevi Aho wrote a concerto for contrabassoon in 2004-2005 which was premiered in 2006 with Bergen Philharmonic Orchestra and Lewis Lipnick as soloist. Lipnick had felt that very few composers could or would explore the possibilities of the contrabassoon, but after playing a trombone concerto by Aho, Lipnick contacted the composer and commissioned a contrabassoon concerto. Aho pushed the
limits to extremes, writing passages an octave higher than what is the contra’s effective range. It went so high as the C that is the beginning note of the Le Sacre du Printemps, which is considered high on the regular bassoon. The concerto thus posed some difficulties in execution but is doable with a special modified contrabassoon made by Fox Products in collaboration with New York Philharmonic’s contrabassoonist, Arlen Fast. Most notably extra octave keys were added so the highest register would be playable, but to this day there are only six (in 2005 ed.) of these special instruments in existence.^{32}

Lipnick himself states:

“The Aho Contrabassoon Concerto is a musical journey that takes both performers and listeners from our darkest hours through a wild ride and vivid dances, finally coming to rest on a note of resignation and hope. Like the other magnificent works of Kalevi Aho, this is more than just a beautifully written piece of music. It provides the underdog contrabassoon with an opportunity to finally spread its wings and take flight into the solo spotlight.”^{33}

The Aho concerto is published by Fennica Gerhman.

**Conclusion**

As Lipnick is implying the contrabassoon has lived in the shadows most of its life. Many composers did not know how to write for it (and many still do not, one might add!). The famous composers mentioned in this paper all gave it worthy attention, at least in some of their works, but many other just as famous composers never used it or did not use it beyond a long note here and there. Perhaps it is not all their fault. Many composers wrote for the local orchestras and what was around, and the contrabassoon was not a

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^{32} Lipnick, “Contrabassoon concerto”
^{33} Lipnick, “Contrabassoon concerto”
common instrument. And as mentioned earlier, some of the instruments were of very poor quality and did not present themselves very well. But we can still detect the tendencies through time in the works that have the contrabassoon scored.

In the beginning of the classical period, it was used as a reinforcement of the double basses. It did not have much independency and stuck to the bass line almost all the time.

In the early romantic era, we see a slight change happening in Brahms music. The contrabassoon is now changing between belonging to the lower strings and belonging to the woodwinds. It does not receive any major soloistic lines by itself, but it has audible parts.

Later in romantic era it has been developed into a real solo voice, with Ravel and Strauss giving it big and elaborate solos. It was now an independent instrument with independent qualities, not only a goofy big brother to the bassoon.

In the 20th century and contemporary times, the contrabassoon now also became a solo instrument with a space of its own in chamber music and in front of the orchestra. The instrument is constantly being developed and experimented with, and at the same time the players dedicating their time to it are becoming more and more virtuoso and adept at mastering it.

Of course, these developments can be seen throughout the orchestra and in all instrument groups. Limits are being pushed, boundaries crossed and new ways of making music explored all the time. I still think the contrabassoon has gone through a magnificent development and deserves even more attention from both composers, musicians, and audiences.
Sounding part

As I have described in this thesis, not many solo works are written for contrabassoon, and those that exist are extremely demanding – even to a degree where the player needs a special instrument to perform it. Furthermore I am passionate about the contrabassoon in the context of the orchestra, so the sounding part of my work is a recording by Benjamin Koppel Jazztrio and Odense Symphony Orchestra in which I play the contrabassoon. The music is Anders Koppel’s newly written *Mulberry Street Symphony*, released 2022 on Cowbell Music. The contrabassoon is scored in all the tracks, but I would like to highlight track no. 4 *Blind Man*, where the contrabassoon enters 0’18” on a sustained low C sharp after a tender woodwind chorale.

During the production my contrabassoon playing was praised by the producers, the soloists and Anders Koppel himself, so I am happy that it can now be a part of my thesis about the role of the contrabassoon.

To connect the sounding part with the thesis I have also added a recording *Salome*.

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**Recording**